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Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*: A Study of Women's Capacity of Grappling with Suffering

ABSTRACT

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) is a tale of two heroic female characters whose spirits are still shining despite the miserable life and the dimmest rays of hope they have. This novel portrays and renders a sense of what daily life, especially life of women, is like in Kabul --both before and during the restrictive and destructive reign of the Taliban. As a humanitarian and activist, Hosseini wants to depict the tragedies that the Afghan women had endured, the discrimination and violence that they had suffered in the contemporary Afghan society. This motivated him to write this novel to focus on women's suffering and endurance simultaneously due to the multiple dominations of the patriarchal society. Each part in the novel deals with new pattern of hardships and torture, which have their roots either in childhood, like Mariam's miserable childhood, or in war and death of the loved ones, as Laila's suffering when losing her family in the war. As the theme of suffering and endurance is common and recurrent in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the current study examines the ability of the major characters to accept and cope with their sufferings and struggles, whether they are physical or emotional, and even regulate it. It tries to find an answer to the question of how the characters have the capacity to grapple with their anguish. As the study adopts the concept of suffering as the frame of analyzing characters' ability to grapple with the suffering and hardships of women in the eastern society, it is, thus, going to identify the meaning of suffering, shedding light on its types as a concept and its forms as an object. Then it uses this concept as a means to investigate and study the suffering of Mariam and Laila in *A Thousand Splendid Sun*.

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"ألف شمس ساطعة" لخالد حسيني: دراسة لقدرة المرأة في مواجهة المعاناة

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الخلاصة:

يحكي خالد حسيني في روايته ((2007) ألف شمس ساطعة) عن شخصيتين بطوليتين لا تزال روحهما متألفة على الرغم من الحياة البائسة وأشعة الأمل الخافتة لديهما. تصور هذه الرواية وتعطي إحساسًا بما هي عليه الحياة اليومية ، وخاصة حياة النساء ، في كابول - قبل وأثناء فترة حكم طالبان القمعية والمدمرة. بصفته ناشط إنساني ، يريد حسيني أن يصور المآسي التي عانت منها المرأة الأفغانية ، والتمييز والعنف الذي عانت فيه في المجتمع الأفغاني المعاصر. دفعه ذلك لكتابة هذه الرواية للتركيز على معاناة المرأة وتحملها في نفس الوقت بسبب الهيمنة المتعددة للمجتمع الأبوي. يتناول كل جزء في الرواية نمطًا جديدًا من المصاعب والتعذيب ، والتي تعود جذورها إلى الطفولة ، مثل طفولة مريم البائسة ، أو في حرب وموت الأحباء ، حيث تعاني ليلي من خسارة عائلتها في الحرب. نظرًا لأن موضوع المعاناة والتحمل شائع ومتكرر في (ألف شمس ساطعة)، تبحث الدراسة الحالية في قدرة الشخصيات الرئيسية على قبول معاناتهم وصراعاتهم والتعامل معها ، سواء كانت جسدية أو عاطفية ، وحتى تنظيمها. يحاول العثور على إجابة لسؤال كيف تتمتع الشخصيات بالقدرة على التعامل مع معاناتهم. وحيث أن الدراسة ستتبنى مفهوم المعاناة كإطار لتحليل قدرة الشخصيات على التعامل مع معاناة المرأة ومصاعبها في المجتمع الشرقي ، فهي بذلك ستحدد معنى المعاناة ، وتسلط الضوء على أنواعها مثل: مفهومها وأشكالها. ثم يستخدم هذا المفهوم كوسيلة للتحقيق ودراسة معاناة مريم وليلي في (ألف شمس ساطعة).

كلمات مفتاحية: المعاناة، الصراع، ألف شمس ساطعة ، العذاب النفسي والجسدي ، القدرة على التحمل.

