

Tracing the History of a War-torn Land: A Study of Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

Swapna Gopinath

Afghanistan has gone through several wars and internal strife which has created a unique cultural and social milieu. The people of various ethnic origins have been striving to come to terms with their diversity over centuries. A land torn and a people shattered by various wars show amazing resilience in coming back to normalcy. The women of this land, twice victimized, still stand strong, braving all kinds of national and domestic violence. The Afghan women have often been in news for their intense suffering and the veiled woman has been the focus of Western media. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini gains in importance as it is a portrayal of Afghan society by an Afghan writer.

Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 1965. His father was a diplomat with the Afghan Foreign Ministry and his mother taught Farsi and History at a high school in Kabul. In 1976, The Hosseini family moved to Paris. They wished to return to Kabul in 1980, but by then Afghanistan had already witnessed a bloody communist coup and the invasion of the Soviet army. The Hosseinis sought and were granted political asylum in the United States. In September, 1980, Hosseini's family moved to San Jose, California. Hosseini graduated and went on to enter the University of California-San Diego's School of Medicine, where he earned a Medical Degree in 1993. *The Kite Runner*, his first novel was published in 2003. In 2006 he was named a goodwill envoy to UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency. His second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was published in May, 2007. Currently, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is published in 25 countries.

A Thousand Splendid Suns traces the socio-political and cultural history of Afghanistan. As Brannigan rightly points out;

Literature is a vehicle for the representation of history, and it does contain insights into the formation of historical moments. It reveals the processes and tensions by which historical change comes about. But it does not ... reflect history as a mirror. It sees literature as a constitutive and inseparable part of history in the making, and therefore rife with the creative forces, disruptions and contradictions, of history. (418)

Hence it is interesting to look at this breathtaking tale set against the volatile events of Afghanistan's last thirty years—from Zahir Shah's rule to the Soviet invasion and later to the reign of the Taliban and to the post-Taliban rebuilding—that puts the violence, fear, hope, and faith of this country in intimate, human terms. It is a tale of two generations caught in the war, their struggle to survive and the history of the nation which plays an integral part in their lives.

Change is fundamental and inevitable in any society. We cannot interpret the text in isolation. So "any meanings that a text might have are always related to the much wider cultural, political, economic and social institutions and practices of its context" (Malpas 57). Afghanistan is one of the most war-torn, most ravaged, and most beleaguered of nations. It is a nation that has faced

repeated invasions, external pressures and internal upheavals since before the time of Alexander the Great. Within its current borders there are at least a dozen major ethnic groups – Baluch, Chahar Aimak, Turkmen, Hazara, Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, Nuristani, Arab, Kirghiz, Pashai and Persian. Historically the Pashtun nationality has been the most dominant. The royal families of the country were Pashtun, and today the Pashtun represent about 50% of the total population. Tajiks come in second with 25%. Tracing its history from Zahir Shah's rule, it was one of almost total autocratic power. It is a country proud of its rich heritage. "Jalil ... was fond of ... telling her stories ... of Herat, the city where Mariam was born in 1959, had once been the cradle of Persian culture, the home of writers, painters and Sufis"(4). The rural landscape where Mariam grows up is undisturbed by war cries. People watch cinema and Hindi films have many admirers. Wealth can buy comforts and luxuries and a life of opulence is possible.

In 1973, the king was overthrown and a republic was declared. But this in reality changed nothing. The king had simply been overthrown by a prominent member of his own family, Daoud, who decided to title himself president instead of king. During this time, Mariam who is fifteen years old, leaves her home to meet her father in Herat. She could travel all alone and talk of music from Iranian films. Under Daoud, a certain liberalization took place, but very little was done to satisfy the people. Mariam is married to Rashid, a Pashtun, a shoe maker and moves to Kabul. Rashid's house introduced her to the emerging cityscape. She sees the lower middle class living in crowded areas and in Rashid's house, Mariam sees "pots and pans and a pressure cooker and a kerosene ishtop"(53). There are kites and volley ball playing. They are comfortable with imported cars, and upper class women wearing high heels and makeup.

We also see the emerging power of the conservative forces in the character of Rashid. The double standard in moral values is visible here. Rashid says: "The women come uncovered, they talk to me directly, look me in the eye without shame. They wear makeup and skirts that show their knees"(63). But Rashid will not permit his wife to move around without the burqa. Mariam wears the burqa for the first time. "She has difficulty getting adjusted to it. The loss of peripheral vision was unnerving, and she did not like the suffocating way the pleated cloth kept pressing against her mouth"(65). Mariam later sees her husband's collection of porn magazines. She does not question it but prefers to feign ignorance.

