

Resilience and Resistance: Women's Struggles in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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ABSTRACT

The Handmaid's Tale and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* depict the struggles of women in oppressive societies - Gilead and Afghanistan - where they endure exploitation, mistreatment, and reduced autonomy. Both these novels highlight the physical and emotional torment faced by female protagonists who are essentially reduced to vessels for reproduction. The study aims to uncover the shared condition of women in these seemingly unrelated societies, emphasizing the commonality in their experiences of victimization, sexual harassment, and suppression by both genders. Despite their suffering, the female characters resist discriminatory practices, challenging the prevailing brutality and exposing the underlying ideologies perpetuating their oppression.

KEYWORDS

Gilead; Afghan Society; Male domination; Brutality; Women's suffering.

Introduction

The novels, *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini delve into the challenging conditions faced by women within their distinct yet equally oppressive settings. Atwood's work presents a speculative future dystopia governed by a theocratic regime, while Hosseini's narrative unfolds against the backdrop of real-world events in Afghanistan, navigating the impact of political turmoil and the oppressive rule of the Taliban across different historical periods. These literary masterpieces provide an opportunity to ponder deeply and carry out a profound reflection on the ways societal structures and political ideologies have socially and culturally shaped as well as constrained the lives of women.

In both novels, women emerge as victims of oppressive societal structures,

compelling readers to confront the harsh realities of their existence. The authors skilfully illuminate the struggles women endure in their pursuit of agency and autonomy within contexts marked by inequality and discrimination. The thematic underpinnings resonate with real-world issues, addressing the profound impact of political and religious ideologies on women's lives and the broader dynamics of gender inequality.

Central to the exploration of these societal constructs is the pervasive authoritarian control depicted in both the novels. While *The Handmaid's Tale* envisions a speculative future where religious extremism tightens its grip on society, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* meticulously captures the historical and political upheavals in Afghanistan. This distinction in the nature of control becomes a critical lens through which we

analyse the characters' experiences and the resilience they display in the face of oppressive regimes.

This objective of this research is to expose the women's suppression in male-dominated cultures and unravel the multifaceted dimensions of women's struggles within these divergent yet thematically interconnected narratives. By closely examining the societies portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the paper will draw parallels between the imagined dystopia of the former and the historical realities of the latter, to thereby shed light on the universal challenges faced by women and their unwavering resilience in confronting oppressive systems. The endeavour of this exploration, is to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gender dynamics, societal control, and the enduring quest for autonomy within the intricate tapestry of these compelling literary works.

Both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* vividly explore the oppressive environments shaped by powerful societal forces. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred grapples with the strict regime of the Republic of Gilead, while *A Thousand Splendid Suns* portrays the struggles of Mariam and Laila within Afghanistan's complex cultural landscape marked by religious and political turmoil. The novels offer poignant reflections on the impact of authoritative institutions on individual lives.

A Dystopian Misogynistic World

The Handmaid's Tale follows the tradition of George Orwell's *1984*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. According to Zamyatin's *We*. W.H. New:

It speculates about present day trends: the verbal controls that commercial advertising exerts over roles and expectations, the legal controls that society claims over women's lives and bodies; the

active will to assert power, the passive wish for anonymity that leads many people to surrender authority to institutions, the existence of economic structures more powerful than legislative ones, the resurgence of influential fundamentalist groups that impose preconceived boundaries around the design of truth

It is written from a woman's point of view and predicts

...the horrors of a culture so frightened by normal sexuality that it codified and prescribed all such procreation and created hierarchies of life and death around it. It is a brutal horrifying culture (Wagner 4)

Offred, as a Handmaid, is subjected to a society that values fertility above all else, and women's rights are not only restricted but virtually non-existent. The theocratic regime of Gilead dictates every aspect of women's lives, reducing them to roles that primarily serve the reproductive needs of the ruling class.

Offred's struggle is not only physical but also psychological, as she grapples with the loss of autonomy and the constant surveillance that characterizes life in Gilead. The novel delves into the oppressive nature of the society, exploring the dehumanizing effects of such extreme ideologies on individuals, particularly women. Offred's narrative provides a poignant and chilling commentary on the consequences of a society that prioritizes rigid beliefs over individual freedoms and rights.

