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**FEMINIST DISCOURSE AND THE POLITICS OF SILENCE IN A  
THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS**

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## Abstract

*This article explores *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini using the concept of feminist discourse and politics of silence. The study suggests that as in the novel, silence is more than the lack of speech; it is a social, cultural and political process that silences, disciplines and sometimes empowers women. The article highlights the theme of the women's voice and the limitations imposed by patriarchy, domestic violence, war, displacement and Taliban rule on the voices of the characters of Mariam and Laila in both public and private spheres. The analysis also shows how silence is a form of survival, resistance and female solidarity during the same time. The article demonstrates how Hosseini portrays Afghan women as victims of the power of men and how he presents them as agents that subvert oppression by enduring their fate, connecting emotionally through their relationship, sacrificing their own lives, and subtly challenging authority by their acts of silence. The article argues that *A Thousand Splendid Suns* advances feminist literary criticism; it takes silence as an indicator of gendered subjugation and a quiet but powerful form of agency.*

**Keywords:** *feminist discourse, politics of silence, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini, Afghan women, patriarchy, resistance, postcolonial feminism.*

## Introduction

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini is one of the most important modern day novels addressing gender oppression, war and women's survival in Afghanistan (Neimneh, 2025). The novel is the story of two women, Mariam and Laila, whose lives are influenced by patriarchal traditions, domestic violence, political unrest, and social norms concerning the submission of women (Umair & Ahmad, 2026). The novel is read as a book of suffering, but also as a book of endurance and resistance and solidarity among women (Nusrat, Abbas, Zaheer, & Shabbir, 2025).

This article examines the feminist discourse in the novel from the perspective of the politics of silence (Mastour, Aram, Anwari, & Haqmal, 2024). Women are expected to be silent and subservient and abide by the dictates of men in a patriarchal society. They are expected to be silent and their speech is considered to be rebellion or shame (Tanzeel, 2025). The voices of females in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* are silenced by the family, marriage, social norms, and legal frameworks of the political system (Saranya et al., 2026). Early in life, Miriam is silenced by the stigma of being a harami and Laila's once promising and educated world gradually becomes curtailed by war and Rasheed's rule (Shamsan, Alwan, & Ghannam, 2025).

But silence isn't powerless in the novel. Silence is another means of survival. Mariam and Laila discover the art of speaking and hiding the truth and just not speaking at all. Their quietness is an unknown language of sorrow, care and community (Saha & Mukherjee, 2024). This article thus contends that silence is an important feminist tool in Hosseini's hands for uncovering the oppression of women and their agency (Maqsood, Qayyum, & Parveen, 2025).

## Research Objectives

The main objectives of this article are:

1. To examine how patriarchal structures silence women in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.
2. To analyze silence as both oppression and resistance.
3. To explore the feminist significance of Mariam and Laila's relationship.
4. To study how war, displacement, and Taliban rule affect women's voices.
5. To show how Hosseini's narrative gives visibility to marginalized Afghan women's experiences.

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## Research questions

1. How does Khaled Hosseini portray silence as both a tool of oppression and a form of resistance in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*?
2. In what ways do Mariam and Laila's experiences of silence differ according to their social backgrounds, and how does this reflect intersectional dimensions of class, gender, and culture?
3. How does the novel challenge or reinforce patriarchal and Orientalist narratives about Afghan women through its representation of silence and voice?
4. What role does female solidarity, expressed through silence and speech, play in constructing alternative forms of agency and survival?
5. How can analyzing silence in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* contribute to broader feminist literary criticism and the global politics of women's resistance?

## Theoretical Framework

The feminist literary criticism, postcolonial feminist theory, intersectionality and the politics of silence are used as a basis for this study. Feminist literary criticism is the study of the role of literature in symbolizing the roles of men and women, the oppression of women and opposition to male domination. In the novel by Hosseini, patriarchy is present in the form of fathers, husbands, legal system, cultural norms and regimes (Elsa, 2022).

Importance of Postcolonial feminism: The novel is set in Afghanistan, a country populated by a people who have been affected by war, colonial histories, religious interpretations, and the conflict with the global political arena. A postcolonial feminist reading refrains from reducing Afghan women to helpless victims. Rather, it explores how their struggles are bound up in certain cultural, historical and political contexts (Saranya et al., 2026).

Intersectionality also helps illuminate the difference in the way that Marjam and Laila are oppressed. Mariam is deemed to be illegitimate, poor, rural and uneducated. Unlike Laila, she is more urban and better educated, with a more liberal outlook on freedom and expression. However, both women end up being ensnared by the vicious circle of patriarchy and political conflict. They come from different backgrounds, indicating that gender oppression is not the same in all situations, and that levels of oppression are determined by class, family status, education, war and social position (Koçak & Kabiri, 2025).

