

A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS

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Abstract

In his novel A Thousand Splendid Suns, author Khaled Hosseini provides a vivid portrait of a country shattered by a series of ideological leaders and wars imposed on it by foreign and internal forces. The narrative, which spans several decades, is driven by the stories of two women, Laila and Mariam, who, despite starkly different beginnings, find themselves intimately connected and dependent upon one another. Hosseini's women, much like the country of Afghanistan itself, appear to be propelled by the whims of outside forces, familial and societal, with little chance of influencing their own lives and futures. Yet Laila and Mariam are neither passive nor helpless as they make choices and accept consequences to affect desired ends, both hopeful and tragic. In interviews and talks, Hosseini claims to write simple love stories, but his portrayal of Laila and Mariam and their dreams, trials, and challenges presents a complex view of women in Afghanistan that goes beyond oppression and the stereotype of the veil. This chapter looks at Hosseini's second novel as a novel of resistance.

Keywords: post colonialism, Khaled Hosseini, women, Afghanistan, Taliban, fiction, resistance in fiction.

INTRODUCTION

A Thousand Splendid Suns tells the intertwined stories of the lives of two Afghan women, Mariam and Laila, both married to the same abusive man, during the years of the Soviet occupation, then the civil war and the Taliban dictatorship. This guide is designed to aid teachers in selecting resources that provide background to the novel. It also provides discussion questions and activities for before, during, and after reading the novel. Teachers can select the activities which best fit the needs of their students. This guide may also be useful to independent readers of the novel who are looking for resources to guide their reading. A Thousand Splendid Suns as an English text or within Drama and Theatre based courses. It is also a useful resource for those interested in doing further research before or after watching the play. There are sections of the script available that may interest youth theatres and adult theatre companies. There are also activities suitable for schools and theatre companies to use to explore themes and issues covered within the play. The resource pack gives readers further insight into the themes of the play and the process of developing the novel into a stage production.

RESISTANCE AND SANCTUARY: AFGHANISTAN

Through his characters, Hosseini introduces the reader to an Afghanistan that existed before the war and beyond the media's twenty-first century coverage of the country. He paints a picture for his readers of a land of culture and abundance. As the novel opens, Jalil, Mariam's father, tells her as she sits on his lap that Herat, Mariam's birthplace, "had once been the cradle of Persian culture, the home of writers, painters, and Sufis" (Hosseini 4). He evokes the glory of the city through its ancient architecture and history. He impresses Mariam as he describes its current lushness, "the green wheat fields of Herat, the orchards, the vines pregnant with plump grapes, the city's crowded, vaulted bazaars" (Hosseini 4). Jalil attests to an Afghanistan with its own tradition of literature and a history of autonomous rule that precedes the era of the Great Game and the wars yet to come. Laila's father continues these idyllic history lessons as he relates the story of Afghanistan as a country of poetry and architecture, but from the perspective of Kabul. Finally, as the novel draws to a close, Laila returns to Herat to visit Mariam's birthplace. At this sad and reflective moment, despite the evidence that Soviet soldiers made use of Mariam's house, her kolba, Laila experiences only the peace and quiet beauty of the spot. As the tragedy of this novel plays out within the devastation of wars, civil chaos, mindless cruelty, and rampant injustice, Hosseini never abandons the thread of the narrative of Afghanistan's rich heritage and its capacity for beauty. In the background of the main narrative, Afghanistan is buffeted from power to power. It becomes clear that no one can successfully rule or dominate the country. Its people, willing to sacrifice everything to fight for their political and religious autonomy, as well as the country's geography, eventually defeat each invading power. As Babi travels with Laila and Tariq to Bamiyan to see the famous (and now destroyed) Buddhas, Babi points out Shahr-e-Zohak, the Red City. The Red City was built as a fortress to defend its surrounding valley. Babi explains that it withstood the invasion of Genghis Khan's grandson but was then

destroyed by Genghis Khan himself. The taxi cab driver comments on this story, saying, And that, my young friends, is the story of our country, one invader after another. . . . Macedonians. Sassanians. Arabs. Mongols. Now the Soviets. But we're like those walls up there. Battered, and nothing pretty to look at, but still standing. (Hosseini 132)