1.1 Introduction

Khalad Hosseini is an American and Afghanian novelist and journalist. He is one of the most recognized and bestselling authors in the world due to the humanistic subject matters his narratives involve and his focus on reflecting the Afghanian culture and society. He grew up in Kabul where his father was a diplomat and his mother was a teacher. They moved to Paris and with the coming of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 they couldn't return back to it. They went to California, where he studied biology in Santa Clara University, and joining medical school at the University of California, San Diego. Hosseini was introduced by creating a coherent structure in his writings in which the structural elements of the novel were regulated in agog composition and arrangement (Khirin 15). His first work was *The Kite Runner* which is rejected many times by many publishers yet when published, the novel at once got wide popularity and received very well by critics. A *Thousand Splinded Suns* is composed after he visited Afghanistan for the first time during

2003, noticing that the Afghani's women, wearing burkas, are the silent victims of both terrorism and patriarchal authority.

As he wrote this novel, he was sure that the Afghan women had suffered a lot more than anybody in Afghanistan particularly in the last 15th years. In the novel, women are expected to wear burqas, be escorted by male family members and be obedient. Laila and Mariam suffer at the hands of Rasheed because he is given all of the power over the women and children, according to the law. The unfair treatment of woman is epitomized by Mariam's execution in the stadium in spite of progress in the country, Afghan women and girls continue to suffer low social, economic, and political status (Kazemiyan 16). Women in Afghanistan have been facing gender discrimination for generations and Hosseini feels that he should devote his pen to spotting the struggles and hardships of his country's women. The severity of discrimination over the years has gone unnoticed for it has become a norm of their culture and society. Through the character of Mariam and Laila, he raises the issue of feminism and gender inequality. Women in Afghanistan have been facing gender discrimination for generations. In spite of progress in the country, Afghan women and girls continue to suffer low social, economic, and political status. In *Women of Afghanistan in the post-Taliban era*, (Skaine 28) demonstrates and affirms these truths,

You might expect me to talk about Afghanistan as a free, peaceful and liberated country but painfully and unfortunately the reality is not what you might be aware of through the media. After September 11, and the subsequent U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan in the name of "war on terror" and "liberating Afghan women" despite all claims of the USA and its allies, Afghanistan is still burning in twofold fire.

What fascinates Hosseini in the suffering of Afghan women is the non-limitedness of their struggles and how they got accustomed to their daily pains and severe oppression. Through reading *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, readers come to realize the unlimited suffering of the characters whether they are main or secondary characters. As Laila comes to understand, "every Afghan story is marked by death and loss and unimaginable grief. And yet she sees that people find a way to survive, to go on" (*A Thousand Splendid* 350).

Therefore, this novel depicts the immense suffering and pain of Afghanistan's people who have been suffering as a result of wars specially women, as in Mariam's and Laila's stories. They deal with all aspects of suffering and their attempts to cope with such as struggles in their life and seek for freedom despite the chains and restraints

imposed on them by their traditions and norms. Significantly, suffering is the core and major theme of the current study which is going to investigate suffering of Afghan women and their endurance of pain as well as showing how those women can grapple bravely with struggles and suffering in such a patriarchal society as Afghanistan.

As a concept, suffering can be defined as an inevitable facet of life (Koester 22). All around the world countless numbers of people live in suffering due to violence, abuse, natural disasters, and their own vindictive and self-damaging natures (ibid). In brief, it is an "extreme anguish" (Gregory 18). Suffering may be interpreted as a sense of displeased and a perception of damage to a person. Affective phenomena have a negative valence because they are pervaded by suffering. Suffering is said to be the reverse of pleasure or happiness. Mental suffering and bodily pain are usually divided into two categories. It can range from somewhat annoying to absolutely unbearable. Multiple occurrences as well as long durations typically augment the level of intensity.(Almond6) defines suffering as "The state of passing pain, distress or hardship" and he declares it "includes both physical and mental pain"

