

A Thousand Splendid Suns: The plight of Afghan women only partially depicted

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A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini. Publisher: Penguin Group (US edition), Bloomsbury (UK edition), 384 pp.

Khaled Hosseini's second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, like his first, *The Kite Runner* (made into a film, directed by Marc Forster), is set against the background of Afghanistan's recent history. It follows two Afghan women, born two decades apart, whose lives are brought together through a series of largely tragic events.

Hosseini's book takes its title from a poem written about Kabul by the seventeenth century poet Saib-e-Tabrizi. It is generally honest enough to visit social and psychological areas away from the hackneyed propaganda of recent years to give a more informed and rounded appreciation of the life of Afghan women.

The story begins in 1974, as Mariam, an illegitimate child of a wealthy businessman from Herat, is growing up. Her father did not have the courage to marry her mother after "dishonouring" her.

Under pressure from his family, he marries off 15-year-old Mariam to Rasheed, a brutish cobbler 30 years her senior. Repeated miscarriages dash Rasheed's hopes of fathering a son, and he subjects Mariam to cruel acts of physical punishment.

The second part of the story begins in the spring of 1987 and is centered on Laila, the daughter of a university teacher. From her father, she has absorbed a love of art and culture—especially poetry. As Kabul comes under fire from various warlords, following the Soviet withdrawal, Laila's childhood sweetheart Tariq leaves for Pakistan. To avoid social disgrace and in search of protection, she too marries Rasheed but soon loses her place in his affections when she gives birth to a daughter instead of a son.

At first, Mariam shows only contempt towards the "interloper," but slowly a friendship develops between the two women. They make common cause and endure degradation, starvation and brutality at the hands of their husband until they are forced to take up a desperate, joint struggle.

One of the strengths of the novel is the author's ability to weave historical events into the narrative. On April 17, 1978, around the time that Mariam turns 19, we learn that Mir Akbar Khyber has been murdered. Thousands of people turn out on the streets of Kabul in protest; they blame his murder on President Daoud Khan's government. Rasheed tells Mariam that the murder victim was a prominent Communist. She asks him what a communist is. He sneers at her for her apparent ignorance, and then makes a confused attempt to explain. It becomes clear to the reader that he

doesn't know either.

The story, which is a generally more sincere second effort from Hosseini, uncovers valuable social truths through the lives of the main characters. The reader gets an impression of the incredibly precarious existence of young people during the most recent period through the fate of Laila and Tariq. But above all, it lays bare the truly horrendous existence of women and girls.

The reader is introduced to this early on in the story, through the words of Mariam's mother, when she says that a woman's lot is to "endure."

In a telling early passage, Laila considers what her father says about how the "communists" have improved the lives of the women of Afghanistan with their insistence on education for all. Her father explains that now is the time to get an education, as certain liberal rights are enacted under the aegis of the Soviet-backed regime in the teeth of entrenched opposition from a religiously conservative, mainly rural section of the population—the same backward-looking social layer that was being encouraged and militarily armed by US-sponsored forces.

Even so, despite its largely uncontrived narrative and interesting, even captivating, episodes, the story suffers from a lack of critical engagement with the history it charts—especially the closer it moves to the present day.

Alongside the portrayal of the medieval barbarity exercised by the Taliban, the story only hints indirectly at the lack of any meaningful advance in the status of women under the current US-backed Karzai regime.

Most glaring of all is Hosseini's decision to end *A Thousand Splendid Suns* in April 2003—just months before large parts of Afghanistan erupted in a counter-occupation insurgency.

This suggests that the author calculated that the false hopes assigned to his main characters would sound more plausible in the brief lull following the fall of the Taliban regime. For a novel that deals directly with the lot of women in Afghan society, it is impermissible to ignore their plight during the US-led occupation, especially in light of the unrelenting propaganda concerning women's rights and general emancipation that surrounded the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan.

In all walks of public life, the status of women in Afghanistan today is under threat. The parliamentarian Malalai Joya, who has spoken out against Mujahideen and warlord influence, has faced death threats, and the journalist Zakia Zaki was shot dead. For the average Afghan woman, the threat of violence has been vastly

increased either from US-led air-strikes or Taliban-inspired atrocities.

