



AN ANALYSIS OF REALISTIC VALUES IN *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS* BY KHALED HOSSEINI

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Abstract:

Khaled Hosseini's novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, serves as a pivotal work in reflecting the reality of Afghanistan. This article aims to analyze the various facets of realistic values depicted in the masterpiece, including the tapestry of Islamic culture, the landscape of social instability, the tragedy of women, and the inherent beauty of the human soul hidden beneath sorrow. The study employs literary analysis in conjunction with a socio-historical approach, drawing on specific evidence from the text and relevant academic research. The findings reveal that *A Thousand Splendid Suns* not only authentically recreates the material and spiritual lives of Afghans under the devastating influence of religion and war but also profoundly portrays the tragedy and resilient vitality of women, thereby condemning social prejudices and injustices. This article contributes to clarifying the realistic and humanistic values of the work while raising awareness of the social challenges faced by Afghan women.

Keywords: Afghanistan, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini, Islam, realistic values

1. Statement of the problem

Khaled Hosseini is an influential Afghan-American writer in world literature, renowned for his ability to convey the hidden historical and cultural corners of Afghanistan. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* stands as one of his most quintessential works. The novel is set against the backdrop of Afghanistan from the 1930s to 2003 - a tumultuous period marked by incessant civil wars and the harsh reign of the Taliban regime. This was an era in which the lives of millions of Afghans were severely disrupted, their existence threatened, and women, in particular, endured profound injustice. The work is highly acclaimed not only

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for its authentic portrayal of the brutal reality of war but also for recreating the material life of people in Afghan society, thereby providing the international community with a window into the country's actual conditions. Academic studies further affirm that the novel depicts complex experiences of depression, despair, and the "self-redemption" of its two heroines.

In literary criticism, realism is an artistic approach aimed at truthfully reflecting life and social issues. The work does more than simply tell a story; it draws attention to the struggles and emotional journeys of individuals amidst volatile historical and social events. This suggests that the realistic value of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* lies not only in the recreation of events but also in exploring their profound impact on the inner lives and destinies of human beings.

The scholarly interest in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has remained robust since its publication, with researchers examining the work through diverse theoretical lenses. Generally, these studies can be categorized into three primary thematic groups:

Firstly, the group of studies focuses on artistic techniques and literary movements. Notable among these is the comparative analysis by Jame et al. (2025), which explores realist and naturalistic elements in Hosseini's broader corpus. While this study succeeds in identifying the structural parallels between *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, it tends to prioritize stylistic comparisons over the specific socio-political depth of Afghan history. Similarly, the work on intertextuality Nguyen (2018) provides a sophisticated look at the "multi-textual" nature of the novel, yet it leaves room for a more grounded exploration of how these texts reflect physical reality.

Secondly, a significant body of research is dedicated to the "Subaltern" and gender identity. Authors such as Sya'asah et al. (2024) and Soraya (2015) have effectively utilized post-colonial and feminist theories to amplify the "subaltern voice" of Afghan women. These works are commendable for their depth in cultural identity and the capacity of women to grapple with suffering Rasheed (2022). However, many of these studies approach the "woman question" through a predominantly theoretical or ideological lens, sometimes distancing the characters from the raw, material conditions of their daily Islamic and social environment.

Thirdly, domestic research in Vietnam has begun to bridge the gap between cultural dialogue and human destiny. Works by Thai (2019) and Han (2022) offer empathetic insights into the "drifting souls" of children and women. Nevertheless, there remains a lack of a comprehensive synthesis that simultaneously connects cultural reality, political instability, and humanistic values into a single cohesive framework.

While previous scholars have laid a solid foundation, there is still a need for a study that treats "realism" not just as a literary technique, but as a multi-dimensional mirror reflecting the intersection of faith, war, and the female psyche. Building upon these foundations, this article aims to provide a more holistic analysis of realistic values in the novel. By synthesizing cultural, socio-political, and humanistic realities, this study seeks to clarify how Hosseini transcends mere storytelling to document a national tragedy and the resilient beauty of the human spirit.

2. Research methodology

This study employs a multidisciplinary approach, primarily integrating literary analysis with a socio-historical method to deconstruct the realistic values within *A Thousand Splendid Suns*:

- **Literary Analysis:** This method is utilized to conduct an in-depth examination of the novel's narrative structure, linguistic nuances, and artistic elements. It aims to elucidate the techniques through which Hosseini constructs a vivid sense of reality.
- **Socio-Historical Approach:** By situating the masterpiece within the specific historical and social milieu of Afghanistan- spanning from the 1930s to 2003 - this approach facilitates a deeper understanding of how war, shifting political regimes, and cultural mandates impact human destiny.
- **Comparative Method:** Additionally, a comparative lens is applied to contrast and highlight the distinct layers of realism in Hosseini's work against broader literary and social contexts.