Certainly, Offred's contemplation of suicide in *The Handmaid's Tale* reflects the profound despair caused by the oppressive regime. The sense of scandal surrounding her situation highlights the restrictive social norms, while the pervasive feeling of betrayal underscores the erosion of personal autonomy. Margaret Atwood's novel serves as a potent commentary on

the consequences of a society that systematically denies individuals their fundamental rights and explores themes of gender roles with a stark portrayal of the emotional and psychological toll of such oppression. As Mario Klarer says, "In Gilead, being a woman means to become preliterate and to follow the prescriptions of men". Gilead is portrayed as a society where religious ideology is used to justify a hierarchical system that places men in positions of power and reduces women to the status of property, primarily valued for their ability to reproduce.

Margaret Atwood achieves success by amplifying certain existing misogynistic attitudes and weaving them into a compelling plot and well-developed characters. Through this approach, she effectively sheds light on and cautions readers against the alarming mistreatment of women in society.

The categorization of men into distinct roles, including Commanders, Guardians, and functional roles, serves to illustrate the stratification and control imposed by the ruling class in Gilead. The Commander, embodying authority, symbolizes the power dynamics inherent in this dystopian society. Meanwhile, the Guardians function as enforcers, ensuring compliance with the regime's rules. This hierarchical structure reflects the deliberate organization designed to maintain and reinforce the regime's control over various aspects of life.

The color-coded uniforms and rigid categorization of women based on their functions serve as powerful symbols of the oppressive nature of the society. The novel indeed presents a dystopian future in which feminist ideals have been replaced by a fundamentalist patriarchy.

The Wives, who wear blue dresses, symbolize the societal expectation of virginity and fertility, the colour blue being what was worn by virgin Mary. Despite their infertility, the Wives play a crucial role in the impregnation Ceremony,

highlighting the extent to which women are objectified and reduced to their reproductive functions. The responsibility for household discipline further underscores their position as enforcers of the regime's rules.

Marthas, dressed in dull green, are relegated to domestic roles as maids and housekeepers. Their attire reflects the mundane nature of their tasks and emphasizes the societal devaluation of women performing such duties.

Econowives, in their striped dresses of red, blue, and green, represent a group that must fulfil multiple roles, showcasing the economic and social challenges faced by women in Gilead. The presence of Jezebels introduces an element of rebellion and resistance to the prescribed roles. These women, working as prostitutes in clubs, represent a form of subversion and deviation from the societal norms imposed on women.

The Aunts, the policewomen of Gilead wear paramilitary khaki dress with cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts. They are rigid, middle-aged women who have internalized patriarchal values and are used to impose them on other women. They run their re-education centres with cattle prods, torture techniques, and brain washing slogans. It is believed that, "the best and most cost effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves" (320). The Aunts betray other women in order to "escape redundancy and consequent shipment to the infamous Colonies..." (290)

The Handmaids are child bearers and they are young women whose possession of "viable ovaries" (153), make them an important and scarce "natural resource" (61). They wear red dress, which resembles religious habits. Their faces are obscured by peaked hats, which also function to prevent their seeing anything but what lies immediately in front of them.

As Susan Jacob says, "Women's dresses in Gilead are meant to resemble both Christian nun's habit and the Muslim woman's purdah". The role of the Handmaids in Gilead is indeed one of the most dehumanized and oppressive aspects of the society depicted in the novel. Handmaids are reduced to mere vessels for reproduction, their identities stripped away to fulfil a singular purpose: to bear children for the ruling class. As Offred says: "...We are two legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices."(146)

Absolutely, the Handmaids' reproductive role in *The Handmaid's Tale* is heightened by the infertility of the Wives. The Ceremony, a symbolic ritual where a Handmaid is impregnated by the Commander while the Wife observes. It serves as a stark illustration of the dehumanization and objectification that these women endure. Reduced to mere vessels for reproduction, they are stripped of their individuality and valued solely for their ability to bear children, underscoring the oppressive nature of the society depicted in the novel.

