

## **Environmental Philosophy in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns***

**S.S.Meenakshi**

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sri Sarada College for Women, Tirunelveli, India

---

### **Abstract**

This paper is an attempt to the detail study on the Environmental philosophy in the life of the illegitimate beginnings and the sufferings of the illegitimate belongings in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hossieni. Mariam, the protagonist of the novel was a harami, an illegitimate child. As an illegitimate belonging, she had suffered a lot in the hands of the people who was her belongings. Mariam experienced a height of torture in her marriage life with Rasheed which heightened her oppression to the decision to kill her husband Rasheed. Mariam sums up in her final thoughts the major message of the novel that the life is often hard, often unfair, but if one can persevere through things there is truth and strength and beauty that gives meaning to existence.

**KEYWORDS:** Sufferings, feminism, natural world, human's place.

---

KhaledHosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan on 4th March 1965. His father was a diplomat in Afghan Foreign Ministry and his mother taught Farsi and history at a secondary school in Kabul. *The Kite Runner* was his first novel which was published in 2003. His second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, was published in 2007. His third novel, *And the Mountains Echoed* was released in 2013 KhaledHosseini took this title from the translation of the poem, *Kabul* composed by Saeb-e-Tabrizi, a seventeenth-century Persian Poet, translated by Dr. Josephine Davis.

KhaledHosseini had chosen the role of women to explore in his second novel and he achieved it vividly through the stories of Mariam and Laila, two women separated by a generation but united by an unbreakable bond of friendship. These two endure not only the brutality of their husband Rasheed, but also the subjugating atrocities of the Taliban. Yet they remain resilient and true to themselves. Environmental Philosophy is a branch of philosophy that is concerned with the natural environment and human's place in it.

The illegitimate beginnings of the life of Mariam and Aziza, two illegitimate belongings, confronts with the quest for identity. Mariam and her parents, Nana and Jalil, are positioned as central to the narrative of the novel's first section. The novel begins with the line, "Mariam was five years old the first time she heard the word harami." (ATTS 3) Mariam, a thoughtful child, had put on warmth, when she would enjoy her time with her father, Jalil, who used to visit her in the Kolba (small cottage) outside the town on Thursdays. Her mother, Nana called her 'clumsy little harami', when she had broken the only relic, which Nana belonged as a remainder of her mother, a Chinese tea set on a Thursday, a day which brings spring in Mariam's life.

Nana was her belonging and she should adorn her daughter. In contrast, Mariam's mother itself made an abusive comment on her daughter who 'was not old enough to appreciate the injustice happened to her' as the words voiced by Khaled Hosseini. Jalil never pronounced the word harami and also none of his actions and his affection towards Mariam surrogated Nana's expression of illegitimate beginning of her daughter. Nana's utterance of the word harami ballooned with psychological conflict clouded in her mind about her unquenchable quest for a legitimate and a glorifiable future of her daughter. It led to an ironic question whether Jalil had truly showered care on his daughter. The multiple truths about Mariam's birth and the origin of her name raised the question about her identity.

In Nana's account of the day that she gave birth to Mariam all alone in the kolbawith a knife in her hand to cut the umbilical cord, no one came to help her. Mariam believed Jalil's version of the story that he had arranged for Nana to be taken to a hospital in Herat. Nana said that Mariam was the name of her mother which she picked for her daughter as her name. But Jalil said that he had chosen this name from his favorite flower, Mariam, the tuberose. Nana apologized for Mariam's birth but not Jalil. Mariam's birth, by troubling her mother for two days, raised an unfair apology of her for the manner of her birth.

Laila, the second protagonist of the novel, married Rasheed, Mariam's husband, for protecting her reputation because she became pregnant with her childhood friend, Tariq. Tariq fled to Kabul to recover his father's illness. In the meantime, Abdul Sharif, a man who claims that he is a clothing store operator with shops in Kabul, informed Laila that he was hospitalized with a kidney infection and that Tariq was in the bed next to him. He also revealed the cruel death of Tariq in Soviet war in Kabul. This news led Laila to take the decision to marry Rasheed. "She knew that what she was doing was dishonorable and spectacularly unfair to Mariam. But even though the baby inside her was no bigger than a mulberry, Laila already saw the sacrifices a mother had to make. Virtue was only the first." (ATSS 213)