The synthesis of these methodologies ensures a comprehensive evaluation of the text, moving beyond mere aesthetic appreciation to a rigorous exploration of the novel as a historical and human document.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Theoretical framework of realistic value in literary works

Realistic value is a core attribute and a pivotal criterion for evaluating literary works, particularly within creative movements associated with Realism. This term refers to literature's capacity to reflect and recreate life authentically and profoundly, enabling readers to perceive the essence of social phenomena, the laws of historical evolution, and the multifaceted dimensions of the human soul.

According to the *Tu dien thuat ngu van hoc (Dictionary of Literary Terms)*, the realistic value of a literary work is "*manifested in its faithful reflection of objective reality, assisting readers in gaining a correct understanding of life and humanity*" [8]. However, this reflection is not a passive reproduction but a process of selective and creative reconstruction through the writer's subjective lens, encompassing their worldview, outlook on life, and artistic prowess. Le Ngoc Tra emphasized that "*Reality in art is not reality in itself, but reality that has been consciousnessed, perceived, and transformed into imagery*" [9]. Thus, realistic value is intrinsically linked to the ability to explore and interpret the fundamental issues of existence.

The realistic value in literature is typically examined across various dimensions, providing depth and weight to the work. First and foremost, the essential dimension is authenticity and historical specificity. A work highly regarded for its realistic value often possesses the ability to vividly recreate the social atmosphere, historical context, and specific events of a given time. Characters and circumstances must be authentic and capable of typicality - representing a specific historical period or social class - allowing

readers to sense the veracity of the depicted life. Vissarion Belinsky, the eminent 19th-century Russian critic, asserted: "*The life of any people is manifested in its own characteristic forms; therefore, if you depict life faithfully, it is inherently national*" [10]. Through this, he elevated literature's power to sharply capture and express the core characteristics of the era it reflects.

Furthermore, the capacity for generalization and typification serves as a vital benchmark for realistic value. This value transcends the mere faithful description of outward appearances; it demands that a work delve into the underlying essence to generalize the universal laws of life. By constructing typical images - that is, typical characters situated within typical circumstances - a work can illuminate universal issues regarding society and the human condition. Friedrich Engels famously articulated this requirement of realism, stating: "*Realism, to my mind, implies, besides truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances*" [11].

Another equally significant dimension is the depth of cognition and ideology that a work imparts. A piece with profound realistic value does not merely stop at reflection; it poses fundamental questions, provoking readers to contemplate the meaning of existence and the agonizing issues of society. It does not simply expose social realities in their rawest form but inherently contains the author's evaluations, judgments, or attempts to interpret that reality, thereby demonstrating the writer's ideological stance. Researcher Ha Minh Duc emphasized this point: "*The realistic value of a literary work is concentrated in the author's ability to perceive and interpret life, as well as in their level of generalization and ideological depth*" [12].

In summary, realistic value is a vital attribute that demonstrates literature's capacity to explore, interpret, and profoundly recreate life in its most authentic form. It does not merely assist readers in perceiving the world but also evokes humanistic sentiments and provides rich aesthetic experiences. Identifying and analyzing realistic value requires an examination of the work in the integrity of its content and form, as well as within the specific socio-historical context from which it emerged.

3.2 Cultural reality: The tapestry of Islamic life in Afghanistan

3.2.1 Depiction of women's traditional attire

Hosseini authentically portrays the cultural life of Afghan Muslims, where religion and traditional customs are deeply intertwined with every aspect of existence. The work recreates the attire of Afghan women, primarily the burqa and the hijab - the two most prevalent and traditional garments in Afghanistan and the wider Islamic world. Rather than delving into meticulous details of fabric or craftsmanship, the author introduces these garments through the characters' daily dressing habits, reflecting the societal emphasis on sartorial culture and the profound reverence for Islamic principles among Afghans.

The hijab is depicted as everyday wear. For instance, Mariam pairs it with a knee-length dress and cotton trousers: "*Mariam wore a cream-colored knee-length dress, cotton trousers, and a green hijab draped over her hair*" [13; p.41]. Even on her wedding day, the

hijab remains a constant; she is given one by Afsoon: "*Afsoon gave Mariam a dark blue long-sleeved dress to wear over white cotton trousers, a green hijab, and a pair of sandals*" [13; p.135]. In contrast, the burqa is portrayed as the mandatory garment for women when venturing out with their husbands. It is described as cumbersome, difficult to wear, and inducing a sense of suffocation and restricted vision for Mariam: "*Rasheed had to help her into it. The padded headpiece felt both tight and heavy on her head, and it was strange for her to see the world through the mesh screen. She practiced walking around the room in the garment, but constantly stepped on the hem and tripped. The sensation of being unable to see her surroundings clearly was uncomfortable, and she disliked the stifling feeling of the fabric pressing against her mouth*" [13; p.87]. The distinction between the hijab (covering the head and chest) and the burqa (covering the entire body) reflects the norms of modesty, simplicity, and formality. Simultaneously, it serves as a mechanism to ensure the moral standards imposed upon Afghan women within an Islamic society.

