

Connection, Resistance, and Rebirth: The Female Spiritual Community in A Thousand Splendid Suns

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Abstract. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a novel by Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan American writer. The story takes place in Afghanistan under Taliban rule, and it focuses on how women struggle to survive amid extreme religious discourse, patriarchal structures, and the violence of war. At the same time, the novel also shows how they draw out spiritual strength through standing by each other in times of crisis. So, this article starts from the evolving relationship between the two main female characters, Mariam and Laila—how they go from being hostile to becoming symbiotic. Drawing on theories of community, the article looks at how women, through mutual support and shared agency, form a kind of "female spiritual community" that carries resistant power. At first, as co-wives in a polygamous setup, they're forced into an antagonistic relationship. But later, that relationship slowly turns into an empathetic, mother-daughter-like alliance. This shift shows a seemingly contradictory truth: oppression can actually spark emotional bonds. Against the backdrop of extreme religious interpretations, ethno-patriarchal culture, and the devastation of war, they build a system of resistance together, carving out their own little spaces within the cracks of dominant structures. Through self-sacrifice and passing on education, they don't just find redemption within their community—they also hand down that resistant spirit to the next generation. This study aims to offer a literary case of women's solidarity and resistance in a global context, helping us better understand the politics of resistance among marginalized groups.

Keywords: Khaled Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, spiritual community, female solidarity, resistance and rebirth

1. Introduction

Since its publication in 2007, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* written by Afghan American author Khaled Hosseini has rapidly become a global bestseller. Set in Afghanistan from the 1970s to the early 2000s, the novel traces the life trajectories of its two female protagonists, Mariam and Laila, to depict women's suffering and resilience amid war, social upheaval, and the oppressive rule of the Taliban. Mariam, a bastard child ostracized by her family from an early age, is forced into marriage with Rashid, a middle-aged shoemaker. Laila, who grows up in an educated family and loses her relatives in the war, becomes Rashid's second wife as a result of fate's cruel twists. Initially hostile toward each other, the two women gradually form a deep bond as they endure domestic violence, religious oppression, and the trauma of war together. In the end, they support each other and resist

collectively, demonstrating extraordinary spiritual strength and the enduring power of female solidarity.

Currently, academic research on *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has mostly focused on perspectives such as feminism, identity, narrative analysis, and trauma theory. From the perspectives of war writing and cultural studies, Wang Yuping examined how war permeates and destroys daily life [1]. Within the framework of family ethics and trauma theory, Liu Jingyu argued that the lack, pursuit, and acquisition of ethical identity constitute the central thread underlying the formation and healing of characters' trauma [2]. Drawing on ecofeminism, Gao Jing and Yu Fang elucidated the isomorphic relationship between the oppression of women and the destruction of nature, as well as women's realization of the dual reconstruction of the self and nature through resistance [3]. Employing Lacan's mirror theory and the tripartite schema of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, Liu Xibo and Ge Jian analyzed the process of female subjectivity construction in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as progressing from the Real, through the Imaginary, to the Symbolic [4]. Among these, feminist research has largely focused on themes such as female development, sisterhood, the intertwining of war and women's fate, and the construction of female subjectivity. Admittedly, these studies have provided important references for understanding women's awakening and resistance within structures, yet they have not fully revealed the subjective power that women can unleash in extreme adversity through spiritual solidarity. In the novel, the two female protagonists meticulously plan and execute an escape from Kabul to Pakistan, reflecting how women, amidst suffering, move from emotional solace toward collective practical resistance. Therefore, this essay focuses on the female spiritual community in the novel, aiming to analyze in depth how women, under the oppression of patriarchy, religion, and war, form a spiritual alliance through emotional resonance and collective resistance, thereby expanding the depth and breadth of the female themes in Hosseini's work.

