

From Silence to Freedom: Education as a Tool of Resistance in Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns

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Abstract

Education is considered one of the most powerful institutions in society. A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini depicts education as a powerful tool of freedom in a society deeply struck by horrors of war, shackles of patriarchy and political oppression. Hosseini portrays how education shapes identity, independence and optimism for women like Mariam and Laila who are oppressed under political systems. While Laila is encouraged by her father to learn and gain knowledge, Mariam is deprived of formal education leading to feelings of insecurity. This sharp contrast between the two women is a revelation of how education impacts lives and helps survive the suffering. Moreover, the novel also emphasises that authoritarian systems fear educated and learned women because these women have the ability to challenge the systems which are built on the foundation of silence. One such system under Taliban rule is an example where women are silenced and schools are shut down, giving way to a mechanism of control based on ignorance. Alternatively, Hosseini portrays education as a force that endures injustice and violence. Education emerges as a symbol of resilience and hope when Laila decides to return to teaching in the end. Through the character of Laila, education becomes more than personal freedom and social rebirth. By highlighting the transformative power of knowledge, A Thousand Splendid Suns shows how education can challenge patriarchy, empower women and restore hope in a dysfunctional society.

Keywords: Education, Silence, Freedom, Empowerment, Resistance

Introduction

Although education is defined as a means of achieving success, it becomes much more than that in civilizations that have been shaped by injustice and violence. It is observed by Naziev (2017) that education is a process of social and intellectual development [2]. In A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini, women in Afghanistan during decades of political unrest are depicted as using education as a source of identity, freedom, and survival. In the context of conflict, patriarchal dominance, and Taliban extremism, the book shows how knowledge may subvert structures intended to silence women.

A Thousand Splendid Suns, which was published in 2007, chronicles Mariam and Laila's lives over several decades of Afghan history. Despite the fact that both women experience abuse and sexism, their attitudes toward education are very different. While Laila is raised by an educated father who firmly believes in the value of female education, Mariam grows up alone in Kolba with minimal access to education.

The book also examines how repressive countries purposefully limit women's access to education in order to hold onto power. Women are denied access to public life and girls are prohibited from attending school under Taliban control. The regime controls women's destiny through its control over education. According to United Nations News (2025), millions of Afghan girls continue to face barriers to education in Afghanistan [5]. Therefore, ignorance can be utilised as a political tool to uphold social reliance and gender inequity. Freire argues that education enables oppressed individuals to develop critical consciousness and challenge systems of domination, making knowledge a powerful instrument of liberation [7].

A Thousand Splendid Suns, however, portrays education as a source of hope that endures even the most violent times. The narrative concludes with the prospect of recovery and reconstruction through Laila's eventual return to teaching.

Historical and Political Context

Examining Afghanistan's historical past is essential to comprehending the significance of education in A Thousand Splendid Suns. The book covers a number of decades including the Taliban government, the Soviet invasion, the Mujahideen civil war, and the monarchy under King Zahir Shah. Every political upheaval has a prominent impact on women's lives and educational opportunities.

In the initial years of the novel, Kabul is depicted as quite progressive. Women enrol in universities, pursue professional jobs, and engage in civic activities. Laila's father, Hakim, is a part of a generation that thinks education can change Afghanistan into a more powerful and contemporary society. His encouragement of Laila's education embodies the hopefulness of that era.

Nonetheless, wars slowly erode these possibilities. As violence engulfs Kabul, schools suffer damage, teachers vanish, and prioritizing daily survival outweighs the pursuit of intellectual development. Hosseini illustrates how conflict impacts not only physical structures but also cultural educational frameworks.

Amid the Taliban, constraints on education intensify significantly. Girls are not allowed to go to school, and women are barred from almost all types of public engagement. According to UNESCO (2025), Afghanistan remains the only country where girls are prohibited from receiving education beyond the primary level [4]. The Taliban recognizes that knowledgeable women are more inclined to challenge authority and fight against oppression. By restricting education, the regime curtails women's autonomy and guarantees their reliance on men. Hosseini thus links education to power. As Sen observes, educational opportunities are closely connected with individual freedom and social development, particularly in societies affected by inequality and conflict [8]. Access to education shows who is able to communicate, work, aspire, and engage in society. In the story, regulating education serves as an additional means of controlling women.

Mariam and the Absence of Education

Mariam's early years serve as an example of the disastrous effects of lack of education. Mariam obtains very little formal schooling from Mullah Faizullah while growing up with Nana in the remote Kolba. Even if Mullah Faizullah taught her reading and basic religious instructions, her possibilities were still far less than those of boys or youngsters from wealthy families.

Because Nana believes society will never let women like them succeed, she discourages Mariam from pursuing education or independence. As Nana says to Mariam, "What's the sense schooling a girl like you? It's like shining a spittoon. And you will learn nothing of value in those schools. There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don't teach it in school." (Hosseini, 2007,

p. 18) [1]. Nana sees hope as risky because she has personally been rejected and humiliated. Mariam consequently internalises the idea that her job is to suffer in silence as she grows older.

Mariam's self-perception is shaped throughout her life by her lack of education. Educational deprivation often results in diminished self-worth and limited agency among women living under patriarchal structures [9]. She finds it difficult to confront the injustice in her environment because she lacks social experience and intellectual confidence. Mariam has never been educated to foresee another future for herself, so when Rasheed abuses her, she hardly ever thinks about getting away.