Attire in the workplace serves not merely as a cultural trait but as a tool to manifest and maintain patriarchal power and religious extremism. Although initially perceived as symbols of modesty and moral standards, the descriptions of the burqa reveal the restriction and discomfort it imposes on women. This is further reinforced by the notion that behind the burqa and hijab often lie "*darker*" realities - secrets that women wish to conceal or reflections of the harsh prejudices they endure.

Under the Taliban regime, the mandatory wearing of the burqa became part of a comprehensive imposition on individual freedom, undermining women's self-worth, confidence, and autonomy. A notable point is Mariam's paradoxical sense of comfort while hiding behind the burqa. This highlights a profound irony: the concealment of identity provides a meager form of liberation from the social judgment attached to her status as a "*harami*" (illegitimate child). Consequently, attire transcends its cultural origins to become a multi-dimensional symbol of conformity, concealment, and, at times, a form of self-protection within a deeply prejudiced society.

3.2.2 Reflection of beliefs and social customs

The Salah prayer ritual is one of the five pillars of Islam, performed five times a day. When the Adhan (call to prayer) resonates, individuals must immediately set aside their work to pray with sincerity and solemnity, demonstrating their reverence and faith in Allah. Hosseini portrays this strict adherence even amidst the chaos of war: "*The call for namaz rang out, and the Mujahideen dropped their weapons, facing West to pray. Afterward, the prayer rugs were folded, and the guns were reloaded*" [13; p.197]. However, as soon as the prayer concludes, they resume the slaughter. This paradox reflects a complex reality where deep-seated belief is not always a unifying moral force but is instead fragmented by sectarian conflict. This implies that religion may sometimes be practiced as a mere formality, detached from secular behavior, or even co-opted by extremist groups to justify violence rather than serving as a force for reconciliation and ethics.

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The Quran is the sacred scripture of paramount importance to the Afghan people and Muslims worldwide. It contains righteous teachings and is regarded as a "*spiritual sanctuary*" whenever individuals fall into psychological crisis. Mullah Faizullah taught Mariam lessons from the Quran, disseminating its philosophy and helping children develop a proper understanding of social issues: "*My dear Mariam. Cry. There is no shame in it. But remember, my daughter, that the Quran says, 'Blessed is He in Whose hand is the Kingdom, and He has power over all things, who created death and life that He may try which of you is best in deed'. The Quran is right, daughter. In every trial and every suffering. He places on our shoulders; God has His reasons*" [13; p.51].

Alongside religious beliefs, child marriage is depicted as a prevalent social custom. This form of marriage occurs when one of the parties (typically the female) is underage, often involving a vast age gap—sometimes spanning decades. These unions are usually the result of pre-arranged settlements rather than mutual consent. Mariam is forced to marry Rasheed at the age of 15, while he is already 40: "*But I've seen nine-year-old girls married to men twenty years older than your betrothed, Mariam. We've all seen it. You, what are you, fifteen? That's a suitable age for a girl to marry*" [13; p.131]. Similarly, Laila marries Rasheed at just 14, when he is well over 60. Reports indicate that approximately 80% of marriages in Afghanistan are forced [14].

Child marriage is a concrete and brutal manifestation of patriarchal prejudice and the lack of female autonomy. The fact that marriage is conducted through "*arrangement and settlement*" clearly reflects the power of men and families in dictating women's destinies, stripping them of their right to self-determination. The significant age disparity and the absence of love or consent lead directly to marital lives fraught with discord and domestic violence, as vividly illustrated through Mariam and Laila's marriages to Rasheed. This demonstrates that Hosseini does not merely document the culture; he critiques its "*darker side,*" specifically how it stifles individual development and happiness, creating profound personal tragedies.

3.3 Socio-political reality: A society fraught with instability in Afghanistan

3.3.1 Social chaos and violence under radical Islamic regimes

The work reflects the landscape of Afghanistan from the 1930s to 2003 - a period characterized by frequent conflicts that severely disrupted the lives of the populace. Countless innocent civilians were either dragged into the fray of war or forced to flee Afghanistan in search of a peaceful existence. This reality serves as a poignant mirror to the hardships endured by millions of Afghans during that era.

The period of civil war is depicted as a society submerged in a "*sea of blood,*" where all conflicts were settled through armed violence. Constant bombings and assassinations were carried out in a relentless struggle for power, disregarding the destruction of the nation and the sanctity of human life. The root cause lay in the resentment of conservative factions toward the new democratic regime, as they refused to accept the liberation of

women. The scenes of chaos and devastation are vividly portrayed: "*Outside, rockets continued to whistle through the sky as the forces of Hekmatyar and Massoud fought tirelessly. Laila knew that somewhere in the city, someone had just died, and a plume of black smoke was rising from a collapsed building, kicking up clouds of dust*" [13; p.211].

