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RESIST AND RECONSTRUCT: REPRESENTATION OF AFGHANISTAN IN KHALED  
HOSSEINI'S *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the body has been radically rethought by science and philosophy. The body is actually a cultural representation constructed through various media including literature. A culture's body ideals speak volumes about how that culture perceives itself or wishes to be perceived. A national body is a conjugation of acts of representation and acts of political and economic power. Afghanistan is one of the most war-torn, most ravaged and most beleaguered of nations. In his second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini constructs his home land Afghanistan through a series of images. Afghanistan has gone through several wars and internal strife and all kinds of national and internal violence. The present paper highlight the plight of the country, its struggles for hegemony, and how its culture aim at building a sense of identity and finally sums up as a narrative of the nation itself, as depicted in the novel. It also explores how the Afgan society and its changing administrative powers have regularly tried through a variety of laws and rituals, to delimit its body.

Key Words: Society, hegemony, power, nation.

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'*A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a triumph. In Khaled Hosseini, Afghanistan has at last found a voice'. Such is the remark by *Financial Times* English language international daily from United Kingdom. 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- Turkmen, Pashtun, Tajik, Arab, Pashai and Persian and many more. 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. Tracing its history from Zahir Shah's rule, it was one of the almost total autocratic powers. It is a country proud of its rich heritage. Mariam was born "on a damp, overcast day in the spring of 1959, she said, the twenty-sixth year of King Zahir Shah's mostly uneventful forty year reign".(Hosseini, 11)

Mariam is a harami, an illegitimate child, who only sees her adored father once a week. On those precious days they go fishing, he reads to her and gives her beautiful presents, but she can never live with him. She decides to visit his home, a visit he does not acknowledge and returns to find that her mother has hanged

herself. Determined that she will not secure a place in their household, her father's wives marry her off to Rasheed, an elderly widower from Kabul. It is marriage that soon deteriorates into brutality and misery made worse for Mariam by Rasheed's decision to also marry the orphaned Laila. When Laila disappoints Rasheed by bearing a daughter, she too finds herself the target of his cruelty. But out of this unhappy household grows a friendship which will bind the two women in a union as close as any marriage, and which will endure beyond death. Written in often lyrical prose, the novel weaves thirty years of turbulent Afghan history through an intensely powerful story of family.

Mariam and her mother Nana, a former housekeeper for Mariam's wealthy father, Jalil, have been banished to a hut near a small village to avoid humiliating Jalil and family in Herat. Nana bitterly disparages both Mariam and Jalil, who visits his daughter weekly. Even though the village mullah urges Nana to send the girl to school, she refuses, insisting that the only skill a woman needs is endurance. To celebrate her fifteenth birthday, Mariam begs Jalil to take her to a cinema in Herat. When Jalil fails to meet her, Mariam walks alone to city, only to be told that her father is not at home. On her return she discovers that Nana has killed herself. The rural landscape where Mariam grew up is undisturbed by war cries. It was in the spring of 1974, that Mariam turned fifteen. In 1973, the king was overthrown by a prominent member of his own family, Daoud, and a republic was declared. After Nana's death, Mariam was married to Rasheed a man in his forty's, a Pashtun, and was moved to Kabul. Rashid's house introduced her to the emerging cityscape.

Throughout the last century, there were multiple attempts to liberate the women in Afghanistan. There was a king named Amanullah in the 1920's who actually banned the wearing of burqa in public. He built the first hospital for women and the first school for girls. He brought teachers over from Europe and sent women to Europe to get educated. Amanullah tried to ban forced marriage, and raise the minimum marrying age for girls to sixteen and ban the practice of bride price. Unfortunately, largely as a result of these attempts, there was a rebellion in town, and he was sent out only to die in exile. At Kabul, Mariam sees the lower middle class living in crowded areas and in Rashid's house sees pots and pressure cookers. There are kites and volleyball playing. They are comfortable with imported cars, and upper class women wearing high heels and makeup. On a Friday, Rasheed takes Mariam to the city and she sees

Afghan women married to men who did not mind that their wives walked among strangers with makeup on their faces and nothing on their heads. Mariam watched them cantering uninhibited down the street, sometimes with men, sometimes alone, sometimes with rosy-cheeked children who wore shiny shoes and watched with leather band, who walked bicycles with high-rise handle bars and gold-colored spokes. (Hosseini, 74)

Rasheed, being an orthodox minded chauvinist, has only contempt for them. "They think they are being modern men, intellectuals, on account of their education...they're spoiling their *nang* and *namoos*, their honor and pride" (Hosseini, 69). We see the emerging power of the conservative forces in his character. The double standard in moral values is visible here. Rasheed will not permit his wife to move around without burqa. Mariam wears burqa for the first time. But she later sees her husband's collection of porn magazines. She does not question it but prefers to feign ignorance.

The Soviet Union invaded the country in 1979 and more Soviet troops were sent to support the Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) government. Soon several Islamic fundamentalist groups like Mujahideen began to spring up. In reality, it was an irony that the worst affected people in this warfare was the Afghans themselves. The average Afghan began to suffer the consequences. The increased interference by other countries in the domestic affairs of the homeland 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.

The Taliban, a new Islamic fundamentalist movement was born as it members as young rebellious students. They attacked corruption, greed and factionalism of the contending Mujahadeen factions inside Afghanistan. They were well received by certain sections of Afghans, initially. As in Rasheed's words:

“They may have no past...They may know nothing of the world or this country’s history... at least the Taliban are pure and incorruptible. At least they’re decent Muslim boys. *Wallah*, when they come, they will clean up this place. They’ll bring peace and order. People won’t get shot anymore. No more rockets! Think of it.” (Hosseini, 267)

By September 1996, Taliban reaches their place as Laila announces, “The Taliban are here”. (Hosseini, 266) Once in power, Taliban sought to create a theocratic state based on their interpretations of the Holy Koran and the Afghan women’s conditions were 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 of secular or western influence. The country became isolated. Historical and cultural relics were destroyed. Laila had to undergo her caesarean operation without anesthesia as hospitals were no longer women-friendly.

The internal strife in Afghanistan had women and children as their mute victims. The victimized are further oppressed by men and are taken advantage of. Laila is orphaned and has no future. So Rasheed says she has few options in front of her. She can either marry sixty-year old Rasheed or she can leave only to be “abducted, raped or tossed into some roadside ditch with her throat slit”. (Hosseini, 209) Laila has no choice but marriage. Under the Mujahadeen 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 travelling without a male escort. Later, the condition worsens because under the Taliban, there are more widows than women with husbands.

Since the fall of the Taliban by 2001, the political and cultural position of the country has improved. Women have been allowed to return back to work, the government no longer forces them to wear burqa, and they have been appointed to prominent positions. Despite all these changes, many challenges still remain.

Mariam and Laila begin their journey life from two diverse social backgrounds: Mariam, a social outcaste, a harami and Laila, a child of a liberal household. Laila’s happiness is the gift that Mariam offers 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 for Laila. The novel, at one level is the tale of Afghanistan. But it is a poignant tale of two afghan women who share a special and strong bond.

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* traces the socio-political and cultural history of Afghanistan- from Zahir Shah’s rule to the Soviet invasion and later to the reign of the Taliban and to the post-Taliban, of violence, fear and hope. The agonies of Mariam, Laila, Aziza and Tariq sums up as a narrative of the nation, its people and the agony of their confused identities during a period of warfare.

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