The naming convention also adds to the dehumanization, as they are identified with the possessive "Of" followed by the name of the Commander. For example, the protagonist is called Offred, meaning "Of Fred" in reference to her Commander. This naming convention reinforces the notion that they are property rather than autonomous individuals. It's a kind of tag, As Offred says: "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden... name is like your telephone number, useful only to others". (94)

The statement, "There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law", reflects the oppressive laws and social norms that strip women of their individuality and define them solely in terms of their reproductive capabilities. This narrow definition goes beyond gender roles and emphasizes the

extreme measures taken by the Gileadian regime to control and exploit women. The psychological toll on the Handmaids, as seen through the narration of Offred, is palpable, highlighting the emotional and mental anguish of living in such a dystopian society.

Patriarchy and the Dominant Orthodox Tradition

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini delves into the intertwining lives of Mariam and Laila set against the tumultuous backdrop of Afghanistan's history. The narrative spans four decades, offering a poignant portrayal of how political upheavals shape the destinies of these women. Unlike the fictional Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Afghanistan serves as a real-world setting, becoming a canvas that reflects the complex socio-political realities of the country. The novel not only explores the profound impact of war but also delves into the pervasive gender discrimination entrenched in the social and cultural norms of the country. Beginning in Herat in 1964 and concluding in Kabul in 2003, the story provides a sweeping panorama of the challenges and transformations faced by its characters within the shifting landscape of Afghanistan's history.

Indeed, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* shares thematic similarities with *The Handmaid's Tale*, particularly in its exploration of systemic oppression faced by women. However, in this case, the oppression is intricately woven into the societal structures and traditions of Afghanistan. The constraints on women's freedom and the dominance of orthodox traditions give rise to a culture marred by bigotry and discrimination. Once again, men emerge as the oppressors, capitalizing on the helplessness imposed upon women in their society. The novel effectively portrays the entrenched power imbalances and gender dynamics that perpetuate the

cycle of oppression within the cultural and historical context of Afghanistan,

God has made us differently, you women and us men. Our brains are different. You are not able to think like we can. Western doctors and their science have proven this. This is why we require only one male witness but two female ones (Hosseini 355).

This is how they maintain social control over women's behaviour.

The friendship between Mariam and Laila serves as a potent symbol of solidarity in the face of adversity in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Similarly, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, women forge connections that offer emotional support and resilience amid oppressive circumstances. Both novels underscore the significance of these relationships, portraying women who seek strength in their bonds with one another as they navigate and resist the challenges imposed by their respective oppressive societies. The theme of female solidarity becomes a powerful force that enables the characters to endure and even defy the constraints placed upon them.

A Thousand Splendid Suns is similar to that of *The Handmaid's Tale* as Rasheed marries Laila, his second wife when Mariam could not give him a child. Just as wives are envious of the handmaids, Mariam is envious of Laila as well. Both these novels, while set in different cultural contexts and utilizing different narrative approaches, share a common thread in their exploration of the challenges and hardships faced by women.

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the burqa emerges as a powerful symbol within the narrative, representing the profound impact of oppressive social conventions and religious values on the lives of the female protagonists, Mariam and Laila. Traditionally employed to conceal and cover women, the burqa takes on a heightened symbolic meaning for

Laila, serving as a tangible representation of her loss of independence. It becomes a potent emblem of the restrictions imposed by the Taliban government and the erosion of previously enjoyed freedom in her perception. The enforcement of the burqa mirrors the stringent social regulations to which women are subjected, curtailing their visibility and autonomy. This symbol becomes a poignant manifestation of the broader themes in the novel, illustrating the struggle against rigid societal norms that seek to confine and control women in the context of Afghanistan's turbulent history.

In contrast to Laila's perspective on the burqa in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam finds comfort in its use as it provides a shield from the judgmental society in which she lives. This divergence in their views reflects the nuanced experiences of women within the novel and highlights the complexity of their relationship with respect to cultural and religious symbols.

Similar to *The Handmaid's Tale*, where women are also compelled to cover themselves before leaving their homes, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* illustrates the commonality in the imposition of such practices across different fictional worlds. These shared themes speak to the universality of struggles faced by women in societies where patriarchal norms dictate their appearance and behaviour. The contrasting reactions to the burqa within the novel contribute to its nuanced exploration of individual perspectives and responses to oppressive social structures, "You will not, under any circumstance, show your face. You will cover with burqa when outside. If you do not, you will be severely beaten" (Hosseini 271).