She gave birth to a girl baby, Aziza, in the spring 1993. Rasheed's displeasure is immediately evident: He refuses to help Laila with the baby, and frequently voices his displeasure about the child. Laila names her daughter Aziza, which means the Cherished One. A third year of drought blankets Kabul during the summer of 2000. Also during this summer, a store neighboring Rasheed's shoe store catches fire, burning down his store as well. After the fire, the family begins selling off whatever they can. Rasheed gets fired from two restaurant jobs. Laila is more distraught by the fact that she's forced to put Aziza in an orphanage because Rasheed is unable to earn enough to feed all of them. Laila cannot bear to tell Aziza the truth, so she tells her the orphanage is a special school. Laila finds it odd as she tells a lie that's also the truth: that Aziza's father is dead.

Rasheed refused totally to accept that Aziza was his own daughter. Laila tells her daughter about Tariq as often as possible, always careful to never use his name but refer to him only as her father. When Laila and Mariam went to orphanage to meet her, Aziza utters the following words, "If the earth had no atmosphere, Aziza had said a

little breathlessly, the sky would not be blue at all but a pitch-black sea and the sun a big bright star in the dark.” (ATSS 316) The words of Aziza were a symbolic representation of her life in the orphanage. Mariam and Laila took care of her very much when she was with them and they grown her like a beautiful princess even in the midst of Rasheed’s dislike on her. In orphanage, Aziza was covered with dirt and sorrow. Laila would notice the dirt under Aziza’s fingernails and the untidiness of her children.

Mariam lost her identity because of her illegitimate beginning as the daughter of Jalil who refused to give a legitimate position to his own daughter in his house. Mariam found herself an identity after her marriage with Rasheed. Even this identity seems to shake because of the arrival of Laila in Rasheed and Mariam’s life. But Laila and Mariam love each other which rescued her identity. When Tariq reunited with Laila, Aziza could find her identity. Tariq loves Aziza very deeply. Through Mariam’s adaptation to the hopes of her as a wife, Hosseini identifies the way society enlightens and directs behavior through gender. Rasheed earns only hatred from Mariam through such inhumane treatment and he does not recognize that when the tormenter excessively uses violence, the subjugated revolt against the dominant to defend the dear ones.

Mariam becomes an outcast again when she miscarries one child after another. The baby was a symbol of hope and a ray of light in her bleak living. But her inability to give birth to a child reduces her to the position of Rasheed’s servant. He never tries to understand Mariam’s agony for the child she lost. “Mariam grieved for this baby, this particular child, who had made her so happy for a while.” (ATSS 92) She is grieved because with the death of the baby, she has lost her own hope of a happy life.

Male dominance in Afghan Society is clearly exhibited in Rasheed’s demeanor and ill-treatment of Mariam’s abortions. His mood changes drastically. “With each disappointment (six other miscarriages), Rasheed had grown more remote and resentful. Now nothing she did pleased him.” (ATSS 98)

Rasheed has central power over Mariam and Laila throughout their lives until they decide to resist his patriarchal terrorism. They strictly must tolerate everything: his shifting moods, his discontent with their cooking, cleaning, abuse, insult and handling as if they are useless. He thinks of them as things not as human beings. Women are considered men’s chattels..

Mariam like her mother Nana appears to be an archetype who never in her life demands for her own sake rather sacrifices her desires for others. Because she has learnt from her mother that “endurance” is the only way of survival in the male oriented society. She could also remind her mother’s words, “Like a compass needle that always points north, a man’s accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam.” (ATSS 7) These lower class women are constantly tortured and deprived of fully realizing their capabilities. They lack the courage and strength to bluntly resist the standard norms of the society and are ragged between the conventional norms and their own emotions.

Mariam grows up believing that she is a futile “harami” and the society will never appreciate her. She, therefore, accepts and subdues herself to the life she is forced to live. She is convinced that it is her destiny and continues to endure the domination, oppression and victimization. She never objects or resists Rasheed’s exploiting behavior. If he is distraught with her serving of food, she expresses regret for her fault. The cruel husband treated her like debris and she presents him all in return. “It wasn’t easy tolerating him talking this way to her, to bear his scorn, his ridicule, his insults, his walking past her like she was nothing but a house cat. But after four years of marriage Mariam saw how much a woman could tolerate when she was afraid.” (ATSS 89)