Suffering is described as an unpleasant or even agonizing event that has a profound effect on a person's psychophysical and existential well-being. It is one of the most deep and disorienting aspects of the human experience. Suffering, as a term, carries a resonance with our sense of the purpose of life and the threat that suffering poses to the expectations of happiness. It is not limited to the ailments, aches, and challenges with which one can and should cope. It is characterized by crises and threats that degrade or alienate human's beings. It is associated with the spiritual component of human existence, or the "contemplative" part of our being, to use Aristotle's word, rather than only with the physical aspects of individuals' lives. Moreover, it is a spiritual occurrence, a test of the capacity for faith in life. The role of pain in human lives is debated at the level of discourse, which involves the negotiation of cultural meanings and visions of human life. (Hoof 13-14)

A good definition of suffering is that it can reduce one's potential to find serenity and comfort in their current condition. In Cassell's view, the sensation of suffering is provoked by the perception of approaching destruction. It persists until the individual feels that he or she is safe, or until he or she can put himself or herself back together in some other way. He found that, even in its day-to-day practices, contemporary medicine sometimes contributes to patients' pain. He underscored that to understand another person's pain takes an in-depth

knowledge of the individual's own narrative. Suffering can create a 'crisis of meaning' or a spiritual reevaluation of life's ultimate value. While people in palliative care commonly suffer, this pain is frequently hidden and only recognized by the patients themselves. (Williams 29).

A disposition toward pain is not limited to the sufferer. It may also vary significantly, from those who see it as preventable to those who see it as inescapable, valuable to those who see it as worthless, and just to those who believe it is merited. In the experience of sentient beings, there are countless ways to suffer, and it happens rather dramatically. Janice Morse's theory of suffering claims that "human beings who have gone through a condition of enduring do not submit to emotional suffering before they are emotionally capable of accepting their loss". According to him enduring suffering is important to enable human beings to continue. Although mental suffering may apply to both physical and mental pain, it can also describe trouble, malfunction, or discomfort in the mind. Also known as emotional trauma and emotional suffering, emotional injury is brought on by someone else's behaviour. Additionally, mental and emotional distress is commonly caused by an external source, which makes the condition likely to help the victim secure compensation in a tort. The physical and mental sufferings are not correlated, i.e. the physical pain like disease, disability, poverty, starvation may not cause pain in the mind. While the mental suffering like interior conflicts and psychological troubles causes intense or troubling emotions such as sadness, hatred, frustration, heartache, anxiety, and loneliness.

In the Islamic tradition, the word *musiba* refers to suffering pang resulted by events that lead to some form of harm, and is often explained in the light of Muslim's belief about the greatness and omniscient of God. Muslims believe it happens due to God's permission or as they call it *mashiyyati - lla*. According to Quran and Muslim conditions treat suffering as a unavoidable aspect of human experience or as a kind of faith (Fitzpatrick 10). Some passages quoted from Qu'ran obviously demonstrate that people might sometimes be responsible for their own suffering. Other passages state that God is omniscient and has the foreknowledge of suffering. While the majority of Sunni depends on theology still make clear that God has commanded and ordained everything, and that nothing, including suffering, could happen either in this world or in the next excluding through His will and knowledge (ibid.).

In brief, it could be said that people might be discouraged and embittered by pain, or they can utilize their hardship to push them on to a successful life. As Khaled Hosseini portrays in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* two female characters suffering and one of them, Laila, managed and coped with her suffering to start new life. Those who inflict pain on themselves and endure it in order to alleviate others' suffering are also depicted in character of Mariam who sacrificed her life for the sake of alleviating and ending Laila's suffering with their husband Rasheed.

1.2. Mariam's And Laila's Grappling with Suffering in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

The title of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) comes from a poem about Kabul by Saib-e-Tabrizi. In this poem the city of Kabul is described as having a thousand glorious suns. Hosseini conveys this metaphor as a sign for Mariam who "is in Laila's own heart, where she lights with the burst splendour of a thousand suns" (*A Thousand Splendid 1*). It is about the tragedy of Mariam's life who is victimized and experiencing a miserable life not because of patriarchal social system but also because of the war and catastrophe event in the 21st century (Dhakal 229). The novel opens on Thursday and with bitterly words "*This is my reward for everything I've endured. An heirloom-breaking, clumsy little harami*" (4). This sentence stands for a start point for the first heroin's suffering. Mariam is unsolicited child an opulent Jalil. Misunderstanding the true meaning of "harami", as a child she thought that her mother doesn't love her (Soraya 84).

