

Female Resilience And Solidarity Under The Patriarchy In “A Thousand Splendid Suns”

Quvvatova Shaxlo Choriyevna

Bukhara State University, second stage basic doctoral student

e-mail: kuvvatova.shaxlo@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines how “A Thousand Splendid Suns” portrays patriarchy not simply as a set of interpersonal abuses but as a social structure that permeates institutions, laws, and cultural norms. At the same time, the novel positions resilience and solidarity among women as potent counterforces that challenge and subvert patriarchal power. Ultimately, Hosseini presents a complex vision of human endurance, showing that while oppression may dictate the conditions of women’s lives, it does not define their capacity for agency, compassion, or sacrifice.

Khaled Hosseini’s “A Thousand Splendid Suns” (2007) has been widely recognized as a groundbreaking literary work that illuminates the intersecting forces of gender, violence, and sociopolitical unrest in Afghanistan. Through the lives of Mariam and Laila—two women separated by age, background, and status, yet ultimately joined by marriage and fate—Hosseini constructs a narrative that interrogates the destructive power of patriarchal oppression while celebrating the profound possibilities of female resilience and solidarity. Although the novel is deeply rooted in the historical and cultural realities of Afghanistan’s late twentieth-century turmoil, its thematic concerns extend beyond a single national context. Hosseini argues that even in environments shaped by systemic subjugation, women develop forms of resistance—quiet, strategic, and ultimately transformative.

Patriarchy as Systemic and Institutional Power

One of the central contributions of “A Thousand Splendid Suns” is its representation of patriarchy as a far-reaching system embedded in Afghan society. The injustices faced by Mariam and Laila are not merely the actions of individual men, but symptoms of structural gender inequality. From the novel’s opening chapters, Mariam is marked as a *harami*, a

child born out of wedlock, a status that her mother Nana explicitly links to a lifetime of shame: “*Like a compass needle that points north, a man’s accusing finger always finds a woman*” [Hosseini 7]. This early warning foreshadows the gendered double standards that define Mariam’s life. Even Jalil, who expresses affection toward Mariam in privately controlled moments, ultimately upholds social conventions that justify her marginalization. When Mariam seeks recognition from him, she finds herself literally locked out of his household, a symbolic representation of the broader exclusion women experience from public and familial power.

The patriarchal norms shaping Mariam’s marriage to Rasheed further demonstrate how gender inequalities are institutionalized. After her mother’s death, Mariam is not given autonomy to decide her future; instead, Jalil and his wives arrange a marriage to Rasheed, rationalizing it as necessary for her protection. The marriage becomes a vehicle for controlling her sexuality, labor, and mobility—structures mirrored in Afghanistan’s sociopolitical conditions. Rasheed’s insistence on the burqa, for example, is framed not merely as a personal preference but as part of a larger culture that restricts women’s public presence: “*I want you to cover when you’re outside. I don’t want any stranger looking at*

you” [Hosseini 70]. His justification depends on cultural norms that place responsibility for male desire on women’s visibility, reinforcing gendered power imbalances.

The political upheavals that occur throughout the novel further entrench patriarchal power. Under the Taliban, Laila and Mariam face laws and punishments that institutionalize gender violence and restrict basic freedoms. Women cannot travel without male relatives, work outside the home, or seek medical treatment from male doctors [Hosseini 248–249]. These regulations, by stripping women of economic and social independence, create an environment ideal for domestic abuse and coercion. Through these depictions, Hosseini illustrates that patriarchy operates not only through individual perpetrators like Rasheed, but through legal, cultural, and political systems designed to maintain male dominance.

The Evolution of Resilience: Psychological, Emotional and Physical Survival

Although “A Thousand Splendid Suns” presents a harsh portrayal of patriarchal oppression, the novel devotes equal attention to the forms of resilience women cultivate in response. Resilience manifests differently in Mariam and Laila, shaped by their personal histories and social positions, yet both women develop enduring inner strength that allows them to navigate suffering.

Mariam’s resilience emerges gradually, born from years of emotional hardship and isolation. As a child, she learns to endure her mother’s bitterness and her father’s neglect, internalizing shame but also learning patience, self-control, and quiet determination. Early in her marriage, Mariam’s resilience is largely passive; she survives by withdrawing emotionally and avoiding confrontation. Yet this endurance is not weakness—it demonstrates the psychological strategies women employ when options for self-defense are limited.

As scholar Jennifer Moyer argues, Hosseini uses Mariam to highlight “the dignity of survival in conditions designed to break the human spirit” [Moyer 113].

Laila’s resilience, conversely, is more outwardly active. Raised in a progressive household with parents who value education, she develops a strong sense of self and an awareness of her right to personal autonomy. After losing her family in a bombing and being coerced into marrying Rasheed for the sake of her unborn child, Laila applies resilience strategically. Her decision to endure domestic abuse is motivated not by resignation but by a determination to protect her children, particularly Aziza. Laila’s resilience involves adaptation, ingenuity, and tactical negotiation—qualities evident in her attempts to escape and her defiance of Rasheed’s control.