As an important concept in humanities and social theory, "community" embodies people's imagination of relationships characterized by belonging, identity, and solidarity. The German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, in his work *Community and Civil Society*, defined "community" as emphasizing an organic bond based on blood, geography, and spiritual consensus. He stated, "All kinds of social co-existence that are familiar, comfortable and exclusive are to be understood as belonging to *Gemeinschaft* [5]." This means that a community is not merely a form of organization, but rather an emotionally and morally cohesive bond, in which members develop deep and natural affective ties through shared history, values, or ways of life. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, although Mariam and Laila are not bound by blood or geographical ties, they gradually construct a female community characterized by a high degree of spiritual identification through the sharing of memories and emotional resonance amid their shared experiences of suffering.

The relationship between Mariam and Laila evolves from initial hostility—as wives forced to "compete" within a patriarchal household—into a symbiotic alliance deeply connected on physical, emotional, and spiritual levels. This transformation is not merely an elevation of personal affection but also an active process of constructing a female spiritual community.

Therefore, this article will proceed in three parts. Mariam and Laila evolve from hostile co-wives into a mother-daughter alliance, conspiring to resist under the compounded oppression of religion, patriarchy, and war. Ultimately, through sacrifice and education, they respectively achieve self-redemption and spiritual legacy. In doing so, the article reveals how a female spiritual community emerges, operates, and endures under layers of oppression, analyzes the narrative logic of female solidarity in resistance, and offers new perspectives for applying community theory to contemporary women's literature.

2. Female bonding from hostility to symbiosis

Since it came out in 2007, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini—an Afghan American writer—has quickly turned into a global bestseller. The novel is set in Afghanistan, covering the period from the 1970s to the early 2000s. It follows the lives of two main female characters, Mariam and Laila, and shows how women suffer and yet stay resilient amid war, social turmoil, and the harsh rule of the Taliban. Mariam is an illegitimate child who gets pushed away by her family from a young age, and ends up being forced into marriage with a middle-aged shoemaker named Rashid. Laila grows up in a family that values education, but after losing her relatives in the war, fate takes a cruel turn and she becomes Rashid's second wife. At first, the two women are hostile toward each other. But as they go through domestic violence, religious oppression, and the trauma of war together, they slowly build a deep bond. In the end, they support each other and put up a collective fight, showing incredible spiritual strength and the lasting power of female solidarity.

Looking at current academic research on *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, most studies have focused on things like feminism, identity, narrative analysis, and trauma theory. From the angle of war writing and cultural studies, Wang Yuping looked at how war seeps into and wrecks everyday life [1]. Using family ethics and trauma theory, Liu Jingyu argued that the lack of ethical identity, the search for it, and finally gaining it—this whole process is what drives the formation and healing of the characters' trauma [2]. Drawing on ecofeminism, Gao Jing and Yu Fang explained how the oppression of women and the destruction of nature follow the same pattern, and how women, through resistance, manage to rebuild both themselves and nature [3]. Applying Lacan's mirror theory and the three-part structure of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, Liu Xibo and Ge Jian analyzed how female subjectivity gets built in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, moving from the Real to the Imaginary and then to the Symbolic [4]. Among these, feminist studies have mostly looked at themes like female development, sisterhood, how war and women's fate are tangled up together, and the construction of female subjectivity. Sure, these studies have given us important ways to understand how women wake up and push back within existing structures. But they haven't fully shown the kind of subjective power that women can tap into when they come together in spirit, even under extreme hardship. In the novel, the two main characters carefully plan and carry out an escape from Kabul to Pakistan. This shows how women, while suffering, move from just giving each other emotional comfort to taking collective, practical action. So, this essay focuses on the female spiritual community in the novel. It tries to dig deeper into how women—under the weight of patriarchy, religion, and war—form a spiritual alliance through emotional connection and collective resistance, which then expands the depth and breadth of the female themes in Hosseini's work.