Babi concludes that the “only enemy an Afghan cannot defeat is himself.” During the lifetimes of Tariq and Laila, the Soviet invasion will be followed by the warring rebels seeking to gain control of Kabul, the Taliban takeover, the American bombing campaign to take Kabul from the Taliban, and the ensuing partisan conflict that follows the American intervention. Just as Laila and Mariam experience abuse from Rasheed in their home and from random men as they venture out on the streets of Kabul, the country has been abused and traumatized by outside forces. When freedom seems to be within its grasp, as with the signing of the peace treaty with the Soviet Union, events and circumstances lead to continued conflict and violence. Even the Taliban forces bring with them many foreigners. When Rasheed and Mariam go to the hotel to use a telephone to call Mariam’s father, Mariam hears “bits of Pashto and Farsi,” the two major languages of Afghanistan, “but Urdu and Arabic too.” As Rasheed notices this, he tells Mariam, “Meet our real masters . . . Pakistani and Arab Islamists. The Taliban are puppets. These are the big players and Afghanistan is their playground” . The history of Afghanistan’s wars and conflicts is morally complex. Despite the horrifying nature of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, it also brings constructive elements in its train. Although Laila’s father loses his teaching job to the Soviets, he can see positive aspects of their control as well, especially in Soviet policy toward women. The Soviet-backed government raised the status of women by providing them with educational and professional opportunities. At the same time, this interference with entrenched tribal practices (Rasheed’s sense of nang and namoos: honor and reputation) leads to the fierce resistance against the regime. “It is a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan,” Babi tells Laila, but he also points out that the freedoms women have now are “also one of the reasons [Afghans in the tribal areas] took up arms in the first place” . This complexity is further highlighted later when, after the Taliban have taken control and begun their decimation of Afghan culture and the eradication of what remains of the rights of women to work, be educated, or to move freely outside the home, Laila declares that the Taliban are savages. Rasheed laughs at Laila’s declaration, “Compared to what? The Soviets killed a million people. Do you know how many people the Mujahideen killed in Kabul alone these last four years? Fifty Thousand. Fifty thousand!” (Hosseini 251). Despite its fluctuating fortunes, Kabul serves as a kind of sanctuary for Laila and her family. During the Soviet occupation, war raged beyond the boundaries of Kabul. Tariq’s lost leg and the death of Laila’s brothers serve to symbolize the devastation that is taking place in the areas beyond the city; the prevalence of land mines, tanks, and raging battles can be seen when Babi takes Laila and Tariq beyond the city’s borders. Life in Kabul is not without difficulties for Laila, but she goes to school, has friends, the warmth of a home, a father’s love, plus her special friendship with Tariq and the affection of Tariq’s parents. This sanctuary is violated completely as the battle of the warring Mujahideen take over the streets of Kabul. The Mujahideen, having sacrificed everything for the sake of Afghanistan’s independence, come out of the mountains and into Kabul having spent all of their adult years fighting. Just as the celebratory party Laila’s mother hosts in honor of the fall of Najibullah turns into a scuffle of differing opinions originating out of ethnic loyalties, so does the brief period of harmony among the different rebel parties end in war. Hosseini writes, “The Mujahideen, armed to the teeth but now lacking a common enemy, had found the enemy in each other” .

Later, as the Taliban establish themselves as the rulers of Kabul, they root out what remains of the Kabul so beloved by Babi: the elements that contributed to Kabul as sanctuary. The Taliban smash the remnants of the Kabul museum and do away with any aspects of Afghan culture that predate or conflict with Islam. The university was shut down and its students sent home. Paintings were ripped from walls, shredded with blades. Television screens were kicked in. Books, except the Koran, were burned in heaps, the stores that sold them closed down. The poems of Khalili, Pajwak, Ansari, Haji Dehqan, Ashraqi, Beytaab, Hafez, Jami, Nizami, Rumi, Khayyam, Beydel, and more went up in smoke. Many years later, after leaving Kabul, Laila returns to the new post-2001 Kabul. But even as Laila, once again pregnant, finds purpose and healing in her work with the children at Zalman’s orphanage, outside forces are once again threatening to destroy the promise of sanctuary.