However, Thursday has a profound meaning for Mariam; as on Thursday, Mariam would listen to stories of her father wonderfully and happily, and after that, Nana will discoloring all the words Jalil telling her that Jalil would never recognize her as one of his daughters (Wulandari 48). She is a stoic character from the beginning of her life, when she used to wait her father desperately. The endless waiting isn't easy, one can realize her torturing mentally either through listening to her mother's torturing words that her father may not come. From her tender age, Mariam is exposed to suffering of waiting her father. "*She checked the clock*" eagerly awaiting the arrival of her father.

As Mariam, an illegitimate daughter of a lower class mother is always banished from her desired freedom. For her, freedom is to go to school, to learn and to play and to connect with her siblings. Her journey of hope ends when her embittered mother tries to squash:

“What’s the sense schooling girl like you? It’s like shining the spittoon. And you’ll learn nothing of value in those schools” (*A Thousand Splendid* 17). Her mother attempts to teach her to be patient and endure life struggles; women like them have to be skillful of endurance, “*There is only one skill a woman like you and me need in life, and they don’t teach it in school... And it’s this: tahamul. Endure*” the word tahamul is an Arabic word referring to person’s ability of enduring and grappling with the hardships and pains of daily life especially the life of poor families. Tahamul is an Islamic teaching that provokes individual’s patience and endurance.

Mariam is described from the first time as one of the reasons caused her mother's suffering and grief, “this is my reward for everything I’ve endured” speaking of Mariam. Yet Nany's endurance lasted no more, when she committed self-murder, leaving Mariam alone, she “*feels the bitterness of her life*” (Soraya 84). To understand Mariam's suffering, it needs to go beyond her mother's story of life. She had planned to runaway to Gardez with a young man she had flirted with, the son of a local mullah. They had managed to make it out of Kabul. When they were arrested and transported back, the mullah’s son was beaten before he confessed and stated that Naghma had deceived him with her feminine charms. She had put a spell on him, he added. He swore he would rededicate himself to the study of the Koran. The mullah’s son was liberated, while Naghma was sentenced to five years. Indeed, it is Mariam who has become the victim of such ruthless and cruel circumstances as she is the product of this failing love relationship. Being an illegitimate girl, she is unable to stand up and express herself. She suffered a lot and deprived of her simplest rights. She sees her father Jalil once a week. Mariam realizes her mother's words toward Jalil, when she went to meet him in his house and he refused to meet her. She became disappointed especially when she knew that she was the reason behind her mother's death. Her father's cruelty continued to force her marrying Rasheed, a man who is older than her by many years. Mariam put an end to her relationship with Jalil saying that “*I used to worship you... on Thursday, I sat for hours waiting for you... I thought about you all the time. I didn’t know you were ashamed of me*” (*A Thousand Splendid* 54).

She used and has been taught to endure from her birth till the time when she decided to revolt against Rasheed, with whom her suffering took new trend physically and mentally. When she arrived Rasheed 's house, she recognized entirely how her life changed, “*pangs of longing bore into her, for Nana, for Mullah Faizullah, for her old life ,Then she was crying*”(*A Thousand Splendid* 55) .Rasheed asked Mariam imposes many regulations upon her, such

as that she has to wear a *burgu* while she is out (Lu 17). She felt that Rasheed loved her and wanted to protect her when he insisted to wear burqa, while she is out. It was a shock at the beginning, but she came to realize that it is important to hide her shameful secrets. Even the gun that she found with Rasheed, she believed it is for their safety. She is unaware that its function is a means of production and freedom in the end. Her life with Rasheed is full of agony and conflicts; it is no more than violence, beating, terror and domination. Mariam is punished many times either verbally or physical, he treated her less than nonhuman. She is a victim of his drastically mood. Rasheed beats and insults her only for not cooking according to his taste and forced her to eat grave (Soraya 84). *"He shoved two fingers into her mouth and pried it open, then forced the cold, hard pebbles into it, urged her to chew it"* (A Thousand Splendid). What make matters worse than ever and increase her suffering is when Mariam became a pariah again and has aborted one child after another. He never tries to understand Mariam's agony for the child she lost.

