

Khaled Hosseini. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2007, pp 402.

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“She understood then what Nana meant, that a *harami* was an unwanted thing.” (p. 4).

From the very beginning, Hosseini sets the stage for his audience by introducing them to an innocent child who instantly becomes the object of pity. The nine-year-old Mariam lives on the outskirts of Herat with her bitter mother (Nana), anxiously waiting for the once-a-week visits from her father (Jalil). Nana frequently uses the word ‘*harami*,’ which serves as a reminder of her own shame and misfortune and to convey her animosity towards Mariam. At the same time, Mariam learns about the hollowness of her father’s affection, where despite his weekly visits and displays of kindness, she and her mother live in a small shack (*kolba*), far away and at a safe distance from Jalil’s main home, where he resides with his wives and their legitimate children. One day, when she decides to visit him, a visit he does not acknowledge, she returns home to find that her mother has hanged herself. Nana’s untimely suicide scars Mariam’s entire existence by exile, which goes beyond being a personal grief.

“It did not occur to young Mariam to ponder the unfairness of apologizing for the manner of her own birth.” (p. 11).

A fifteen-year-old Mariam hopes to find a home with Jalil, but he, influenced by his wives, arranges her marriage to Rasheed, a widowed shoemaker, who also happens to be her senior by almost twenty years. Her residence of marriage, typically idealised as a woman’s domain, becomes a theatre of violence and the place where her mobility, voice, and fertility are constantly monitored. Rashid’s initial interest in her is solely as a potential mother and housekeeper, and later uses Mariam's miscarriages (and infidelity) as an

excuse for his cruelty when she is unable to conceive a son. He subjects Mariam to regular beatings for minor infractions. When Mariam's cooking displeases him, he violently forces her to chew on pebbles, bloodying her mouth and breaking her teeth. Even when it comes to important life events like his desire to take a second wife, he forbids her from voicing any resistance or disagreement. Marriage, rather than solving Mariam's precarity relocates it, tightening its grip while offering an illusion of legitimacy.

Noted feminist theorist Jessica Benjamin describes in her 1988 book *The Bonds of Love*¹ why people put up with, and stay within, relationships of domination and submission. She contends that domination is a complex psychological process that entangles both participants in chains of complicity. Mariam's own constrained agency is mirrored in Judith Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power*², where she argues that in her relationship with power, the subject is created by a reliance upon it. In Mariam's case, she feels unworthy due to her *harami* upbringing and has a strong need for validation and belonging, which Rasheed provides through the social sanction of marriage. But because of her status as a woman, she depends on male guardianship, which he exploits to establish his dominance over her and define her identity. This realisation frames the oppressive dynamics that underpin Mariam's marriage and her urban mobility.

Preceding the arrival of Laila, Rasheed's second wife in this novel, Mariam's entire world is contained within the domestic sphere. The potential for public humiliation and violence, which are prevalent in Afghan society (of the time), keeps Mariam confined to the domestic space, limiting her sense of freedom, whose entrapment she can never escape. From a young age, Nana instils in Mariam a sense of inferiority and the need for '*tahamul*' (endurance), which translates into accepting her fate and the limitations placed upon her as a woman. Unlike Laila, whose experiences of coming from an educated and relatively progressive background allows for a more dynamic and outwardly resistant trajectory, Mariam's narrative is static. Even Mariam's final moment of rebellion, which involves the killing of Rasheed in the climax, is a domestic

¹ Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 53.

² Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 3.

act, since it was enacted within the kitchen. Her resistance occurs within the space of her subjugation. In doing so, what was once the object of servitude becomes the medium of resistance.

Isabel Fall, in her ground-breaking short story "*I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter*," (2020) asks, "*Can you tell me honestly that killing is a genderless act? The method? The motive? The victim? When you imagine the innocent dead, who do you see?*"³ Despite being driven by love for Laila and her kids, Mariam's act of killing Rasheed results in her execution by the Taliban. In narrative terms, it rejects the ontological passivity that women are assigned by Afghan patriarchy, and consequently, by Hosseini's fictional world. Even though Rasheed's killing was morally justified, it subverts from being portrayed as a victory, since Mariam's execution, which re-instates the patriarchal ledger of guilt, casts a shadow over it.

In the end, however, by taking responsibility for Rasheed's death, Mariam essentially removes herself from the narrative, as most women with her fate would do. With this, Laila and Tariq (her childhood lover) are able to reunite and build a life together, escaping the immediate threats of their oppressive environment. In the epilogue, when Laila gets pregnant, and Tariq is seen playing a game of what to name their future child, the game only includes male names, for if it is a girl, the novel alludes to Laila's intention of naming her Mariam.

"She thought of her entry into the world, the *harami* child of a lowly villager...And yet she was leaving this world as a woman who had loved and had been loved back. She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A mother. A person of consequence at last. No. It was not so bad, Mariam thought, that she should die this way. Not so bad. This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings." (p. 361)

Hosseini mostly switches between Mariam, and in the second half, Laila, in their first-person narratives, which makes it possible to access their thoughts. The main premise of the book is that women suffer, not whether or not they

³ Isabel Fall, "*I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter*," *Clarkesworld Magazine*, no. 161 (January 1, 2020), 13.

do. What it asks instead is how they manage to survive it. Taking the form of endurance, violence, and eventually martyrdom, the novel's power lies in showing how the pain of Afghan womanhood, against the backdrop of political violence, is patterned through gendered and systemic structures. The shame Mariam inherits is not solely from her mother, but from a society that equates a woman's worth to her reproductive utility. This is what gives the novel its affective force. While being conscious of not pathologising Mariam, it historicises the factors that create *a* Mariam, whereby she becomes the canvas upon which the brutal realities of a patriarchal, war-torn society are inscribed.