In this volatile context, women were subjected to sexual violence, while men were arbitrarily detained and brutally tortured. Decrees protecting women's rights were abolished and replaced by draconian Islamic laws. Political instability and violence created a vacuum that allowed for the imposition of harsh regulations, particularly targeting women and reversing the progress in civil rights previously achieved. This underscores the fragility of human rights and the vulnerability of society amidst prolonged conflict, where humanistic values are systematically eroded.

The subsequent period, marked by the Taliban's rise to power (from 1994), is characterized as a "*hell on earth*" for the Afghan people. During this era, every facet of human existence was strictly monitored, and individual freedoms were systematically dismantled. The Taliban, a fundamentalist Islamic group, promulgated draconian decrees based on a radical interpretation of Sharia law, enforcing severe corporal punishments for non-compliance.

These regulations exerted total control over daily life, ranging from attire and social conduct to education and entertainment. Men were mandated to grow long beards and wear turbans, while being prohibited from engaging in recreational activities such as singing, dancing, playing cards, or flying kites. Intellectual and artistic pursuits, including writing books, watching films, and painting, were strictly forbidden. Even the act of keeping parakeets was outlawed, with violators facing public floggings or the execution of their pets: "*All men shall grow beards. The correct length is at least one clenched fist below the chin. Anyone who does not abide by this will be beaten... Singing is forbidden. Dancing is forbidden. Playing cards, playing chess, gambling, and kite flying are forbidden. Writing books, watching films, and painting are forbidden. If you keep parakeets, you will be beaten. Your birds will be killed*" [13; p.307].

For women, the regulations were significantly more draconian. They were mandated to remain indoors at all times and forbidden from "*wandering aimlessly*" on the streets. Any excursion required the accompaniment of a mahram (a male relative) and the wearing of a burqa that completely concealed the face. Women were prohibited from using makeup, wearing jewelry, or dressing in "*fancy*" clothing. They were forbidden to speak unless spoken to, to maintain eye contact with men, or to laugh in public. Even painting one's nails was outlawed, with penalties ranging from public floggings to the amputation of fingers:

"Attention women: You will stay inside your homes at all times. It is not permissible for you to wander aimlessly on the streets. If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a mahram... Under no circumstances are you to show your face. You must wear a burqa when outside. If not, you will be severely beaten. Cosmetics are forbidden... You will not speak unless spoken to. You will not make eye contact with men. You will not laugh in public... You will not paint your nails. If you do, you will lose a finger" [13; p.307].

Furthermore, young girls were stripped of their right to education: "*Girls are forbidden from attending school. All schools for girls will be closed immediately*" [13; p.308]. Beyond individual oppression, the Taliban carried out a systematic purge of progress in Afghanistan, incinerating literary records (with the sole exception of the Quran) and dismantling cinemas, recreational areas, and musical venues. The healthcare system was similarly segregated; hospitals were reserved exclusively for men, forcing women to seek treatment in dilapidated, unsanitary facilities.

In alignment with Hosseini's portrayal of female destiny, Azar Nafisi, in her work *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, provides profound insights into the lives of women under the Islamic Republic of Iran. Both authors vividly depict the severe curtailment of women's rights and personal freedoms under totalitarian Islamic regimes (the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic in Iran). Nafisi details the mandatory wearing of Islamic attire (the *chador* or dark, long robes) and how the streets transformed into "*war zones*" for women who failed to comply with dress codes, facing arrest, floggings, and fines. This directly parallels the enforcement of the burqa and the draconian punishments illustrated in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Both works highlight the regression of women's rights, including laws governing marriage, divorce, child custody, and restricted access to education and healthcare. However, while *Reading Lolita in Tehran* emphasizes the role of literature as a source of solace, an escape, and a tool to interrogate reality and foster resistance, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* focuses more on inner resilience, fierce defiance, and the courage to confront a brutal reality head-on.

