



# A Thousand Splendid Suns



*Novel By: Khaled Hosseini*

*Book Analysis By: Kaitlyn Coleman*

*"Hosseini presents his themes of war, oppression, hope, and love through the use of symbolism, as he weaves a brutally realistic tale of two Afghani women brought together by horrific circumstances." -Thesis*

*Due: March 15th, 2012*

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* is the gripping and compelling tale of two very brave women, Mariam and Laila, as told by the gifted storyteller, Khaled Hosseini. Unlikely friends, whom each had their futures ripped away from them, the two women find hope in one another, as they face the oppression and violence brought about by the turbulent events that, in recent history, has shaped and shattered the nation of Afghanistan. Hosseini presents his themes of war, oppression, hope, and love through the use of symbolism, as he weaves a brutally realistic tale of two Afghani women brought together by horrific circumstances.

Born in Kabul, Afghanistan, Khaled Hosseini was the son of a diplomat with the Afghan Foreign Ministry and a Farsi and History teaching mother. The Hosseini family was later relocated to Paris, and then granted political asylum in the United States, because of the communist coup and Soviet invasion in Afghanistan. He would, however, never forget his early childhood home, making it the setting and focus of his later novels, which would portray the lives of Afghani people during the last thirty-three years of the country's turbulent history of war and oppression. Named a goodwill envoy to the United Nations Refugee Agency, Khaled has returned to Afghanistan with the UNHCR, and continues to provide humanitarian assistance in the nation through The Khaled Hosseini Foundation, which was inspired by his time spent in his birth country.

The events of recent years in Afghanistan, the very same that barred the Hosseini family from returning to the country, have had large scale effects on, not only, the country and its people, but also, many other nations. Mariam and Laila's tale recounts life in Afghanistan from the Soviet invasion, to the reign of the Taliban, and the post-Taliban rebuilding, showing the volatile period from the inside, while reflecting a muted criticism of the role of US imperialism in the area. Uncovering the social truths through the lives of the main characters, Hosseini

portrays the precarious and horrendous existence faced by Afghani women then and, even, into modern times, as Mariam's mother states that it is a woman's lot in life to "endure." *A Thousand Splendid Suns* tells of this history on an intimate scale, causing the work to have quite an impact, as the reader views these events through the eyes of two generations of women, whom are thrust brutally and unexpectedly into adulthood and the trials facing women during the turbulent time period in Afghan history.

In his novel, Hosseini illustrates the upheavals of recent history that have scarred Afghanistan and its people, on an intimate scale, through Mariam and Laila's respective experiences and the jarring events that brought them together. War and violence play a large and damaging part of society, and the novel shows the harmful effects of these elements on the people of a nation shattered by political aggression and violent pursuit of power. Such cycles of changing power cause changes in the freedom of Afghani people, whom had their rights gradually stripped away by each successive regime. As a result of the warfare, women, especially, faced oppression from the government, society, and men in general, for, as Nana instilled in Mariam at a young age, "*Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always.*" This statement, as Mariam and Laila discover, is proved truthful over and over again throughout the novel.

In addition to narrating the events that shook Afghanistan in past years, Hosseini's tale further explores the plight of women in the country through the heroic characters who cling to the dimmest rays of hope. The novel's main characters strive, throughout the tale, to maintain hope, despite the horrid realities of life and oppression, both political and personal. Through the perseverance of his characters, Hosseini reflects the political hope and convictions of the Afghan people, as, with each new ruler, they faced the possibility of freedom that was swiftly crushed by

despairing reality. The waves of hope cause the readers to become emotionally attached to the characters and realize the cycles of hope and dashed dreams that Afghan women have suffered in recent years.

Mariam, as a child, hopes to gain an education, find love, and have a family, but her dreams are crushed when her mother commits suicide and her father gives her away in marriage to the much older and abusive, Rasheed. For Laila, hope also lies in looking toward her future, in her education and her love for Tariq, but, with the swift strike of a missile, her bright future is stolen from her. Her hope of a future with Tariq is reinforced by her carrying his child, but is crushed when she is forced to marry Rasheed, in order to gain security for herself and the baby in an uncertain future. Both of the women, after being brought together in their marriages to Rasheed, find hope in each other and the slim possibility of escaping life under their cruel husband and finding freedom and happiness elsewhere.