As an important idea in the humanities and social theory, "community" captures how people imagine relationships that involve belonging, identity, and solidarity. The German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, in his book *Community and Civil Society*, defined "community" as stressing an organic kind of bond—one that's based on blood, place, and shared beliefs. He wrote, "All kinds of social co-existence that are familiar, comfortable and exclusive are to be understood as belonging to *Gemeinschaft*." What this means is, a community isn't just a way of organizing people. It's more about emotional and moral ties that hold them together. Members develop deep, natural connections through shared history, values, or ways of life. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, even though Mariam and Laila aren't connected by blood or where they live, they slowly build a female community marked by a strong sense of spiritual identification. They do this by sharing memories and resonating emotionally as they go through similar kinds of suffering together.

The relationship between Mariam and Laila starts off hostile—since they're both wives forced to "compete" for resources and attention in a patriarchal household. But over time, it turns into a symbiotic alliance that connects them physically, emotionally, and spiritually. This change isn't just about personal affection growing stronger. It's also an active, deliberate process of building a female spiritual community.

So, this article will move forward in three parts. Mariam and Laila evolve from being hostile co-wives into a kind of mother-daughter alliance, and together they plot resistance against the combined weight of religion, patriarchy, and war. In the end, through sacrifice and education, they each find self-redemption and leave behind a spiritual legacy. By doing this, the article shows how a female spiritual community comes into being, how it works, and how it lasts under layer upon layer of oppression. It also analyzes the narrative logic behind female solidarity in resistance, and offers some fresh perspectives for applying community theory to contemporary women's literature.

3. A system of resistance through collusion and mutual aid

In contrasting community with society, Ferdinand Tönnies points out that: "In *Gemeinschaft* they stay together in spite of everything that separates them; in *Gesellschaft* they remain separate in spite of everything that unites them." This indicates that a genuine community should include not only concrete and real-life interactions, but also sincere and moving spiritual resonance, in which individuals give to one another through the meeting of hearts and minds. As the spiritual community between Mariam and Laila in its first period is manifested mainly as mutual consolation on an emotional level, then with their relationship deepening, this community inevitably extends to the level of action, thereby giving rise to a covert system of resistance based on collusion and mutual aid.

In the novel, this system finds its concentrated expression in the jointly devised plan of Mariam and Laila to escape from Kabul and seek refuge in Pakistan. The novel traces the entire process of this plan from inception to execution, demonstrating that it is by no means the product of a momentary impulse on the part of either Mariam or Laila, but rather the result of long-term deliberation within their spiritual community:

This, Laila had known, would be the first risky part, finding a man suitable to pose with them as a family member.

The second risky part of this trip would come when they actually arrived in Pakistan. Already burdened with nearly two million Afghan refugees...But the border was porous—always had been—and Laila knew that thousands of Afghans were still crossing into Pakistan either with bribes or by proving humanitarian grounds—and there were always smugglers who could be hired.

She fished the envelope from her pocket beneath the burqa and passed it to him. In it was eleven hundred afghanis, or about half of the money she'd stashed over the past year plus the sale of the ring [6] .

Under the Rabbani government's extreme interpretation and politicized manipulation of religion, Afghan women were stripped of their rights. The government issued decrees requiring women to wear the burqa, strictly prohibiting them from traveling far without a male relative, and punishing adultery with stoning. Neither Mariam nor Laila individually would have been capable of sustaining an escape. However, it is precisely on the basis of their deepest mutual recognition of their shared predicament, and relying on their unreserved sharing of resources and division of labor, that they are able to translate their common vision into concrete action—jointly planning a route across the border, attempting to forge a male guardian's identity, and selling belongings to raise funds. Thus, the power of the female community of fate lies precisely in its posture of resistance that persists

even when fully aware of the impossibility of success. Their plan may fail; their strategy of forced submission to male authority may backfire—yet they still choose to collude and resist together against the persecution of Sharia law.