Such a strained and disrespectful relationship makes Mariam live in threat and fear. Rasheed demoralizes and humiliates her by calling her bad names, abuses her, and even beats her physically. Mariam’s life is an example of the situation of other women in Afghanistan who are leading life in constant fear of their husbands. Rasheed does not approve of anything that Mariam does. He always complains, “Now you know what you’ve given me in this marriage. Bad food, and nothing else.” (ATSS 103)

Mariam’s inner conflict starts the day Rasheed decides to marry Laila and dishonor Mariam. He forbids her to show any kind of resistance in this matter. He reminds her in insulting manner that, “It’s a common thing... your own father had three wives. Besides, what I am doing now most men I knew would have done long ago.” (ATSS 208,209)

Mariam feels worthless once again and all her hopes of having a happy married life dashes to the ground. She regrets the sacrifices she made for the vicious and ungrateful husband. It is there when the readers understand her personal feelings concerning Rasheed and about her conjugal life. She starts questioning herself, “Had she been a deceitful wife? A complacent wife? A dishonorable woman?” (ATSS 338) She tries to find faults in herself. She wants to know the reason of her being so common and worthless. She wants to understand why she is so discreditable all her life.

Mariam little femininity compels her to seek valid answer for her disgrace and the oppression she faces in her married life. She questions, “What harmful things had she done to this man to warrant his malice, his continual assaults, and the relish with which he tormented her? Had she not given this man her youth? Had she ever justly deserved his meanness?” (ATSS 309)

The above passage suggests that women can tolerate every brutality but cannot compromise on self-respect and dignity. Humiliation and disgrace transforms a passive woman like Mariam into an active feminist. Laila is the representation of the women of Afghanistan who through their struggle against violence prove that they still have a spirit to challenge their discriminatory, biased and downtrodden image. Mariam creates a strong bond of affection with Laila and her daughter and renovates herself into a prototype gallant mother and not even hesitates to kill her tyrant husband. She refuses to bear the burden of false indictments without any resistance. She realizes that mere subjugation and subservience without any protest, defense and resistance strengthen the tyrants to

defeat humanity. It is this selfless love, satisfaction and delight which creates self confidence in Mariam and forces her to resist and defy openly against the oppression and victimization she is subjected to in the male chauvinist society as an illegitimate belonging.

Mariam's decision to resist against the tyranny of her husband leads her towards the attainment of legitimate ending. Her daring step at the time when Rasheed hits and chokes Laila is inevitable. The commonality of their adverse experiences helps the development of a union to protect themselves against a common antagonist, their husband. In a male dominant Afghan society, coming together in a group is difficult for women but the understanding of at least these two women is representative of the determined and unyielding effort of women.

Rasheed becomes furious when he comes to know about Tariq's visits to Laila. He considers Mariam guilty and plans to hurt them both. Mariam's eventual stroke against Rasheed that ends in his demise signifies that she has tolerated greatly. She needs to resist the cruel norms and Rasheed's viciousness. She wants to protect herself and others from the tyranny of a violent man. She takes an immense step and refuses to accept the power of society. Death emerges like the most credible decision to get away from the precarious assault of the Soviet Union, the tyrannical regime of the Taliban, or an offensive husband. Her whole life she tries to conform to Rasheed's ways, and suffers more than any woman should have to tolerate in a life. She does not allow the people to snatch anything from her and in the end she dies a hero.

By killing Rasheed, she takes herself out of the gender and class domination that she has faced throughout her life. Through her daring action she proves that the subjugated can rise up against the tormentor for protecting the dear ones by sacrificing her own life. The powerful motivation of Mariam is saving Laila's life. Mariam realizes after her first swing at Rasheed that if she does not kill him, he will kill them both. While Mariam is ready to die, she's not ready to lose Laila. Through her decision to kill Rasheed, Mariam values her role as a mother above all else; like any mother, she is willing to do whatever it takes to protect Laila. These two motivations, one born out of a new sense of self-worth and one born out of selfless love, provide us with a complex portrait of Mariam and show us how both love and hate are powerful shapers of the human spirit.

Through Mariam's sacrifice and Laila's acquiescence, Hosseini suggests an ideal notion of motherhood: mothers always put their children ahead of all other matters. Mariam demonstrates her maternal nature in the aftermath of Rasheed's death. She attends to Laila's wounds and allows her time to recover from the shock of Rasheed's killing. At this point, Laila realizes that in order to be a good mother to her children, she must go along with Mariam's plan — otherwise she risks putting them all in danger. By depicting the many sacrifices these women make for their children, Hosseini suggests that good mothers have are the necessary qualities for healing — not just for healing of familial relationships, but these qualities can heal Afghani society, as a whole.