Table 1: Draconian decrees of the Taliban and their socio-human impacts in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

Category	Taliban Regulations	Impact/Penalty
For Men	Mandated long beards (at least a clenched fist in length)	Public floggings
	Mandatory wearing of turbans (Black for grades 1-13, white for higher)	Compulsory compliance
	Prohibition of singing, dancing, playing cards, chess, gambling, and kite flying	Deprivation of recreational freedom
	Prohibition of writing books, watching films, and painting	Cultural destruction; intellectual stagnation
	Prohibition of keeping parakeets	Execution of birds; deprivation of personal hobbies
For Women	Mandated to remain indoors; forbidden from wandering aimlessly	Domestic confinement; loss of freedom of movement
	Requirement of a <i>mahram</i> (male relative) when outside	Loss of autonomy; physical abuse if traveling alone
	Mandatory <i>burqa</i> ; complete concealment of the face	Severe beatings; erasure of individual identity
	Prohibition of cosmetics, jewelry, and "fancy" attire	Deprivation of self-expression
	Forbidden to speak unless spoken to, maintain eye contact with men, or laugh in public	Physical assault; suppression of social interaction and voice
	Prohibition of nail polish	Amputation of fingers

For Girls	Prohibition of school attendance; closure of all female educational institutions	Deprivation of the right to education; stifled future
For Society	Incineration of non-religious literature (except the Quran)	Destruction of cultural heritage; intellectual isolation
	Dismantling of cinemas, recreational areas, and musical venues	Erasure of spiritual and cultural life
	Segregation of healthcare (hospitals reserved for men)	Denial of adequate medical care for women
For Religion	Prohibition of proselytizing; mandatory adherence to Islam	Flogging, imprisonment, or execution for "proselytizing" Muslims

The realistic value of the work in this section lies in Hosseini's exposure of a bitter paradox: although the Taliban quelled sectarian warfare and established a semblance of peace after years of conflict, the cost was a comprehensive deprivation of human liberty and dignity. The Afghan populace, having endured incessant chaos and violence, was forced into a tragic compromise: accepting the loss of freedom in exchange for basic security. This highlights the tragic nature of a social reality where human rights are stripped away under the guise of "*stability*," rendering any act of resistance profoundly difficult and requiring extraordinary courage. Hosseini demonstrates that an autocratic regime may impose a superficial order, but it simultaneously inflicts deep-seated destruction upon the fundamental values of humanity

3.3.2 Draconian prejudices

Religious prejudice is starkly manifested under the Taliban's rule. Laws imposing religious conformity were promulgated, strictly prohibiting activities related to other sectarian groups and mandating that all Afghans revere Islam and adhere to its rigid tenets. The penalties for proselytizing or practicing other faiths were severe: "*If you are not a Muslim, do not worship where you can be seen by Muslims... If you attempt to convert a Muslim to your faith, you will be executed*" [13; p.307].

Gender-role prejudice (male chauvinism) is another agonizing issue that Hosseini portrays with chilling authenticity. Afghan society throughout the 20th century consistently elevated the role and power of men. Authority within both the domestic and social spheres was exclusively held by men, while women were relegated to the roles of wives, mothers, and homemakers, stripped of any power or voice. All material wealth and assets after marriage became the property of the husband. Rasheed's arbitrary decision to sell Mariam's wedding ring to buy items for Laila exemplifies this complete lack of property rights for women.

Furthermore, any social transgressions or failures - even those not caused by women - were systematically blamed on them. For instance, Jalil swiftly abdicated his responsibility and blamed Mariam's mother for Mariam's "*harami*" (illegitimate) status. Men possessed the right to polygamy, whereas women were bound to strict monogamy and absolute fidelity. Should a woman be accused of adultery, she would face the barbaric penalty of being stoned to death.

Domestic violence was not only tolerated but effectively encouraged, as no legal framework existed to protect women. The physical abuse of a wife by her husband was regarded as a mundane and "normal" aspect of daily life. When Laila and Mariam were captured after their attempted escape, the Islamist officers declared that "it is a sin for a woman to run away" and asserted: "What a man does in his own home is his business... by law, we do not interfere in private family matters" [13; p.295]. This underscores how gender prejudice has been institutionalized and normalized within the societal fabric.

The patriarchal mindset reduced women to mere reproductive instruments for continuing the male lineage. Sons were celebrated and cherished, while daughters were often met with resentment and verbal abuse. Rasheed epitomizes this patriarchal archetype; he showered Laila's son with affection while systematically alienating her daughter. Furthermore, once Mariam suffered miscarriages and became unable to conceive, Rasheed's demeanor shifted instantly to overt hatred and hostility.

Tragically, this internalized misogyny also persisted among women themselves, exemplified by Nana (Mariam's mother) and Laila's mother, both of whom showed little concern for their daughters' education, prioritizing their sons instead. The "invisibilization" of women in this society transcended a mere lack of freedom; it constituted a total deprivation of human dignity and the right to exist as an autonomous individual.

Prejudice against intellectuals is another dimension of reality depicted in the work. Afghan Islamic society at the time glorified violence and held the intellectual class in contempt, perceiving them as weak, pampered individuals who lived far from the harsh realities of physical labor. The standard for "true masculinity" was synonymous with physical brawn, aggressive behavior, and manual labor. Laila's father, a teacher by profession, was disparaged even by his own wife when he could no longer sustain the family through teaching during the period of upheaval. This systemic disdain for education resulted in a state of intellectual poverty and fostered distorted mindsets among the populace.