Indeed, Rasheed's insistence on Laila wearing the burqa in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* vividly underscores the authority and power dynamics wielded by men like him in enforcing repressive standards. The severe penalties for

deviating from these norms further emphasize the control exerted over women's bodies and choices. Khaled Hosseini's depiction of the burqa in the novel serves as a poignant lens through which readers can delve into the intricate layers of gender roles, societal expectations, and the profound repercussions of an extreme patriarchal system.

The subtleties of Afghanistan's highly patriarchal society are frequently shown through unwritten means. The novel describes twenty-nine restrictions that the Taliban regime imposed on women in Afghanistan, many of which were societal customs shaped by Islamic fanaticism. Some laws that restricted the freedom of free movement of women included in the novel are enforced by Rasheed who does not let Mariam and Laila leave their home, especially unaccompanied by him,

It is not proper for women to wander aimlessly about the streets. If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a mahram, a male relative. If you are caught alone on the street, you will be beaten and sent home (Hosseini 271).

The Taliban government's restrictions on Western popular culture and personal expressions, such as wearing jewellery, resonate with the broader theme of imposing stringent religious and cultural norms in Afghanistan during that period. The Taliban regime enforced a strict interpretation of Islamic law, emphasizing modesty and humility, which often stood in stark contrast to Western values.

The limitations on personal expression, including restrictions on clothing and adornments like jewellery, highlight the cultural and ideological divide between the Taliban's vision for society and Western notions of individual freedom and self-expression. This clash of values becomes a central element in

depicting the challenges faced by individuals, particularly women, under the Taliban's rule in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The novel sheds light on the impact of such restrictive measures on personal agency, autonomy, and the ability to express one's identity in the face of oppressive political and religious ideologies.

Other rules such as not being permitted to speak unless spoken to and making eye contact with men were enforced. Notably the rule "You will not laugh in public." (Hosseini,271), echoes elements of the strict societal norms imposed on the women in Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* where women are similarly restricted in their interactions and expressions. The Taliban government in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* forbids women from attending school, a move that is similar to the Gileadian regime's prohibition on women receiving an education in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Both civilizations emphasize the constrained roles that women are allotted as housewives and mothers by using education as a weapon to uphold established gender norms.

Women in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* are relegated to a secondary or a subordinate status in every sphere of the society, and the extent to which they fulfil their religiously prescribed roles determines their worth. The people and events described in the book have served to illustrate the state and position of Afghani women. It is not fictional, but true that women's health is not given priority.

Women are not allowed to be treated by a male doctor rather women are left behind to die without any proper treatment. Hospitals have been distorted by the horrible effects of war, and the leftover staff and doctors are so less in number that they cannot take care of every single person. "This hospital no longer treats women" (Hosseini 278).

Insightful Parallels between Atwood and Hosseini's Works

In both novels there are characters that embody religious oppression and actively cause suffering to the protagonists. Rasheed in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and the Commander in *The Handmaid's Tale* are characters that embody religious oppression. Both characters leverage their positions of power within the patriarchal system, which are influenced and supported by religious beliefs, propagating misogynistic regimes.

Driven by Islamic fanaticism, Rasheed makes use of religious precepts to defend his repressive actions. His physical and psychological abuse of Mariam and Laila indicates the orthodoxy of gender norms and iniquitous power structures, made possible through a patriarchal reading of religious texts. The use of religious justification adds another layer of complexity to Rasheed's character, as he sees his actions aligning with the will of God. This reflects the manipulation of religious ideology to maintain control and dominance within the household.

The Commander, holding a high-ranking role in the theocratic society of Gilead, uses his position to oppress Offred. He controls her life, but when it suits him, he breaks the law by allowing her to read the Bible, play scramble, and visit a brothel. The Commander's actions highlight the hypocrisy within the ruling class, where those in power exploit their privileges while enforcing strict rules on others.

Similar to Rasheed, the Commander's authority is rooted in a religious framework, illustrating how religious doctrines can be manipulated to maintain control and subjugate individuals. In both cases, these characters serve as powerful symbols of the ways in which oppressive systems leverage religious beliefs to justify cruelty and maintain dominance. The exploration of religious oppression adds depth to the

critique of patriarchal societies presented in the novels.