The direct carnage of military violence is not even the main occupation-related threat facing most Afghan women. According to the Integrated Regional Information Networks of the United Nations:

- * Every 30 minutes, an Afghan woman dies during childbirth.
- * 87 percent of Afghan women are illiterate.
- * 1 in every 3 Afghan women experience physical, psychological or sexual violence.
- * 44 years is now the average life expectancy for women across the country.
- * 70 to 80 percent of women face forced marriages in Afghanistan.

Last year, the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) said worsening insecurity in large swathes of the country, a growing culture of criminal impunity, weak law enforcement institutions, poverty, and many other factors had contributed to increasing violence against women, such as rape and torture, as well as their being forced into marriages against their will.

A report by the UK charity Womankind Worldwide, *Afghanistan Women and Girls Seven Years On*, said, “Seven years after the US and the UK ‘freed’ Afghan women from the oppressive Taliban regime, our report proves that life is just as bad for most, and worse in some cases.”

The recent attempts by the Afghan parliament—with President Hamid Karzai’s initial support—to enact a law that would forbid women from leaving their homes without male consent and would sanctify marital rape, recalls Taliban era edicts.

Hosseini makes only a few disjointed efforts to depict the present social and political reality. For example, in the first years of the US-installed Karzai regime, we are told that Laila is angered by the fact that “the warlords have been allowed back to Kabul. That her parents’ murderers live in posh homes with walled gardens, that they have been appointed minister[s]...that they ride with impunity in shiny bulletproof SUVs through neighbourhoods that they have demolished.”

In the very next line, we hear the author’s refrain through Laila’s pointed response: she has “decided that she will not be crippled by resentment.... *What’s the sense?*... Laila has resigned herself to moving on.”

The uncertainty over their future, under US occupation, is resolved by Laila and Tarik concluding that there is really nothing they can do to affect the future of Afghanistan, other than build an orphanage. To which the reader could be forgiven for asking: “Is that all one can draw from this tragic history?”

The author has given us interesting characters and engaging episodes, but ultimately they lack an historical and political context that has been shaped largely by the geo-political conflicts of the great powers—above all, that waged between the Soviet Union and the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, until the fall of the Soviet-backed regime in 1992.

The decade-long war led to the deaths of over a million mujahideen fighters and Afghan civilians and 14,000 Russian soldiers before the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. The Taliban regime

that came to power, as well as Al-Qaida, originated from the noxious mix of US-sponsored anti-communist foreign policy in the region during this period. This is entirely omitted in Hosseini’s narrative, as he all but erases US complicity in the fate of modern Afghanistan.

Hosseini was born in Kabul, where his father worked for the Afghanistan Foreign Ministry. In 1970, the family moved to the Iranian capital where Hosseini’s father worked for the Embassy of Afghanistan. In 1973, Hosseini’s family returned to Kabul.

In 1976, Hosseini’s father got a job in Paris. The Soviet-backed People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) overthrew the regime of Mahommed Daoud Khan with the support of the army in a bloody coup in April 1978. Hosseini’s father decided that the family would not return to Afghanistan. Instead, in 1980, they sought political asylum in the US.

Hosseini is currently a Goodwill Envoy for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). He shares the prevalent outlook amongst the professional Afghan émigré population.

It is understandable how families receiving refuge from war and instability may come to accept the official rationale of the host nation. For Hosseini’s generation, however, it is far from inevitable that such myopia will continue.

Hosseini has clearly developed as a writer since *The Kite Runner*. His characters are more believable and interesting, and his writing at least reflects a muted criticism of the role of US imperialism in the area. Hosseini’s work for the UNHCR may even have led to him to become more nuanced in his appreciation of certain parts of recent Afghan history, as well as beginning to question the official rationale of the current US-led occupation.

It remains to be seen, should Hosseini return to the subject of modern Afghanistan, whether he will act as a tame “critical supporter” for interventionist forces in the region or will evolve into a writer of genuine interest who develops the undeniable strengths of his most recent book.

The author also recommends:

The Kite Runner: the Afghan tragedy goes unexplained
[25 March 2008]



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