In the novel, decades of war have devastated Afghan society and left the people impoverished. Rasheed's family of five gradually loses its sources of income. With food in extremely short supply, Rasheed decides to send their daughter Aziza to an orphanage. Laila, desperate to protect her daughter, insists on visiting Aziza regularly, no matter the danger she will face. As a result, she is forced to confront the violence of the Taliban regime directly. "Other times, she met with assortments of wooden clubs, fresh tree branches, short whips, slaps, often fists [6]." The Taliban regime through violent punishment shapes women's bodies into the direct object of discipline and the site of power demonstration, the core logic of which lies in transforming fear into women's everyday condition.

"I'm coming with you," Mariam said.

Laila wouldn't allow it. "You have to stay home with Zalmai. If we get stopped . . . I don't want him to see [3]."

Laila refuses Mariam's offer to accompany her and chooses to bear all the risk upon herself. She is fully aware of the violence of the Taliban regime, and even more aware that if both of them venture out together, no one would be left at home to provide even the most basic care for their son, Zalmai. Mariam understands the entrustment concealed behind this refusal. She transforms her promise of "I will go with you" into another form of action: staying behind to look after Zalmai, and upon Laila's return, bringing warm water and clean cloths to tend to Laila's battered body.

This is a division of labor that requires no words yet achieves perfect tacit understanding. Laila takes the embodied struggle on the streets: with every step she takes outside the home, she resists the Taliban regime's monopoly on basic women's rights. Mariam provides the support at home through watching, waiting, and caregiving, she constructs a haven where Laila can gather her strength again. Though the Taliban regime seeks to fragment women into isolated individuals, trapping them in fear and separation from one another, Mariam and Laila support each other in a way that weaves a network of mutual aid that violence cannot sever. Through daily acts of care and an unspoken co-presence, they mount a form of resistance against oppression that is both enduring and indestructible.

4. Intergenerational transmission through sacrifice and education

"The establishment of a female community consolidates dispersed individual women, enabling them to gain a sense of identity and strength within the collective, and serves as an important path toward value sharing and self-liberation [7]." Therefore, the value of the female community formed by Mariam and Laila lies not only in its internal harmony and warmth, but also in its capacity to enable the two women to support each other, thereby unleashing a collective power capable of challenging oppressive structures. As their collusive resistance deepens and the oppression of women intensifies, this community gradually approaches its ultimate form—one that takes individual sacrifice as the price of escape and education as the vehicle of intergenerational transmission. In the realization of this final form, Mariam completes her own subjective transformation.

Rasheed's renewed act of violence pushes Mariam to the critical moment of self-sacrifice. Mariam tries desperately to pry open Rasheed's fingers as they choke Laila's neck. Laila and she struggle with all their might, only to find it futile—every act of resistance is crushed by Rasheed's physical superiority. Mariam realizes that she can no longer endure the daily beatings and humiliation. She asks herself:

Had she not given this man her youth? Had she ever justly deserved his meanness [6]?

These two rhetorical questions mark the beginning of Mariam's spiritual awakening—for the first time, she places the long-internalized "rationality of abuse" before the tribunal of reason. Under the long-term discipline of the patriarchal system, Mariam had tacitly accepted Rasheed's violence as a deserved punishment, attributing all injustices to her own faults. But at this moment, she issues a fundamental challenge to the patriarchal order: by placing her own contributions and the abuse she has suffered into a chain of cause and effect, she discovers that there is no proportional relationship between the two. Thus, Mariam completes the cognitive shift from self-blame to questioning the abuser. She comes to see that violence is simply violence, regardless of whether the victim is perfect. This marks Mariam's transformation from a prisoner of patriarchal ideology into the judge of her own destiny. This awakening lays the necessary psychological groundwork for her subsequent choice to raise the shovel when Laila's life hangs in the balance.

Mariam steadied her feet and tightened her grip around the shovel's handle. She raised it. She said his name. She wanted him to see.

"Rasheed."