“Learn this now, and learn it well my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman.” (p. 7).

If Mariam's suffering marks the limits of Afghan womanhood under class and rural poverty, Nila Wahdati⁴ in Hosseini's *And the Mountains Echoed* inhabits the other end of the spectrum - where liberation becomes another mask for female social alienation. She casually utters this hauntingly forbidding quote to her adoptive daughter, Pari:

“You know I don't like dogs. They have no self-respect. You kick them and they still love you. It's depressing.” (p. 252).

Nila, a French-Afghan woman of noble birth, is wealthy and cosmopolitan. She dresses flamboyantly, smokes defiantly, and entertains men without apology. She leaves her husband, adopts a child, and relocates to Paris with her daughter. She is, in every sense, an archetype of the sexually liberated woman. But this liberation is purchased through class, race, and cultural capital. She is desirable because she embodies modernity, and her transgressions are folded into the romance of her personality.

Mariam, by contrast, is always outside this realm of desirability. As a poor, illicit, rural Afghan woman, her body becomes a site of punishment. She is passed from a mother who could not protect her, to a father who disowns her,

⁴ See Khaled Hosseini, *And the Mountains Echoed* (New York: Riverhead, 2013).

and eventually to a husband who sexually violates her when she cannot bear him a child. Even when Mariam becomes the sacrificial mother, giving herself up for Laila (her metaphorical daughter), it is not her reclaiming her body, but its final surrender. The woman who was denied motherhood becomes a mother through death. While Mariam's agency, rooted in local, rural, Afghan life, only arrives at the edge of martyrdom, Nila, half-European, operates within the fantasy of liberation through Westernisation.

Doreen Massey in her book, *Space, Place and Gender* (1994) writes, it is not simply a question of unequal distribution that some people move and have more control than others.⁵ It is that the mobility and control of some groups actively weakens that of others. The relationship between them is thus one of forclusion, where the mobile is present discursively and constitutively in the delineation of the weak. This reveals that in a racialised world, based on class boundaries, Nila can move, because Mariam cannot, and precisely because Mariam cannot, Nila can.

Hosseini, in both these novels, while showing us the women who desire, sheds light upon the consequences of these desires which are radically unequal. Desire, instead of being neutral, is classified and morally evaluated based on how and by whom it is felt. This differentiation implies a politics of visibility and the extent to which a person's gender interacts with their own social and cultural environments. In his study of social representation and behaviour, Michel de Certeau (1984) outlines the methods that the average (wo)man might employ to reclaim her own independence from the ubiquitous forces of commerce, politics and culture.⁶ Hosseini's novels, in a similar fashion, reveal that the erotic is unevenly distributed through political affairs. He crafts desire as a literary device to accentuate class privilege through Nila, a tool of domination through Rashid, but never a language a woman born in the shackles of shame, like Mariam, is fluent in.

The foreword of *Ten Indian Classics* (2022) by Ranjit Hoskote provides insight into how South Asian literature navigates identity, history, historiography,

⁵ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 265.

⁶ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xii–xiv.

and resistance.⁷ Analysed through this lens, by exploring the intersection of colonialism, gender, and power, we can see how Hosseini carries these historiographical registers while supplementing them into characters like Mariam. He shows how pain reverberates through generations, over things that are both spoken *and* unspoken, while offering a detailed, moving portrait of the experiences of ordinary Muslim women, and of the contingencies within which they live. In a way, Hosseini's women, in writing endings for themselves, are writing different beginnings for those who come after them the way Mariam does for Laila.

To conclude, as Arunava Sinha commented on N. Prabhakaran's work *Theeyoor Chronicles* (2021), "Fiction which reminds us that the deaths and the lives of others could so easily be our own, is a triumph of both imagination and of translation."⁸

Therefore, to comprehend Hosseini's women as historical subjects is to reimagine fiction as a form of feminist witnessing. By using trauma and critical sociology as a lens, we may observe how Afghan social institutions are intrinsically tied to individual suffering. Nana's bitterness, Mariam's illegitimacy, and Laila's eventual survival show how Afghan women endure brutal circumstances through generations of sacrifice. The representational limitations placed on these women underlines their centrality in the nation's broader imagination as well as the intimate domains of the family. It echoes the notion that, in Afghan society's patriarchal institutions, the family becomes the state's smallest ideological microcosm, where sexuality is governed by obligation rather than desire.

In the end, their narratives demonstrate how the maternal has radical potential, the personal is always political, and the textual becomes the site of embodied historicity, which is essential to reimagining women themselves. Thus, by hinting at their fragile interior lives, Hosseini asks us to reconsider Afghan women as historical subjects whose goals and sacrifices impact both the cultural memory of Afghanistan and the possibility of feminist futures.

⁷ Ranjit Hoskote, foreword to *Ten Indian Classics*, by various authors, ed. Pushpesh Pant (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2022), xi.

⁸ Arunava Sinha, blurb on back cover of *Theeyoor Chronicles*, by N. Prabhakaran, trans. Jayasree Kalathil (New Delhi: Eka/Westland Books, 2021).

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