According to Hosseini, depriving women of education leads to both economic and emotional reliance. Mariam's obedience and silence are partially the result of a society that never promoted her independence or critical thought.

Mariam's tale also shows that intellect can exist outside of formal education. She is resilient, emotionally astute, and incredibly kind. Instead of depicting her as stupid, Hosseini shows her as someone who was not given the chance to reach her potential. By limiting women's access to education, patriarchal societies destroy female brilliance, as the novel reveals through Mariam.

Laila and Education as Empowerment

Unlike Mariam, Laila is raised in a household that values and promotes education. Babi, her father, always stresses the value of education, particularly for women. He makes one of the most remarkable quotes in the book, "A society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 114) [1]. From an early age, Laila's identity is shaped by this notion. She gains intellectual self-assurance and worldly curiosity, in contrast to Mariam. She learns from Babi that education fosters freedom by enabling people to think for themselves and freely engage in society.

Laila's emotional stability is another benefit of her education. She is still critical of her situation even after losing her parents and being coerced into marrying Rasheed. She challenges injustice, longs to flee, and rejects the idea that tyranny is normal. Hosseini demonstrates how education fortifies the spirit as much as intellect. Laila's experiences illustrate how education equips women with the confidence and awareness necessary to challenge patriarchal structures and assert their independence. As scholars have noted, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* portrays education as a means through which women resist oppression and reclaim agency over their lives [10].

Crucially, Laila's education offers promise for Afghanistan as a whole. According to Babi, educated women are essential for the advancement of a country. The Taliban's doctrine, which aims to exclude women from public life, is directly at odds with his goal. Hosseini makes the case through Babi's character that civilization cannot prosper as long as half of their members are silenced and excluded.

After the Taliban regime is overthrown, Laila eventually realises her father's goal by going back to teaching. As she tells her students, "Open your Farsi books, children" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 401) [1]. Because it turns education into an act of reconstruction, this moment is extremely meaningful. Laila helps rebuild people's lives and the country by teaching kids.

The Taliban and Fear of Educated Women

The Taliban's disapproval of educated women is one of the novel's most potent themes. As Mehtarkhan Khwajamir (2016) explains in *History and Problems of Education in Afghanistan*, the Taliban closed all girls' schools and banned female education in Afghanistan [3]. Under Taliban control, women are not

allowed to work, girls are not allowed to attend schools, and female independence is seen as a danger to societal order and morality [3].

Hosseini shows that these limitations are political tactics intended to preserve power rather than merely religious precepts. Women who have received an education are better equipped to challenge authority, identify justice, and pursue independence. The Taliban restricts women's capacity to oppose injustice by prohibiting them from receiving an education. Scholars have noted that the novel presents female resistance as closely connected to the development of identity and awareness, both of which are strengthened through education [11].

The loss of hope is reflected in the loss of education. In the book, schools stand for potential and future development, while their closing is a metaphor for emotional and intellectual insufficiency. Because the regime recognises that ignorance promotes authoritarian power, women are coerced into quiet and reliance.

The way the Taliban treats women also highlights the link between fear and sexism. Ahmed argues that patriarchal systems often employ cultural and institutional mechanisms to restrict women's access to knowledge and public participation [12]. Because they are more likely to demand equality and autonomy, educated women question established gender norms. Therefore, in order to maintain male supremacy, repressive systems try to limit female knowledge.

As a result, Hosseini depicts education as hazardous—not because it damages society, but rather because it jeopardises structures based on subjugation and inequality.

Education and Female Solidarity

In the book, education is not confined to books or classrooms. Additionally, Hosseini portrays learning as a shared experience, empathy, and emotional bond among women.

Despite having no formal education, Mariam's friendship with Laila changes both of them. They impart compassion, courage, patience, and survival skills to one another. They gain a fresh perspective on the world and themselves via friendship.

While Mariam's emotional fortitude teaches Laila perseverance and selflessness, Laila's influence helps Mariam see her own value. Their bond shows that human connection and shared experience may also lead to education. The friendship between Mariam and Laila illustrates how female solidarity becomes a powerful form of resistance against patriarchal oppression [13].

This more comprehensive view of education opposes patriarchal structures that try to keep women out. Even in oppressive situations, Mariam and Laila's mutual support creates a place that allows for growth and healing. Their resilience demonstrates how women can resist oppression through solidarity and sacrifice. As Imran et al. (2017) observe, Hosseini portrays Mariam and Laila as courageous women whose strength enables them to endure suffering and challenge patriarchal domination [6].

In the end, Hosseini contends that genuine education incorporates social responsibility, emotional awareness, and empathy in addition to intellectual understanding.

Conclusion

Khaled Hosseini portrays education as a powerful weapon for societal transformation, empowerment, and resistance in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The novel illustrates how access to knowledge affects identity, freedom, and hope, while its denial perpetuates oppression and injustice, through the contrasting lives of Mariam and Laila. Critics have observed that Hosseini portrays education and self-awareness as essential

elements in women's search for identity and dignity [14]. Education is a method of resistance against patriarchal rule because of the Taliban's limits on women's education, which emphasize the relationship between knowledge and freedom. The novel ultimately suggests that education functions not merely as personal achievement but as a means of social transformation and women's empowerment [15]. It serves as a reminder to readers that the struggle for women's equality, education and dignity is still ongoing, especially in the light of the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021.

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