She finds the courage to end the violence. Seizing a shovel, she strikes Rasheed's head. This blow pushes the female community to its extreme—when justice is absent and no external force intervenes in the world, Mariam chooses to sacrifice herself, transferring all possibility of the community's survival to Laila. Ignoring Laila's pleas to dissuade her, Mariam takes the blame upon herself, walks calmly toward her execution, and actively chooses her own path in life. In this way, Mariam elevates the female spiritual community from an emotional unit of mutual consolation and a collaborative organization of collusive resistance into a form of unrepentant sacrifice, willing to guard another at the cost of her own life.

Mariam secured for Laila the opportunity to begin a new life. Laila, together with her children, went to Murree in Pakistan, where she reunited with her childhood sweetheart Tariq and formed a new family, spending a period of comfort and tranquility. Yet Laila remained haunted by Mariam's sacrifice. She therefore returned to Kabul, renovated the orphanage where Rasheed had once abandoned Aziza, and began taking in homeless children, teaching them knowledge. In her hands, the Kabul orphanage is transformed from a symbol of a father's abandonment of his own flesh and blood into a place where a mother provides shelter for children.

Laila teaches the children knowledge. This may seem insignificant, yet it is a profound form of resistance. It takes root in the most unremarkable corners, yet it allows hope, once stolen, to sprout anew. Knowledge means awakening, and awakening means resistance. It enables women to read the articles of law and thereby recognize injustice, to write their own stories and thereby break the silence, and to learn from history the rights women once possessed and thereby refuse to be deprived of them. Education liberates knowledge from the monopoly of the few, turning it into a shared resource for women as a group, opening up space for a spiritual community, and elevating women's mutual aid from a virtue into a self-regenerating social force. Thus, through the intergenerational transmission of education, the spiritual community of Mariam and Laila no longer depends on physical presence, but is passed down through narrative and knowledge. Mariam is dead, yet her life does not end at the Taliban's execution ground.

Mariam is never very far. She is here, in these walls they've repainted, in the trees they've planted, in the blankets that keep the children warm, in these pillows and books and pencils. She is in the children's laughter. She is in the verses Aziza recites and in the prayers she mutters when she bows westward. But, mostly, Mariam is in Laila's own heart, where she shines with the bursting radiance of a thousand suns [6].

Mariam's spirit lives on in Laila's storytelling. Laila will eventually grow old, but her storytelling lives on in Aziza's listening. Aziza, too, will grow up, and she will tell the story of Mariam and Laila to the next generation of girls. This is the meaning of intergenerational transmission—it is bound not by blood, but by shared memory and choice; it does not depend on the immortality of any individual, but finds its home in the transmission of spirit. The girl who was once called a harami—she's long since moved past labels like illegitimate child or criminal. Instead, she's become the very image behind "a thousand splendid suns" in the hearts of Afghan girls, generation after generation.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, this article has used theories of community to look closely at the female spiritual community that Mariam and Laila build in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, even when they're under extreme oppression. On the emotional side, the relationship between Mariam and Laila goes through a deep change—it shifts from a kind of hostility that the system forces on them, to a solidarity they choose on their own. Through small, everyday interactions, they pile up trust little by little. They affirm each other's worth by caring for one another, and in doing so, they build a small community held together by emotional bonds. On the action level, their female spiritual community doesn't just stay inside their heads as psychological comfort. It turns into real, concrete acts of resistance. Under the overlapping weight of a patriarchal household, the Taliban regime, and religious oppression, they manage to carve out a small space where they can make their own choices. On the level of continuity, sacrifice and education get passed down across generations, and that lifts the spirit of this community. This passing-down is grounded in shared memory and deliberate choice. Because of that, the community can outlive any single person's limited lifespan and become a force that keeps moving from one generation to the next.

By analyzing the female spiritual community in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, this study does more than just shine a light on how marginalized groups living under oppression come up with survival strategies to protect themselves. It also points to an important path through which they can rebuild their own subjectivity and free themselves. This kind of community doesn't just stir up women's sense of agency and their ability to resist. It also offers emotional and conceptual support—on a global scale—for female solidarity across different cultures.

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