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SUPPRESSION OF WOMEN IN KHALED HOSSEINI A *THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*

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A Thousand Splendid Suns tells the story of two Afghan women --- Mariam and Laila --- depicting their lives in the final quarter of the last century. The country experiences two foreign invasions, civil strife, drought and famine. The two serve as proxies for the women of this troubled land, who have been victimized by most of those in power over that period, most notably the Taliban, whose religious fanaticism placed women in a status little better than that of slaves.

A Thousand Splendid Suns is an absorbing novel that is not afraid to tackle challenging subject matter in an intelligent and thoughtful way. For that reason alone, it deserves the wide audience it undoubtedly will secure.

Mariam, the elder of the two, is a harami, the illegitimate daughter of Jalil, a prosperous businessman from the city of Herat and one of his housekeepers. At the age of 15, her father arranges a marriage to Rasheed, a Kabul shoemaker. Although Rasheed quickly establishes his control over the young woman, their union is relatively placid until it becomes apparent after several miscarriages that she'll never bear Rasheed the son he covets. Rasheed's dominating behaviour quickly escalates into constant verbal and physical abuse that brutalizes Mariam and ages her far beyond her years.

Laila is a Kabul native whose life intersects with Mariam and Rasheed after her parents are killed in a rocket attack as the family prepares to flee the country to join the growing body of Afghan refugees in Pakistan in the early 1990s. When the couple comes to her aid, she is approximately the same age as Mariam at the time of her marriage to Rasheed, and it appears that efforts are motivated by genuine concern for the young woman. Soon, however, it becomes clear that Rasheed sees in her the opportunity to create the family he was unable to have with Mariam, and he weds Laila and brings her into the household.

Laila bears Rasheed two children, while she and Mariam live at first in a wary relationship under the increasingly tyrannical domination of their husband. In some of the lyrical passages, Hosseini portrays Laila's effort to break through the wall of resentment that distances Mariam from her. When she does, the women unite in a profoundly moving way to face their common enemy.

Khaled Hosseini is a classical storyteller who has clearly demonstrated his talent for crafting tales which are effective. They are melodramatic, plotting and compulsive. In this case, he brings those talents to bear to expose the persistent subjugation of women that has marred much of modern Afghan history. At the same time, his determination to make that case contributes to what may be the novel's only notable flaw: the relative lack of complexity in the portrayal of its main characters. Mariam and Laila consistently display saint-like fortitude and courage in enduring almost lifelong persecution. Rasheed is so irredeemably evil. It is hard to endure him for the length of time he serves as the novel's dominant male character. A greater degree of subtlety in sketching these characters would have made *A Thousand Splendid Suns* an even more impressive work.

Near the end of the novel, Laila reflects that "every Afghan story is marked by death and loss and unimaginable grief"(Hosseini 4). With ongoing combat, a flourishing drug trade and even fears of a resurgent

Taliban, if Khaled Hosseini chooses to maintain his focus on the tragic story of the Afghan people, one senses he won't run out of compelling material anytime soon.

Mariam is a harami, a product of her mom Nana's affair with wealthy business man Jalil. Mariam loves Jalil, but on her 15th birthday, he refuses to take her to Herat to one of his cinemas. She waits outside of his house all night, and discovers that he is hiding inside. Upon her return, she finds that Nana has hung herself. Jalil's wives marry Mariam off to shoe maker named Rasheed, and Rasheed takes Mariam away to live in Kabul.

At first, Mariam is nervous but content in her marriage to Rasheed. He makes her wear a burqa, but he is nice to her otherwise. As Mariam can't carry a child Rasheed begins to physically abuse Mariam and their marriage becomes a nightmare for Mariam.

A girl named Laila lives near Rasheed and Mariam. Laila's brothers are off fighting with the mujahedin, and her mother, mammy, suffers from bouts of depression. Her father is a book-learning man, and places great importance on Laila getting her education. Laila's brothers are killed and her best friend Tariq's family flee. Her parents are killed in a bombing of their house. Rasheed rescue Laila from the rubble. Laila is pregnant at 14 with Tariq's child and agrees to marry Rasheed for safety.

Mariam and Laila's relationship is strained at first because Mariam is jealous of Rasheed's affection for Laila. She is also jealous of Laila's daughter Aziza. However, they soon become friends and plot to flee together. They are caught and brought home. Rasheed savagely beats them. After Laila gives birth to Rasheed's son Zalmai, she discovers that Tariq is still alive. Mariam kills Rasheed with a shovel as he strangles Laila.

Laila, Tariq and Zalmai recover Aziza from the orphanage where Rasheed had sent her, and Mariam surrenders herself for Rasheed's murder. She does this so that Laila, Tariq and the children can escape from Afghanistan. Mariam is executed in Ghazi stadium in front of thousands of people.

Tariq works in a hotel in Muree. After the fall of Taliban. Laila feels pulled to return to Kabul, but she wants to stop at Herat first. She meets Mullah Faizullah son Hamza, who takes her to the Kolba where Mariam grew up. He gives her a box that Jalil gave to Mariam years before, with an apologetic note, a copy of Pinocchio, and Mariam's inheritance money. Laila uses the money for the orphanage in Kabul, and she finds her pregnant again. She decides that if it is a girl, she will name the baby Mariam. Thus the suppressed women gear up and find a way for their freedom.

Works Cited

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