Daoud had seized power with the help of an underground party named the Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan – a pro-Moscow communist party. Once he had consolidated power, he ditched them, and ordered a crack down upon the party. In 1978 the PDPA seized power from Daoud in a military coup. They began introducing reforms, such as declaring, more or less, a secular state, and declaring that women deserve an equal treatment as men. But they met with fierce opposition from many sections of the deeply religious population. Soon several rural areas rose in open armed rebellion against the new government. The rising anger against the Soviet reforms is best indicated through the character of Rashid, the Pashtun from Kandahar. Mariam comes across a gun in Rashid's room, perhaps indicating the increasing presence of weapons in the Afghan life.

“She saw the gun. It was black. ... It was disquieting to her that Rasheed owned something whose sole purpose was to kill another person” (74).

Immediately following the PDPA coup, the Soviet Union took an active interest in the PDPA, but they disappointed the Soviets. They invaded the country in 1979 and handed power over to a man named Karmal, who was the leader of the more moderate faction of the PDPA. Soviet troops were sent in to support the unpopular PDPA government. The average Afghan began to suffer the consequences. Soon several Islamic fundamentalist groups sprang up and began waging guerilla warfare. At this point the United States started taking an active interest in the Islamic fundamentalists waging war on the PDPA and the Soviets. The CIA began providing military training the Islamic guerillas known as the Mujahideen. The CIA kept supporting them, the Saudis and Persian Gulf Emirates contributed billions of dollars to them. The revolt against the Soviets was considered as a holy war, a jihad. In reality, it was an irony that the worst affected people in this jihad was the Afghans themselves.

The muezzin’s call for namaz rang out, and the Mujahideen set down their guns, faced west, and prayed. Then the rugs were folded, the guns loaded, and the mountains fired on Kabul, and Kabul fired back at the mountains.... (157)

The increased interference by other countries in the domestic affairs of Afghanistan sends the country into a whirlpool of misery. So we have Hakim, Laila’s father losing his job in the high school. He is no more a teacher, but a worker in the gigantic bread factory. But Laila can still see a Soviet film with Tariq and hope for a normal romantic relationship.

In 1989 the Soviets withdrew, leaving the PDPA government to fend for itself. Different Mujahideen warlords occupied different cities and regions of the country. The Mujahadeen warlords and their feuds continued to bring death and destruction upon the country. In the response of Laila’s mother to the civil strife, we see the perfect representation of the Afghan sentiment. “When the rockets began to rain down on Kabul, people ran for cover. Mammy did too, literally. She changed into black again, went to her room, shut the curtains, and pulled the blanket over her head”(155).

With the aim of ending the civil war, Pakistani Intelligence aided in the creation of a new Islamic fundamentalist movement, the Taliban. The Taliban was born in the Islamic schools that had sprung up inside the Afghan refugee camps inside Pakistan. It had as members, young religious students, primarily Pashtuns, with a zeal for religion and the belief that they were ordained to bring stability and the ways of Allah back to their war torn land. They attacked corruption, greed and factionalism of the contending Mujahadeen factions inside Afghanistan. They were well received by certain sections of Afghans, inially.

This sentiment of optimism is reflected in the words of Rashid:

They (Taliban) may have no past. ... They may know nothing of the world or this country’s history. And, compared to them, Mariam here might as well be a university professor. ... But look around you. What do you see? Corrupt, greedy Mujahideen commanders armed to the teeth, rich off heroin, declaring jihad on one another and killing everyone in between....

At least the Taliban are pure and incorruptible. ... They'll bring peace and order. (245)

Once in power the Taliban sought to create a theocratic state based on their interpretations of the Koran and the Afghan women's conditions worsened. The veil became the law of the land, and women were forbidden from attending school or holding employment outside of the home. Television was banned and an effort was made to purge the country of any signs or remnants of secular or Western influence. The country became isolated. Historical and cultural relics were destroyed. By this destruction of the past, the Taliban hoped to recreate a history for their country.