The politics of silence is the main theme of this article. Silence often means the lack of speech but in feminist criticism, it can also mean forced obedience, social exclusion, trauma, survival, refusal, resistance. While in the novel silence is forced by the patriarchy, women also use silence as a way to endure and protect themselves (Ahmed, Mahmood, Kashif, Nusrat, & Ashraf, 2026).

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(Brear, 2020) emphasized involvement in growth to lead to strength, people in the community need to bring their ideas to the table during decision-making. People can choose to stay quiet, though. People think of silence as both a way to fight back and a way to consciously avoid saying certain things. In collaborative development, these different ideas show up as the contradictory advice to "give voice" and "tolerate silence." My goal is to help people learn more about the reasons and meanings of silence in inclusive development and to talk about what this means for the processes of deliberation. To do this, I use an interpretive analysis of observational data that shows how I led a process of co-designing participatory action research (PAR) about health. Bourdieu's theory of social power relations and Nussbaum's approach to skills have helped shape the study (Stará, 2023).

When the co-researcher volunteers were given a chance to speak, they often didn't because they were afraid of something, like giving the wrong answer. The co-researchers were annoyed by the silences because they liked having a say. They annoyed me because I thought and needed the co-researchers to add their thoughts to make the research planning process more open to everyone. I tried different ways to break up silences, and when they worked, they gave the co-researchers real-life experiences that helped them see themselves as important people who had the right and ability to speak up. The study shows how important it is to think about the social barriers that keep disadvantaged people from speaking out and to include ways to

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break down those barriers in participatory action research (PAR) and other forms of community development (Carroll, 2021).

(Joyia & Gull, 2017) critically evaluated that even though they are constantly going through terrible things, the characters show amazing resolve by being able to get over or adapt to bad luck. This toughness comes from having to, and it shows up in different ways. For Mariam, her perseverance starts out as a kind of quiet endurance—a will to live through a hard life. When it comes to Laila, resilience means being proactive. She is smart and thinks ahead to protect her children. The most strong sign of their strength is how they were able to stick together. Mariam and Laila's friendship changes from a feud to a close bond, giving them power and mental support to get through their shared pain. Their resolve isn't about getting past their problems; it's about having the will to keep going (Safdar, Abbas, & ul Zafar, 2022).

The novel's theme of resistance evaluated by (Stuhr, 2011) is modest but strong. It builds from quiet acts of defiance to the final act of revolt that costs everything. At first, they are quiet and private in their defiance. Laila is rebelling in small ways by meeting with Tariq's friend behind his back and not following Rasheed's rules. Mariam's early reluctance is just her need to live even though people tell her she shouldn't. As their bond grows stronger, they work together to make their rejection more clear. The plan to leave together is a direct challenge to Rasheed's power. Mariam's last act of resistance, killing Rasheed, is the climax of this theme. In this last, aggressive act, there is no yielding; there is total agency. At that moment, she takes back her power and gives up her life to protect Laila and her children's freedom. This turns the years of quiet pain she had been through into one last, strong act of resistance against a system that tried to silence her (Zhang, Xu, & Umeanowai, 2026).

Feminists have a lot of problems with how the book shows women working together. People see Mariam and Laila's friendship as a strong act of protest against the male order that tries to keep women apart and against each other (Imran & Ismail, 2022). This "sisterhood" gives them mental support, helps them stay alive, and in the end helps them get away from Rasheed's abuse. But some postmodern critics like (Bouzenag, 2020) have taken a more negative view, saying that Hosseini's story may support neo-Orientalist ideas even though it's meant to make Afghan women more human. These experts think that the book was written with a Western audience in mind, and that it may oversimplify Afghan culture and history by making Afghan women seem like passive victims who are waiting for the West to "save" them. Some people say that the novel's focus on human rights and pain in general can make it hard to see how the Afghan opposition fits into the larger political and historical picture (HASROURI & BOUZENAG).

This is another important area of critical study by (Elsa, 2022): how war and political uncertainty change the characters' lives in big ways. The book is both a personal story and a history lesson. The political situation in Afghanistan is a constant and damaging force in the story. The Soviet-Afghan War, the civil war, and the rise of the Taliban are not just events that happen in the background; they have a real effect on the characters' lives and take away their freedoms and houses. Critics talk about how Hosseini uses the destruction of Kabul to show how the characters' emotional and mental pain is similar. The book shows how changes in politics have a direct effect on the lives of women, with times when women had more freedom giving way to harsh rules under the Taliban. Part of the criticism looks at how the fight to stay alive in a war-torn country is linked to the fight for freedom and respect for each person (Asri, Sabrina, & AC, 2024).