In this respect, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* shares significant commonalities with Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. As an autobiographical graphic novel, *Persepolis* recounts Marjane's life in Iran during and after the Islamic Revolution. Despite the geographical difference - Iran rather than Afghanistan - both works converge in their authentic portrayal of social reality and the female condition under radical Islamic regimes. *Persepolis* depicts the mandatory wearing of the veil and the institutionalized gender segregation within schools following the Iranian Revolution. These elements directly parallel the compulsory burqa and the systemic deprivation of girls' education under the Taliban in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Furthermore, both masterpieces highlight themes of identity struggle, rebellion, and the innate yearning for freedom within an oppressive environment. Marjane's individual rebellion against imposed norms serves as a mirror to the defiant spirit of Mariam and Laila.

These prejudices are not merely individual beliefs; they function as systemic barriers that stifle national development and perpetuate a vicious cycle of violence and instability. Hosseini portrays a reality where archaic values are reinforced by political

chaos and radical governance, resulting in a society where progress is nearly unattainable. The marginalization of intellectuals and the glorification of violence reflect a declining society, where intellectual values are supplanted by raw power. This shift leads to chronic stagnation, instability, and a profound distortion of social perception.

3.4 Humanistic Reality: Tragedy and the Beauty of the Human Spirit

3.4.1 The tragedy of ill-fated women

The novel focuses on the tragedies of two women, Mariam and Laila, who represent different backgrounds but share the same endurance of misfortune under the crushing weight of society and war.

Mariam's tragedy originates from her status as a "*harami*" (illegitimate child). From birth, she was subjected to her mother's resentment and verbal abuse, as Nana believed Mariam's existence had ruined her life: "*You are a clumsy harami. This is my reward for everything I've endured. An awkward harami, breaking a family heirloom*" [13; p.12]. This status haunts Mariam throughout her life, instilling a deep sense of shame and the realization that she will never be legally recognized or welcomed by society. It is a profound social scar that shapes her entire existence - from her inferiority complex to being exploited and abandoned.

Mariam's tragedy deepens through the betrayal and abandonment by her beloved father. Jalil, whom Mariam loved dearly, deceived her and barred her from his city life to avoid personal embarrassment, leaving her to wait all night in the cold outside his gates. Ultimately, he pushed her into a corner by marrying her off to the brutal Rasheed, stripping her of any choice regarding her life or personal happiness. Her marital life was equally calamitous. Having suffered seven miscarriages and being unable to conceive again, Mariam endured a life of constant verbal abuse, contempt, and physical violence from Rasheed. When Rasheed married Laila, Mariam became redundant in his eyes, relegated to the status of a domestic servant. Her wedding ring was sold, and everything she cherished had to be surrendered to Laila. Mariam's greatest tragedy remained her "*harami*" status, which led to her being shunned and forced to hide her origins. Paradoxically, she only felt comfortable behind the burqa, for "*no one would know who the woman behind the burqa was.*"

Laila's tragedy, by contrast, is rooted in war. Her happy childhood, filled with love, friends, and her sweetheart (Tariq), was utterly decimated by the conflict. The death of her two brothers led to her mother's psychological collapse, resulting in a cold indifference that made Laila feel redundant in her own mother's eyes. Her close-knit social circle was severed, with friends either killed or displaced. Even Tariq was forced to flee Afghanistan as the country became too perilous.

The climax of her tragedy was the death of her parents, killed instantly when a rocket struck their home, leaving Laila severely wounded and deaf in one ear. Laila lost everything: her support system, her home, and her dreams. Hosseini emphasizes that Laila's misfortune was not a result of personal choice but a consequence of macro-sociopolitical and historical forces governing their lives. War pushed Laila to the brink, forcing her into heartbreaking decisions for the sake of survival. To protect the unborn

life within her and to find sanctuary, Laila was compelled to act against her conscience by entering Mariam’s household and marrying Rasheed. Subsequently, she endured the same systematic violence as Mariam. Laila’s tragedy serves as a testament to how war creates "*victims of circumstance*," where morally agonizing choices are sometimes the only path to preserve one’s life and the lives of one’s children.