Nevertheless, she welcomed the strict reality of not being able to have a child (ibid.). She began to contemplate about her fate, and how she does not deserve to obtain such a favor from God since she had been the cause of her mother's death as she thinks. She also thinks that Harami daughter does not worthy to have a child (Muaddatunikmah 7). According to her, the baby symbolizes a torch for her darkness and gloomy life. With each miscarriage, Rasheed had grown more and more dissatisfied with his married life with her.

However, Mariam, as a subaltern and marginalized woman, can only suffer her husband's persecution silently without complaining. She seems to be impacted by her mother's wearing about women; suffering at the hand of men (Soraya84). Mariam as a *woman cannot do anything when Rasheed beat her brutally; force her to chew the hard pebbles, and so many kinds of wicked things done* (Muaddatunikmah 8). Woman like her had no support or potential to revolt against her husband. She has no one to support her or to understand her.

Women like Mariam must accept their fate, otherwise to face Taliban's threats. She has a remarkable ability to endure and persevere herself through misery and ordeals; She frequently relies on the Quran verses that she memorized as a child. Because Muslims believe that they are created for a little period of time, and that their life is a test from Allah in which they must undergo evil and suffering in order to be prepared for Paradise. As the following verse *"So lose not heart, nor fall into despair: For ye must gain mastery if ye are true in Faith"*

(sura :Aal-i-Imraan.Aya,139). When Rasheed decided to marry Laila, Mariam's "outrage and humiliation upon learning that Rasheed will take Laila as a second wife turns out to be her rescue" (*A Thousand Splendid* 76).

Mariam silently bears all the cruelties of her vicious husband because she lacks the courage to rebel against the established norms set by the men. In a traditional Afghan society women's value has been judged by her fertility and her ability to bear male children. Mariam's inability to give birth into a boy pushed her husband, Rasheed, to get marriage from Laial who is described as a sophisticated, contemporary, and well-educated young woman. Laila, the novel's secondary heroine, was Rasheed's Kabul neighbor. She is a woman who was born into a tiny smart family and was well educated. She had a wonderful childhood and adolescence, yet the war has its own word and deprived her of her older brothers and her parents who are later killed by a rocket. These harmful incidents render her to be mature for her age and fill her with a sense of aim in life.as long as she falls in love with her childhood friend, but war has forced him and his family to flee to Pakistan. Yet, her decision to marry Rasheed challenges her ideal personality and independent mind. One may justify this marriage as she wants to give her unborn child by her lover a father. Becoming a mother makes her accept the limitations and chains she once would have openly criticized and rebelled against.

When Rasheed seeks to marry Laila for a boy, initially Mariam cannot accept the presence of Laila into her house and has never shown any love or compassion to Laila. But later, when Leila had a birth to Aziza, Mariam's attitude is changed and her deprivation of motherhood plays a role in altering her feelings to Laila. She soon becomes a second mother to Aziza .When Mariam carries Aziza for the moment she believed that love had never been advertised to her simple mind so unreservedly. After all these years of shaking and loose "she had found in Aziza the first true relationship in her life of fake, unsuccessful connection" (Nadu 529).