Like the dress colours that Atwood uses, Hosseini also employs recurrent motifs to convey the suffering and isolation experienced by the protagonists, particularly Mariam and Laila. The pebble symbol becomes a powerful metaphor for the societal norms, oppression, and challenges faced by these characters. Mariam's early usage of pebbles as a metaphor for her estrangement from her father's legal family highlights the stigma attached to her illegitimacy in society, "Solitary, eleventh pebble". Furthermore, when Rasheed criticises Mariam's cooking he not only insults her but, "He snatched her hand, opened it, and dropped a handful of pebbles into it...Then he was gone, leaving Mariam to spit out pebbles, blood, and the fragments of two broken molars" (Hosseini, 104), leaving her to suffer alone. In addition, the protagonist Laila is also associated with the symbolism of pebbles as, "a shower of dirt and pebbles and glass" (Hosseini 24) rained down as when her home was hit with a bomb. The pebble motif takes on painful significance as a representation of the protagonists' suffering in their society controlled by men.

This analysis draws insightful parallel between *The Handmaid's Tale* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, emphasizing the enduring theme of women's status and oppression across different contexts and time periods. The writers here portray the women's struggle in body and mind in relation to the customs and supremacies of all kinds, be it communal, religious, economic, cultural, or political. The observation that the forms of oppression may change, but the underlying patriarchal structures persist, is a poignant reflection on the historical and ongoing challenges faced by women.

The protagonists in both the novels, serve as powerful symbols of resistance against a hostile, male-dominated world.

The emphasis on survival and refusal to be silent victims underscores the strength and resilience of women in the face of oppressive systems.

The reference to Offred's feminist consciousness and her escape from Gilead highlights the transformative power of individual agency and resistance. The use of words as a tool for rebellion underscores the significance of language and expression in challenging repressive ideologies. Both, Margaret Atwood and Khaled Hosseini, explore the ways in which women navigate and resist patriarchal systems, offering a profound commentary on the complexities of gender dynamics and the quest for autonomy.

Laila and Mariam unite so powerfully against the patriarchal Taliban rule that they are able to overcome their seclusion and constraints, suffering, and victimization brought on by their social circumstances. Following one of Rasheed's frequent attacks against Laila, Mariam tries to console Laila through Nana's teaching of "endurance". Yet, Laila responds, "I won't, I couldn't let him ... I wasn't raised in a household where people did this like that" (Hosseini, 130), it highlights Laila's status in contrast to most Afghan women, who are forced to remain passive and docile owing to despotism. Her response to being victimized is to fight back and resist as best she can. Likewise, when Rasheed chooses to keep her from seeing Aziza at the orphanage, she cries out; "You can't stop me. Do you hear me? You can hit all you want, but I'll keep going there" (Hosseini, 339).

She refuses to cow down and is determined to take all necessary action to withstand the Taliban's threats. Taking into account these instances, it is evident that Laila stands for the middle-class, self-

aware Afghan woman who has formed her own ideology and perspective on life and is eager to take advantage of everything that life has to offer. Laila's return to Afghanistan following their peaceful stay in Pakistan is critical as it is an act in terms of an idealist woman who longs for serving her country (Hosseini,347).

Conclusion

Certainly, both Offred and Laila's journeys in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* can be seen as acts of resistance against societal, religious, and patriarchal domination. The perseverance of these women protagonists, reflects bravery and tenacity in overcoming oppression and contributing to the fight against youth illiteracy. The portrayal of women in both these literary works highlight the ability of women in navigating and challenging societal conditions, demonstrating the transformative power of hope and determination.

Atwood and Hosseini thus skilfully present their female characters as heroic archetypes, who undergo metamorphoses from vulnerable and compliant members of the patriarchal order to independent and courageous women who break free of conventional constraints, and embrace self-assertive lifestyles, in fulfilment of their personal obligations and life-aspirations. In this way, Offred and Laila conform to the heroic archetypal model, serving as symbols of resilience in pursuit of happiness. The authors, through their literary works, offer a reflection on the dangers of blindly adhering to societal norms, encouraging readers to learn from the characters' struggles and avoid the consequences of excessive conformity.

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