Table 2: Comparative analysis of the tragedies of Mariam and Laila

Criterion	Mariam	Laila
Origin of Tragedy	Social Stigma: Born as a "harami" (illegitimate child); resented by her mother, deceived and abandoned by her father from childhood.	Political Chaos: War deprived her of loved ones (brothers, parents, friends, and Tariq) and demolished her home.
Primary Forms of Suffering	Psychological & Physical Abuse: Endurance of social contempt, profound inferiority complex, domestic violence from Rasheed, chronic miscarriages, and the hardship of a forced polygamous marriage.	Loss & Existential Crisis: Physical trauma from war and Rasheed, profound bereavement, loss of personal freedom, and being forced to act against her moral conscience for survival.
Relationship with Rasheed	The first wife, disparaged as a "country girl," was exploited, strictly controlled, and brutally abused after becoming unable to conceive.	The second wife, exploited primarily as a vessel to bear a son, was subjected to surveillance and systematic domestic violence.
Coping Mechanisms & Survival Choices	Initially submissive; later transitions to verbal and physical defiance when pushed to the brink; ultimately chooses self-sacrifice to protect others.	Employs intellectual defiance; actively attempts to escape; makes agonizing survival choices (marrying Rasheed, placing her child in an orphanage).
The Resolution (Ending)	Execution as a consequence of protecting Laila; however, it achieves spiritual liberation and finds ultimate meaning through sisterhood.	Attains happiness and freedom following Rasheed’s death; reunites with Tariq to rebuild a new life.

The comparative data in the table above underscores both the parallels and the distinctions between the tragedies of Mariam and Laila. Although the origins of their misfortunes differ - one rooted in social stigma and the other in the upheaval of war - their eventual outcomes and the forms of suffering they endured, such as domestic violence and the total loss of personal liberty, share striking similarities. This highlights the diverse spectrum of experiences among Afghan women, yet simultaneously reflects a collective social reality of systemic oppression.

3.4.2 Soulful beauty and inner resilience

Amidst the harsh strokes of this realistic portrayal, noble human virtues continue to shine, serving as a spiritual anchor and a source of profound inner strength. First and foremost, the forbearance and self-sacrifice of Afghan women are depicted with great depth, illustrating their enduring capacity to protect what they cherish most - above all, their children.

Nana, despite facing societal scorn for carrying a "*harami*" child, refused to abandon Mariam, choosing a life of poverty and isolation instead, so her daughter could grow up in peace. Laila also embodied boundless sacrifice, enduring brutal beatings to shield her children. Even when forced to place Aziza in an orphanage, she defied draconian laws and risked torture by the Taliban to visit her daughter daily. Furthermore, Laila traded her personal happiness, consenting to marry Rasheed solely to ensure the safety and legitimacy of her unborn child, sparing the infant from a life of destitution. Mariam, too, dedicated her youth to building a home, enduring her husband's abuse and the bitterness of a polygamous marriage, all in an effort to preserve the fragile domesticity she had labored to sustain.

Alongside sacrifice, the virtues of empathy and mutual understanding are prominently displayed, particularly through characters with profound education and progressive mindsets, such as Laila's father and Tariq. Laila's father consistently treated his wife with gentleness, respecting her opinions even regarding critical decisions, such as the perilous choice to flee their homeland. Tariq, even when his love was initially met with a heartbreaking refusal, harbored no resentment or blame toward the woman he loved. Instead, he chose to honor Laila's decision, for he deeply understood the heavy burden of familial responsibility she carried upon her shoulders.

Most prominent of all is the spirit of tolerance and altruism, vividly exemplified through the character of Mariam. Despite enduring bitter insults and the derogatory label of "*harami*" from her mother, Mariam harbored no resentment; instead, she maintained a special, poignant love for her. Toward her father - the man who deceived her and thrust her into a life of darkness - Mariam still occasionally remembered him with complex emotions, wishing for his peace.

Notably, Mariam's altruism extended to Laila, whom she initially perceived as the interloper who had stolen her only husband. Mariam did not merely forgive Laila but grew to offer her a profound, maternal affection. This altruism is by no means a sign of weakness; on the contrary, it is a powerful act of agency - a conscious choice to relinquish past traumas in order to embrace the present. Through this lens, sacrifice and forgiveness become a form of silent resistance, a formidable way to preserve one's humanity and dignity in a world rife with inhumanity.

Secondly, the work portrays the resilient vitality of individuals who resist when subjected to brutality. Afghan society, under its draconian Islamic structure, consistently prioritizes male authority while rendering women invisible. However, these women do not remain perpetually submissive. Hosseini constructs their resistance through an incremental progression, moving from verbal defiance to decisive action and a spiritual awakening regarding their inherent self-worth.

Regarding Mariam's trajectory of resistance, she transitions from initial resignation to active verbal opposition when her husband intends to take a second wife: "*Eighteen years... I've never asked you for anything. Nothing. And now I'm asking... I don't want this... I won't allow it to happen*" [13; p.238-239]. Her resistance escalates when witnessing Rasheed's assault on Laila. Mariam bravely intervenes, using her body as a shield and physically fighting back: "*Mariam clawed at him. She hit his chest. She threw her weight against*

him. She tried to pry his fingers from Laila's neck" [13; p.38]. Ultimately, Mariam takes Rasheed's life to protect Laila, liberating them both. This act serves as a powerful affirmation of the right to life and liberty—a defiant "voice" raised against systemic oppression.