With the September 11 World Trade Center bombings, Afghanistan became a hot spot. The United States accused Osama Bin Laden of the crime, and demanded that the Taliban hand over Bin Laden. The Taliban demanded proof of Bin Laden's guilt, and refused to hand him over. Soon the United States began bombing the country, as well as providing active support to the Northern Alliance. The Northern Alliance succeeded in taking Kabul and the Taliban had to retreat. All the while the people of Afghanistan continued to suffer. Yet they believe that they can rebuild their country from the ashes of their glorious tradition. Laila hopes and has firm faith in the resurrection of her country but she feels intense anger at the sight of the war lords walking away scot-free.

That her parents' murderers live in posh homes with walled gardens, that they have been appointed minister of this and deputy minister of that, that they ride with impunity in shiny, bulletproof SUVs through neighborhoods that they demolished. It slays her. (363)

The novel traces the history of Afghanistan in a very objective manner. It is narrated as a faithful representation of history and the novelist's objectivity in the narration gives it the authenticity it requires. Hosseini builds his story along with a detailed commentary of the political history. He weaves his tale into the socio-political fabric of Afghanistan. The flyers and posters, the radio and occasionally the television, acts as constant source of information on the latest political development. The radio announces; "After the music faded, a man's voice came on the radio. He ... reported that Daoud's loyalist forces were all but defeated..." (91). Later Babi comes with the big news in April 1988. "They signed a treaty Within nine months, there won't be any more Soviets in Afghanistan". (138) As the story progresses, Rashid comes in with the news; " They're forcing young boys to join, ... the Mujahideen are."(227) In Chapter 37, Laila tells Mariam with a smile on her face; "The Taliban are here."(244) The novelist has devoted several pages to give us details of the Taliban rule.

The vast majority of Afghanistan's population professes to be followers of Islam. It is a religion that stated that men and women are equal before God, and gave them various rights like the right to inheritance, the right to vote, the right to work, and even choose their own partners in marriage. King Amanullah Khan (1919-1929) stated that religion does not require women to veil their hands, feet and faces. But for centuries now, in Afghanistan, women have been denied these rights. During Zahir Shah's rule, women had a comparatively better role to play in society. The wealthy upper class and the urban society allowed women greater freedom compared to the lower economic class and the rural community. So

Mariam, although a harami, wishes to go to school. The week before, Bibi jo had brought news that Jalil's daughters Saideh and Naheed were going to the Mehri School for girls in Herat. Since then, thoughts of classrooms and teachers had rattled around Mariam's head. (17) Mullah Faizullah does not find fault with her simple desire for education. So he says: "If the girl wants to learn, let her. Let the girl have an education"(17). Mariam is married off at an early age not just because it was customary at that time, but because she was a burden on her father's household. So we have Mariam commenting on her situation:

It did not escape Mariam that no mention was made of her half sisters Saideh or Naheed, both her own age, both students in the Mehri School in Herat, both with plans of to enroll in Kabul University. Fifteen was not a good solid marrying age for them. (44)

Later the country falls under the Soviet regime and we have women hoping and aspiring for greater freedom. The teacher in Laila's school, Shanzai is proud of her father who is a poor peasant. "She did not cover and forbade the female students from doing it. She said women and men are equal in every way and there was no reason women should cover if men didn't"(101). Later in the same chapter, Laila's father says:

Marriage can wait, education cannot. ... Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated. (103) Later he says further; Women have always had it hard in this country, Laila, but they're probably more free now, under the communists, and have more rights than they've ever had before. ... But it's a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan. (121)

But Babi knows that it is for the same reason that the tribals especially in the Pashtun region have started to rebel against Soviet rule. They see it as an insult to their centuries-old tradition and they found it unpalatable because it came from a godless government. Things change drastically with the rival factions fighting on the streets for power. This struggle for power conveniently places women behind the burqa. Laila cannot travel by herself. "She was always accompanied by Tariq"(157). Later the strife results in further curtailment of freedom as far as Laila is concerned. "The streets became so unsafe that Babi did an unthinkable thing: He had Laila drop out of school"(160).

The internal strife in Afghanistan had women and children as their mute victims. The victimized are oppressed further by the men and taken advantage of. Laila is orphaned and has no future. So Rashid says she has few options in front of her. She can either marry sixty-year old Rashid or she can leave.