In postcolonial studies by (Roozbeh, Ghasemi, & Najjar Homayounfar, 2024), resistance is key to claiming cultural independence and a unique identity in the face of dominating societies. In the past, this idea has supported freedom and given power to groups that have been pushed to the edges. These days, resistance studies are becoming popular again thanks to new ideas shaped by postcolonial and feminist approaches to neocolonialism. Looking at how resistance can change people's identities in response to unjust stories in Toni Morrison's "Beloved" and Khaled Hosseini's "A Thousand Splendid Suns," this study looks at how postcolonial theories overlap with these ideas. In these books, the idea of "maternal resistance" goes beyond standard roles and becomes a strong way to understand battle, freedom, and identity formation in the face of neocolonial rhetoric. Morrison and Hosseini both use mothers as symbols of struggle against injustice. For example, Beloved shows the sacrifices mothers make when they are strong during slavery, and A Thousand Splendid Suns praises mothers as change agents. By bringing back the psychological meaning of maternal grit, the writers stress how mothers shape identities and stories that are built on resistance (Roozbeh et al., 2024).

Recently (Tanzeel, 2025) passed remarks on book *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is about how complicated relationships can be and how long-lasting the effects of strife can be. It does a great job of asking what happens when religious zeal and power-hungry break down the bonds that hold people together. Hosseini has a clever way of telling stories that comes from the Afghan tradition, which has a long history of literature and culture. Hosseini uses his unique way of telling stories to bring attention to the situation of Afghan women, which got much worse after the Soviet attack and the wars and civil wars that followed. Hosseini shows the pain and strength of Afghan women through the story of Mariam and Leila. She also shows how complicated human relationships are, especially the subtleties of female friendship. The book also talks about the effects of war and how the nation-state can support or deny women's rights (Tanzeel, 2025).

### **Methodology**

In this article, qualitative textual analysis and narrative deconstruction are used. Close reading of selected scenes, characters, symbols, and patterns of narration are available in qualitative textual analysis. Analysis is centred on moments of 'woman's voice' being silenced, moments of 'woman's voice' being dangerous, and moments of the potential meaning of woman's voice in silence.

The techniques for narrative deconstruction include the disruption of binary opposition like voice/silence, power/submission, male/female, and victim/agent. The study does not interpret silence as a void, but it is a sign of a story. Mariam's silent resolve is read as a feminist act, Laila's lying is sublimated as a feminist act, and the bond they share without speaking is read as a feminist act.

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini is the main source for this study. The texts chosen focus on Mariam's childhood, her marriage to Rasheed, Laila's entry into Rasheed's house, the building of female solidarity, the oppressive life of the Taliban and finally, the last act of sacrifice by Mariam.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

#### **Patriarchy and the Silencing of Women**

The novel starts with a strong sense of shame playing a role in the formation of Mariam's identity. Her status as a harami – an illegitimate child and a socially less desirable entity – is noted. It's more than a label, it's a political one. It illustrates the consequences on women and children of a patriarchal society for men's deeds. Jalil can defend his public reputation, but Nana and Mariam have to endure the shame. Mariam's silence starts before she marries: it is produced through the rejection from society, the neglect of her emotions and the lack of legitimacy.

When she marries, Mariam becomes more silent. Rasheed treats her not as an equal partner, but as property. His power is manifested in his control of her body, in her movement, in her speech and in her emotional life. If she doesn't give birth to a son, Rasheed's wickedness grows. Her value is her reproductive success, particularly if she has an ability to give birth to a male child. It is a reflection of a patriarchy that values women based on their obedience, fertility, and service.

Initially Laila's experience is different. She's educated, her father's favourite, encouraged to dream of something more than a life of domesticity. But her family is ripped apart by war and she winds up in the house of Rasheed. Similar to Mariam, she finds herself in a situation in which talking can cause violence. Hosseini demonstrates that patriarchy functions across social classes via both characters. Patriarchal power is able to silence a woman both through marriage, as in the case of Mariam, and through violence and social control, as with Laila.

#### **War, Taliban Rule, and Public Silence**

The novel links between domestic patriarchy and political oppression. Rasheed's control at home reflects the control which the Taliban have over the outside. Women are prohibited from education, employment, moving freely and appearing in public during the Taliban regime. They are silenced from the public sphere. This political silence helps to perpetuate domestic abuse as women have less opportunity to seek help or leave.