Love is prevalent in the novel, as there is a clear distinction made throughout the book between love and, often forced, marriage. Mariam finds hope in her marriage, at first, as something that could lead to contentment and maybe even love, but it soon crumbles into an abusive and oppressive relationship. Laila, however, is able to escape the abusive bonds placed on her by Rasheed through her true love with Tariq, showing the contrast between forced marriage and such true love. Although fearful and restrained with Rasheed, Laila feels secure with Tariq and is able to be honest, brave, and truly hopeful of a bright future once again. The women also form a powerful female bond, despite the efforts of their husband and government to control them, growing to care deeply for each other, suggesting the strong ability of women to find strength and support in one another. Children, too, offer hope and love to the women of the novel, shown through Nana and Laila gaining strength from their children. Mariam, in turn,

would never have gained the strength and courage to fight Rasheed and later face her own execution, had she not gained confidence and love from Laila and her children.

Khaled Hosseini's "A Thousand Splendid Suns" focuses on the plight of women in Afghan society. It is in this society that the burqa is used as a symbol of both the repressive nature of male dominance and the suffocating effects of submission. Neither Mariam nor Laila had to wear a burqa before becoming Rasheed's wife, and it represents loss of identity they each experience in their marriage and later when the Taliban control the nation. In a society where women are seen only for their reproductive purposes, a means by which to pass on the family name and business, Mariam and Laila are not recognized as the loving and caring individuals they are. The lack of vision caused by the burqa is a symbol not only for the experiences in life from which the women are cut off, but also for the blindness of society to such oppression.

Like the literal feeling of cloth pressing against their mouths, the women are theoretically suffocated by society, silenced, secluded, and made submissive to their husbands, all by a thin layer of cloth. While the burqa is a symbol of the oppression Afghani women were subjected to, it is also a symbol of hiding for both women in Hosseini's story, for, when they appear in public they are able to look around, without smiling or showing expressions that they do not feel. The burqa shields the two from the harshness of reality, functioning as a veil on the past, protection from unkind stares, and providing the freedom for them to think as they wish without others knowing. Nana insists that the only lesson that Mariam needs to learn is to "endure," which the women of Afghanistan were and, in many cases, still are forced to do.

Hosseini uses pregnancy as a symbol of hope throughout the story, further supporting the novel's themes. Each of Mariam's pregnancies offer her an opportunity to be hopeful for the

future, despite her dreadful position in life. Laila's pregnancy with Aziza allows her to remain positive after she learns about Tariq's death, despite sealing her fate by causing her to agree to marry Rasheed, for the security it would offer her and the baby. The contrast between Laila's fertility and Mariam's infertility shows how a woman's value in Afghan society has been measured by her ability to bear children, specifically boys. Aziza and Zalmai offer light and joy to two women in otherwise bleak circumstances, giving them hope for a brighter future. Despite the pain and sacrifices that parents make to bring a child into the world, Laila's children show how a mother's pain is worth the joy and attachment that she later feels at their birth.

*"One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs, or the thousand splendid suns that hide behind her walls."* As the namesake saying of the novel suggests, one cannot possibly count the number of men who placed themselves as the dominant power in marriage, or the thousand bright and heroic women that were hidden behind the veil of required burqas. In the midst of oppression, Mariam and Laila were brought together, and became shining suns of hope in each other's lives. Mariam remains a symbol of this hope to Laila, even after her death, as the younger woman finds joy in marriage to Tariq and freedom with the removal of the Taliban. Such splendid freedom was shown once again to all people, as society was being rebuilt and women were again gaining power. As the sun shines through the veil of a burqa, and can be felt despite the suffocating cloth, hope was the prevailing factor echoing within the women of Afghanistan during those times of forced darkness, and it is what supports the dream of equality for all, a dream shown by Zalmai and Aziza heading off to school together, at the novel's conclusion.

Set against the volatile events of recent times, the story serves as a chronicle of three decades of Afghan history, while telling the deeply moving and illuminating tale of two women

struggling to survive, raise a family, and find true happiness, their lives inseparable from the events playing out around them. This heart-wrenching novel, showing an unforgiving time, an unlikely friendship, and indestructible love is truly deserving of being included in a list of works of high literary merit, for it forces reality upon the reader causing them to see recent events in a new light, understand the plight of women in recent Afghan society, and revel in the stunning perseverance of so many people living in a shattered nation. Through the use of symbolism and other elements, Hosseini supports his themes, as he tells a fictional, yet very real, tale of two women in the midst of this turmoil.

### Works Cited

Hosseini, Khaled. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. New York: Penguin Group, 2007

Khaled Hosseini Website. Hosseini, Khaled. "Bio" (copyright 2009). The Khaled Hosseini

Foundation. <<http://www.khaledhosseini.com/hosseini-bio.html>>