FEMINISM IN LITERATURE

Literature is a creative form of writing which reflects and mirrors human experience (Abrams, 2000:51). A work of literature is a response to the problems of human existence and fate including discrimination against women. For centuries, feminists continue to voice their perspectives about equality of women and men through literary works. Within their works, either fiction or nonfiction, feminists explore the histories and stories of women’s lives. Morris (1993:7) states that literature gives people a powerful insight about the disadvantages that women get from society. The imaginative ways of literary works in portraying women’s lives can increase people’s indignation at the problem of gender and it will help to stop it. In addition, positive images of women which are crafted by feminist writers can be used to raise women’s self-esteem. In other words, literature can open the world’s eyes about unequal treatment women experience and inspire women to fight for their rights. Due to the fact that literature can portray the problems of humankind and at the same time can inspire people,

feminists use literature as a medium to spread feminist movement. Therefore, a theory which is widely known as feminist literary criticism emerges with the focus on the analysis towards women in literature.

RESISTANCE AND SANCTUARY: MARIAM AND LAILA

It is set in Afghanistan from the early 1960s to the early 2000s. Mariam, a young girl in the 1960s, grows up outside Herat, a small city in Afghanistan. Mariam has complicated feelings about her parents: She lives with her spiteful and stubborn mother, Nana; while her father Jalil, a successful businessman, visits Mariam — his only illegitimate child — once a week. Mariam resents her limited place in Jalil's life; she wants to live with him, his three wives, and her half-siblings in Herat. She makes her wishes known by asking Jalil to take her to see Pinocchio for her fifteenth birthday. Jalil reluctantly agrees, but then never shows up to take her to the film. Mariam walks to her father and finds Jalil's house, but he doesn't let her in, so she sleeps on the street. The next morning, Jalil's chauffeur drives Mariam home where she finds that her mother has committed suicide.

Mariam is taken to Jalil's home after her mother's funeral. Jalil's wives want nothing to do with Mariam, so they force him to let her marry Rasheed, a widowed shoemaker in Kabul. At first Rasheed treats Mariam decently, but after she suffers miscarriage after miscarriage, he abuses her both physically and verbally. It becomes clear that Rasheed's only use for Mariam is in her ability to replace the son he lost years ago.

Growing up down the street from Rasheed and Mariam is Laila, a young, intelligent girl from a loving family. However, the Afghani war against the Soviets disrupts Laila's childhood and both her older brothers leave to join the war. Laila seeks comfort from her best friend, Tariq, a boy a few years older than her. Just before Laila reaches adolescence, her parents' receive news that both of their sons have been killed. A few years later, war reaches Kabul and bombs fall on the city regularly. By now, Tariq and Laila are teenagers and in love. As Tariq tells Laila that he and his family are fleeing to Pakistan, the couples makes love for the first time, quickly and passionately. A few days later, Laila's parents decide to leave Afghanistan as well, but as they are packing a rocket hits their house, killing Laila's parents and wounding her.

Rasheed and Mariam nurse Laila back to health and after she recovers, a stranger, Abdul Sharif brings her news that Tariq has died. Devastated and realizing she's pregnant with Tariq's child, Laila agrees to marry Rasheed. Mariam is initially hurt and threatened by Laila's presence and refuses to have anything to do with her. However, after Laila gives birth to a daughter, Aziza, the women come to see themselves as allies against Rasheed's abusive, manipulative ways. A few years later, Laila gives birth to a son, Zalmi. Then, one afternoon, after years of abuse and sadness, Laila is shocked to see a man standing at her front door: Tariq.

Tariq and Laila spend the afternoon together while Rasheed is at work. Laila and Mariam realize that Rasheed hired Abdul Sharif to tell Laila about Tariq's untrue demise so she wouldn't run away. When Rasheed finds out that Tariq has come home, he brutally beats Laila. With a shovel, Mariam kills Rasheed. The next day, Mariam turns herself over to the Taliban in an effort to clear the way for Laila to find sanctuary for herself and her children in Pakistan with Tariq.

CONCLUSION

In Pakistan, Tariq and Laila marry and finally begin the life they dreamed of so many years ago. With time, both of Laila's children warm to Tariq and they enjoy their new life. But in September, 2001, their happiness is overshadowed by news that the United States has attacked Afghanistan. Following the US invasion, conditions in Kabul improve, and Laila insists that her family move back home so they can help rebuild their city. They stop by Herat on their way to Kabul, where Laila visits Mariam's old home and is able to come to terms with her grief over Mariam's execution. Laila and Tariq build a new life in Kabul: Laila becomes a schoolteacher at the orphanage where Aziza once lived. And when Laila becomes pregnant, she decides that if she has a girl, she'll name her Mariam.

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