Hosseini suggests that resilience is not a singular trait but a multifaceted set of practices shaped by context. Mariam and Laila demonstrate that under oppressive conditions, survival itself is a form of resistance. Their ability to persist undermines the patriarchal system that seeks to silence them.

Female Solidarity as a Subversive Force

The most significant challenge to patriarchy in the novel arises not from individual resilience alone but from the deep solidarity that develops between Mariam and Laila. Although their relationship begins with conflict—fueled by Rasheed’s manipulation and Mariam’s fear of losing her place in the household—their shared suffering becomes the foundation for profound emotional connection. Mariam’s initial hostility gives way to compassion when she recognizes Laila’s vulnerability: “A look passed between them, the first true connection they had made” [Hosseini 226]. From this moment onward, their bond grows into a sisterhood that becomes the emotional core of the novel.

Female solidarity functions as resistance in several ways. First, it creates a private space of affirmation and emotional safety within a household dominated by male violence. Through conversations, shared chores, and quiet acts of care, Mariam and Laila establish an intimate, woman-centered sphere where mutual recognition replaces hierarchical dominance. This sphere itself becomes a form of rebellion, challenging Rasheed's attempts to isolate and control them.

Second, solidarity enables collective action. When Laila first attempts to escape Kabul with Mariam and Aziza, their partnership represents an explicit break from patriarchal control. Although the escape fails, the solidarity that inspires it becomes a catalyst for Mariam's transformation. Ultimately, Mariam's final act—killing Rasheed to save Laila's life—represents the apex of solidarity as resistance. Her sacrifice is portrayed not as martyrdom but as an assertion of agency: "*This was one opportunity that she would not be denied*" [Hosseini 349]. Mariam's execution by the Taliban underscores the brutal consequences women face when challenging patriarchal power, yet her sacrifice secures Laila's freedom and future.

Third, solidarity has generational implications. After returning to Kabul, Laila works to rebuild her community and educate girls, carrying forward Mariam's legacy of resistance. In this sense, solidarity transcends individual relationships and becomes a force for broader social transformation.

The Intersection of Gender and War

While patriarchy is the central oppressive force in the novel, Hosseini situates gender inequality within the broader context of war. The political conflicts of Afghanistan—Soviet occupation, civil war, and Taliban rule—create conditions that intensify women's vulnerability. Hosseini shows that

women experience war not only as citizens but as gendered subjects whose bodies, families, and identities become battlegrounds. For example, Laila's mother, Farida, is consumed by grief over her sons' deaths, symbolizing how women bear the emotional toll of male-driven conflict. Laila herself becomes a direct casualty of war when a rocket kills her parents, forcing her into marriage for survival.

Hosseini's portrayal aligns with feminist scholarship on war, which argues that conflict amplifies gendered violence and disrupts the social structures women rely on for protection. As political scientist Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini notes, "women's experiences of war are marked by heightened insecurity, displacement, and sexual violence, yet their roles in peacebuilding remain undervalued" [Naraghi-Anderlini 52]. "*A Thousand Splendid Suns*" reflects this dynamic: although women suffer disproportionately during wartime, they are largely excluded from political decision-making. Nonetheless, Mariam and Laila become agents of reconstruction in the novel's final chapters, demonstrating the critical role women play in post-conflict recovery.

"*A Thousand Splendid Suns*" is a powerful literary exploration of how women navigate and resist systems of oppression. Through Mariam and Laila, Hosseini illustrates the pervasive nature of patriarchy in Afghanistan and the ways in which political turmoil compounds gender inequality. Yet the novel is ultimately a testament to the resilience of women and the transformative power of solidarity. Mariam's journey from silent endurance to decisive resistance, and Laila's evolution into a woman committed to education and social change, exemplify how personal relationships can become sites of political defiance. Hosseini's portrayal suggests that while patriarchal systems seek to isolate and silence women, their collective strength can challenge and

transcend even the most entrenched structures of domination. In doing so, the novel offers a vision of hope rooted not in external liberation but in the enduring solidarity among women whose spirits remain unbroken.

USED LITERATURES:

Hosseini, Khaled. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Riverhead Books, 2007.

Moyer, Jennifer. "Resilience and the Feminine Spirit in Contemporary Afghan Literature." *Journal of Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2015, pp. 107–124.

Naraghi-Anderlini, Sanam. *Women Building Peace: What They Do, Why It Matters*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007.

Bloom, Harold. *Khaled Hosseini: Modern Critical Views*. — New York: Chelsea House, 2012.

Saeed, Yama. *Women and Social Oppression in Khaled Hosseini's Novels*. — Kabul University Publishing, 2019.