Trauma is another form of silence wrought by war. Laila loses not only her family and her home, but also her sense of security. Kabul itself is a wounded city, with destruction and fear everywhere. Under these circumstances, women's voices aren't heard, they become dangerous. Truth can lead to punishment, shame or even death. The novel thus reveals that the decision to be silent is not always a voluntary one. Frequently generated through fear, violence, and survival needs.

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## **Silence as Survival Strategy**

While silence is enforced on Mariam and Laila, the novel also demonstrates how silence can be a strategic weapon. Laila's refusal to speak up about the father of Aziza is a big hint. She doesn't hide the truth because she's lacking in courage, but because revealing this will put her and her child at risk. "Silence saves life." In this respect silence is a positive choice in a restricted and risky context.

The novel also shows a change in Mariam's silence. Initially her silence is a sign of shame, submission, and oppression. She feels she should be punished for being in the world because socialization has made her feel she is unwanted. As her relationship with Laila grows however, Mariam's silence takes on a new meaning. She observes, understands, protects and then acts. Her last fight against Rasheed is not by talking, but by taking action. In killing Rasheed, Mariam makes one act of agency, bringing years of suffering to an end.

This change is at the heart of the politics of silence. But resistance doesn't always manifest itself as public protest or verbal rebellion, suggests Hosseini. Under oppressive situations, resistance may be manifested through hiding, suffering, emotional fortitude or giving up.

## **Female Solidarity as Feminist Resistance**

Laila and Mariam's friendship is at the heart of the novel in a feminist way. Initially, Rasheed's family puts them in a competition. Patriarchal systems can fragment women, causing them to compete for male acceptance or life. As they experience the same suffering, however, there develops a sense of understanding between them. Their friendship starts to be a rebellion to Rasheed's rule.

They are united in their solidarity and this unity is often expressed in silence. They look into each other's eyes, share household tasks, watch over the children, and comfort each other, and sometimes talk, sometimes don't. This implicit relationship provides a private female space in an atmosphere of violence and patriarchy. It helps them keep their dignity and their hope.

Mariam's final sacrifice too is a gesture of sisterhood. She decides to spare Laila and the kids, and provides them with a future they do not have. In this story, Mariam is no longer a victim. She becomes a Protector, a Liberator. Laila's life after her death is what ensures the memory of Mariam, and demonstrates how women's resistance can last through generations.

## **Narrative Voice and the Recovery of Silenced Women**

Hosseini's storytelling also helps to advance feminist discourse. The novel focuses on two main characters, Mariam and Laila, as it alternately presents them, and thus provides emotional and narrative agency to the other female characters in the story world, including the unheard voice of the Muslim girl. The novel presents Mariam and Laila alternately, thus allowing the other female characters in the story world, including the unheard voice of the Muslim girl, to have emotional and narrative agency. They reveal to the reader their thoughts, fears, memories, and hopes. This has an impact because in patriarchal society women's experience is erased from public history.

The novel thus acts as a recovery in a sense. It features stories of socially voiceless women. Though they cannot voice their opinions openly in their society, the reader can hear these voices in the narrative of Mariam and Laila. But in this manner, Hosseini makes private pain into literary witness.

## **Findings**

Analysis shows some key points. First, in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, silence is created because of the patriarchal culture, domestic violence, social shame and political oppression. Secondly, silence is not necessarily passive, but may also serve as a means of protection, survival, and resistance. Third, by looking at the relationship between Mariam and Laila, one gets the sense that women can break the divide of patriarchy. Fourth, the novel illustrates the women in Afghanistan in their pain in historical and cultural context, but also demonstrates their strength and agency. Lastly, Hosseini's story places women on the map who are otherwise unheard by the domestic as well as the political systems.

## **Conclusion**

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* brings silence up as one of the greatest feminist issues of Mariam's and Laila's lives. The novel illustrates how women are silenced because of family shame, forced marriage, domestic abuse, war, and the rule of the Taliban. But it also demonstrates how silence can be a form of resistance when women use it to defend themselves, to maintain their dignity and establish invisible links of solidarity.

The novel's most important feminist lesson is that when it comes to the power of women, it often emerges in the form of action rather than words: from the silence of shame to the agency of sacrifice, as in the case of Miriam. It comes at times in a way of endurance, protection, refusal, and action. By surviving and going forward, Laila's story becomes a part of a larger continuum of female survival and the promise of hope, of a resistance that doesn't go to waste.

The novel thus extends feminist literary criticism by bringing into question the dichotomy of voice and silence. While silence can be oppressive, it can also be meaningful, strategic and transforming. Hosseini speaks for the voiceless Afghan women of this story, through the character of Mariam and Laila, and his character examination of different ways in which women are still able to act, even in the most violent patriarchy.

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