As for Laila, she consistently counters Rasheed's injustices with reason, never succumbing to his falsehoods. She also intervenes when Rasheed brutalizes Mariam: "...the girl lunged at him. She grabbed his arm with both hands and tried to pull him down... nevertheless, she slowed Rasheed's assault on Mariam" [13; p.238]. Furthermore, Laila proactively plans an escape to flee the cycle of violence in pursuit of a more peaceful existence.

Thirdly, there is a profound awakening of the consciousness regarding the right to life. Laila, benefiting from her education and exposure to progressive ideals, possesses a foundational understanding of gender equality and refuses to accept systemic injustice. Mariam's realization of life's intrinsic value is ignited by Laila's presence, ultimately leading to her courageous act of terminating the cycle of violence.

The bond between Mariam and Laila - often characterized by critics as "sisterhood" - plays a pivotal role in this trajectory. Laila's presence helps Mariam rediscover her self-worth and restores meaning to her existence, propelling her from a state of passive resignation to becoming a formidable protector. Mariam's final act liberates not only herself but also Laila, demonstrating that even when driven to the ultimate brink, individuals can transcend their circumstances, evolving from passive endurance to proactive resistance.

Fourthly, the work portrays individuals driven by an intense yearning for happiness and liberty. Despite enduring lives defined by tragedy and the constraints of societal prejudice, the characters in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* remain imbued with a profound, secret hope for a better life amidst a landscape of violence. Mariam, since childhood, consistently longed for a true family, even accepting a marriage to a stranger in a desperate search for domestic bliss. Laila dreamed of a life with her true love, Tariq, yearning to rebuild a family from the ashes of her loss. Characters like Tariq and Laila's father serve as counter-models of masculinity - men who cherish domestic stability and remain steadfast in their fidelity. Tariq's return acts as the "light" that pulls Laila from her darkest days; his readiness to marry her despite the social stigma of her past marriage exemplifies profound tolerance and authentic love.

Simultaneously, the work highlights the aspiration for freedom - the desire to flee a "death-bound society" that has inflicted so much trauma. Life in Afghanistan, perpetually threatened by warfare and stifled by draconian laws, caused the human spirit to fade; thus, the characters are in a constant quest for a "new life." Tariq and Babi (Laila's father) meticulously planned to move their families away from the instability of their homeland, seeking a sanctuary far from the anxiety of gunfire. Similarly, Mariam and Laila's attempt to escape Rasheed was not merely a flight from domestic abuse but a quest for a life of dignity, free from physical and mental torture. In the context of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, their escape was a radical act - a search for a world defined by personal autonomy and social equity.

Hosseini demonstrates that happiness and freedom are not predestined outcomes but rather the fruits of relentless struggle. His characters consistently manifest a yearning for these ideals, even in their most tragic circumstances. The work asserts that an individual's destiny - whether man or woman - is determined by a confluence of environmental forces and personal factors, with the latter being more significant and proactive. Hosseini concludes that "*happiness is not arranged by fate but decided by man*". This perspective transforms aspiration into a potent catalyst - a realistic driver that impels human action within a society rife with injustice. Ultimately, it serves as a profound humanistic message regarding the human capacity for self-determination.

4. Conclusion

A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini serves as a profound, multi-dimensional realistic portrait of Afghanistan. The work masterfully captures the distinct nuances of Islamic culture, a society in upheaval due to incessant warfare and draconian prejudices, and the poignant individual tragedies endured by its people, particularly women. Through the lenses of realism and naturalism, Hosseini exposes how historical, social, and cultural forces converge to shape human destiny, often rendering individuals as "*victims of circumstance*".

However, the realistic value of the novel transcends the mere depiction of suffering. Hosseini vividly highlights the beauty of the human soul, resilient vitality, altruism, and the fierce yearning for happiness and liberty. The work stands as a powerful indictment of patriarchal society, archaic prejudices, and the brutality of war, while simultaneously serving as a tribute to human compassion, resilience, and the capacity to transcend adversity.

Ultimately, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is not only an exceptional literary achievement but also a significant document that provides international readers with a deeper understanding of Afghan reality and human rights issues, especially regarding women's rights. It offers profound insights into the interplay between macro-forces and individual fate, ultimately conveying a message of hope and the possibility for change, even in the darkest of circumstances.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the teaching staff of the Department of Literature, Linguistics, Journalism and Communication, School of Political Sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities, Can Tho University, Vietnam, for their invaluable guidance and support throughout the preparation of this paper. Special appreciation is extended to Dr. Thai Cong Dan and Ms. Thai Phan Bao Han, English lecturers, for their dedicated assistance in proofreading, language refinement, and formatting. The authors are also deeply grateful to the Editorial Board of the *European Journal of Literary Studies* for accepting this paper for publication and for providing the opportunity to share this research with an international readership, particularly those interested in the study and teaching of both Vietnamese and world literature.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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