But I suspect she won't get far. No food, no water, not a rupai in her pockets, bullets and rockets flying everywhere. How many days do you suppose she'll last before she's abducted, raped, or tossed into some roadside ditch with her throat slit? (192)

Laila has no choice but marriage. Under the Mujahideen rule, the situation of women becomes more precarious. Laila, along with Mariam and Aziza plans on escaping from an abusive husband. But the plan fails because of the strict laws against women traveling without a male escort. "It is a crime for a woman to run away. We see a lot of it. ... You can be imprisoned for running away"(238). Laila in her desperation questions it but she is forced to return home.

We also learn that domestic violence is not a criminal offence. Later, the condition worsens because under the Taliban, there are more widows than women with husbands.

During the rule of the Taliban (1996 - 2001), women were treated worse than in any other time or by any other society. They were forbidden to work, leave the house without a male escort, not allowed to seek medical help from a male doctor, and forced to cover themselves from head to toe, even covering their eyes. Women, who were doctors and teachers before, suddenly were forced to be beggars and even prostitutes in order to feed their families.

The abject misery of Afghan women is aptly portrayed in chapter 39 where Laila is hospitalized for a caesarean session. She suffers intense agony when her surgery is done without any anesthesia. She endures it all and we are surprised to see her alive after her ordeal in the hospital. The hospital has "no clean water, ... no oxygen, no medications, no electricity". (255) The filth and stench at the overcrowded hospital and the fully armed Taliban soldiers guarding the hospital presents an ironic picture of the country.

Since the fall of the Taliban in late 2001, many would agree that the political and cultural position of Afghan women has improved substantially. The Afghan constitution states that "the citizens of Afghanistan - whether man or woman- have equal rights and duties before the law". Women have been allowed to return back to work, the government no longer forces them to wear the all covering burqa, and they have been appointed to prominent positions in the government. Despite all these changes many challenges still remain. The repression of women is still prevalent in rural areas where many families still restrict their own mothers, daughters, wives and sisters from participation in public life. They are still forced into marriages and denied a basic education. In fact, the educational system is still on the verge of collapse.

The novel, at one level, is a tale of Afghanistan. But on another level, it is a poignant tale of two Afghan women who share a very special and strong bond. Mariam and Laila begin their journey through life from two diverse social backgrounds; Mariam, a social outcaste, a harami and Laila, a child of a liberal household. They start off with hostilities but when the novel ends their identities are one and the same;

When they first came back to Kabul, it distressed Laila that she didn't know where the Taliban had buried Mariam. She wished she could visit Mariam's grave Mariam is never very far. She is here, in these walls they've repainted, in the trees they've planted, in the blankets that keep the children warm,.... But, mostly, Mariam is in Laila's own heart, where she shines with the bursting radiance of a thousand suns. (366)

For Mariam and Laila together, life seems bright and the child in the womb is a ray of hope for the future. Laila's happiness is the gift that Mariam offers to her by sacrificing her own life. Mariam, the bastard child, dies a saint's death and she emerges as a symbol of selfless love and hope for the future, both for Laila and for the country. The focus is on the deep bond that develops between two women subjected to abuse both by the patriarchy as well as the nation. The relationship that begins in conflict moves on to a deep spiritual bond

that binds the two. Ironically, Mariam's death resurrects her in the minds of her loved ones as a strong presence of love, hope and faith.

The novel also highlights the plight of a country lost in the aftermath of the cold war and when the struggle for hegemony reaches a nightmarish level, the people are deprived of their identities. The intervention of Soviet Russia, the USA and the Middle East Countries has not led to the betterment of the Afghan people. It has only opened up the market for weapon trade and consumer goods. So we have Fanta and Pepsi quenching the thirst of an angst-ridden society. In this war for hegemony, the loser is Aziza, the little girl confined to the orphanage, where she is denied the basic amenities of life. It , therefore, sums up as a narrative of the nation, its people and the agony of their confused identities during a period of warfare.

WORKS CITED

Brannigan, John. "Introduction: History, Power and Politics in the Literary Artifact." *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*. New York: St.Martin's P, 1998. Print.

Hamilton, Paul. *Historicism*. London & New York: Routledge, 1996. Print.
Hosseini, Khaled. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. London: Bloomsbury, 2007. Print.

Malpas, Simon and Paul Wake. *The Routledge Companion to Critical Theory*. London & New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.

Thayeeb, Aman. "Political History of Afghanistan." 07July.2008. <<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/51/148.html>>

Dr. Swapna Gopinath, Ph.D
Assistant Professor of English
S.N. College, Chempazhanthy,
Trivandrum, Kerala, INDIA