Being educated and mindful woman, Laila rejects her life with Rasheed, who is very oppressive and cruel husband. She attempts to escape many times with Mariam and Aziza, but their attempted ended with failing and suffering. Rasheed's remorseless beating and affliction of pain on them are unbearable and unresisting (Lu 17). In the middle of suffering, Laila and Mariam strove to find a thousand splendid suns of heaven which will give beacon of hope of their planet. (Wulandare 48).Their deep friendship was the result of their hardship and suffering at the hand of the same brutal man. Their suffering and endurance brought them

closer and make intimate friends. *Laila's resistance rekindled the aspiration for self-library and freedom. The two fellow-sufferers became friends and comrade in arms. They together became the maker of hope to break through the cage of themselves destiny facing man's despotism and violence.* (Lu p17)

Thus, suffering is an opportunity for an individual to recover, to grow and develop, it can have value (Koester 13). Through suffering one can discover how to control his life and staring things around him. Suffering unites the victimized people as Mariam did when she sacrificed her freedom and life so that to let other characters live. She becomes able adequately to grapple with her suffering as a part of her nature and personality. She decides to end their suffering by murdering Rasheed and grant Laila and her kids to start new life away from torture and pain. Therefore, in the midst of anxiety and fear, Mariam finally has taken the right decision. She killed Rasheed, thinking that this is the choice for solving their crisis. "I've deprived your son of his father". It isn't right that I run. I can't. Even if they never catch us, I'll never.... Her lips trembled. I'll never escape your son's grief. How do I look at him? How do I ever bring myself to look at him, Leila jo?" (*A Thousand Splendid* 349) Mariam preferred to suffer alone and save Laila and her daughter Aziza from the brutality and abuses of Rasheed. She realized her end "*For me, it ends here. There's nothing more I want*" (*Ibid* 350). She decided to endure the responsibility of killing her husband, letting Laila flee with Tariq, and her children. Feeling and considering herself as a mother to Laila and Aziza, she sacrifices and offers Laila a better life, despite the fact that she knew she will die. Mariam is imprisoned ten days and is punished by Taliban forces waiting for the end of the ill-fated life in a place, where the people watched the end of her life in the hands of hangman. Again she resorted to patience in her last difficult moments by reading some verses from Quran;

He has created the heavens and the earth with the truth;
He makes the night cover the day and makes the day overtake
the night, and He has made the sun and the moon subservient;
each one runs on to an assigned term; now surely He is the
Mighty, the Great Forgiver. (*A Thousand Splendid Suns* 356)

Thus, fundamental element of Hosseini's description of those two women is their inner live, their specific circumstances that bring them together to fight their hard life, and their union build something significant and strong (Muaddatunikmah 12). He thus depicts a new type of Afghan woman who is strong and well-minded woman challenging her hardships and defeating suffering though the Afghan female characters are often portrayed in media as

voiceless, submissive, and powerless. not completely subjugated, voiceless, and powerless—despite how they are often depicted in media. Hence, Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* represents Afghan female characters as assertive, risk takers, and heroic.

Furthermore, the unity of the two women and their affection to each other make them stronger and stronger (Muaddatunikhmah 12). Their sacrifices are "selfless and difficult," as they put it. They have a lot of "caring and sympathetic ability in a world full of hate and evil." They are heroes because despite the enormous amount of difficulties they confront on a daily basis, "they persevered through personal heartache" and show incredible fortitude in the midst of so much chaos, misery, and violence." (ibid. 81)

Conclusion

Suffering is unpleasant experience and be in great trouble . Dealing and grappling with suffering is different from one to another and from one culture to another. Those who believe in God's rules completely know it is redemption for their sins and realize it is more than a torture. The one who has no ability to endure his pain and hardships is characterless. Although, *A thousand Splendid Suns* is an Afghan novel that depicts the reality of such kinds of Eastern countries, and how women are treated less than a human being. The study sheds light on the capacity of those women to grapple with their suffering and cruelty of their patriarch as a part of their routine life and culture. Women like Mariam and Leila have nothing to do but live and the suffering whether it is physical or mental. Finally, Mariam's acting toward her husband displays that one has to put an end to his/her hardships, because she is entirely sure that the end of their suffering would take them to a new life and endurance has end like everything in this world.

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