Mariam decides to stay and face the consequences of their murdering Rasheed. She surrenders her life for Laila and the children, and accepts her destiny. She is put to death by the Extremist. Hosseini's description of Mariam's offers insight into Mariam's evolution. Despite the squalor of prison, Mariam is surrounded by women who respect her, a stark contrast with her life with Rasheed. The women vie to share their food with Mariam and share what little they have — a blanket or pillow, for instance — with her. Through these ministrations, Mariam's strength and sacrifice is honored appropriately.

Mariam's view on life has also changed. For many years of her life, the future had no meaning. But, as she walks to her death, Mariam wishes she could have a longer life. She wishes to see Aziza grow up. Through these wistful moments, it's apparent that Mariam, despite all the hardships in her life, appreciates what she was given and yearns for more of it. In contrast, Mariam also feels a sense of peace, knowing she has ultimately proven herself a good mother and friend to Laila and Laila's children. Thus, through these insights into Mariam's psyche, Hosseini once again highlights maternal qualities: a good mother wishes for more time with her children, but forgoes it if necessary to better her children's lives.

The final thoughts of Mariam before her execution made the readers heart struck with melancholic thoughts. After meeting Mariam at the age of five when she was first called a harami by Nana, having to say goodbye to Mariam was extremely difficult as a reader. She was the backbone of the story. She is responsible for Laila surviving her house bombing and for which the rest of the story unfolds.

Even though Mariam was treated like a weed in the beginning, she was leaving the world as a woman who had loved and been loved back. Mariam is reflecting on her life as a whole in her last moments. Mariam realizes that she did not have the perfect life. She found her life perfect by rescuing the life of Laila and Aziza. At the end, she also gained the true love of her father, who realizes his mistake, through his letter to Mariam.

She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A mother. A person of consequence at last. No. It was not so bad, Mariam thought, that she should die this way. Not so bad. This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings (ATSS 361)

Through the use of time shifts, which break the narrative flow, Hosseini raises the tension caused by Tariq and Laila's reunion. The time shifts also allow Rasheed's reaction to the unfolding of his lie to become increasingly angry. And they demonstrate that Laila does not immediately run away with Tariq. When Aziza learns Tariq is her real father, she's overwhelmed with joy. Again, the "present-ness" of Tariq replaces the "past-ness" of Rasheed; Rasheed "is" never her father, only ever "was" — and wasn't much of one at that. Thus Hosseini uses the present tense to establish a contrast between this hopeful, loving present, with the past — a time in which everything seemed to be disappearing, even as it happened. Zalmai has the hardest time with this transition as he still yearns for the past and for his father, even as the other characters step hopefully into their new lives.

The illegitimate beginning of Aziza's life came to a legitimate ending when Tariq, her real father entered into her life.

Through feminist perspective, one can judge Mariam's murder of Rasheed as an act in which she digs herself out of the gender oppression that troubles her throughout her life. And after killing Rasheed, we see a transformed Mariam, resolute and full of confidence. She stays to face the consequences fearlessly. Once a dull woman stripped of her womanliness and social rights because of her status as a harami child, Mariam is now a class-breaking revolutionary woman who surmounts illegitimate beginnings to get a legitimate end

Mariam realizes in her concluding moment of life that the stain of harami that her mother has given her is not meant to persist with her; it has been removed. She enters into the world considering she signifies nothing, but she succeeds in changing the assumption and leave the world as something. Mariam sacrifices her precious life to bring peace, harmony and freedom in others' lives. "As she closes her eyes, it was not regret any longer but a sensation of abundant peace that washed over her." (ATSS 370) Mariam feels satisfied to turn into a person of consequence, having cherished people in her life.

The conclusion of the study attempts to give a concise overview of the whole discussion and concludes that *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a façade of female resistance against oppression, victimization and loss of identity. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a true representation of a patriarchal and imperialistic Afghan society, and describes the factors that have limited women's opportunities for a meaningful and evocative life. In the novel, it is women who suffer alone, have no chances for education, no fulfillment of desires, no freedom to speak, lack warmth and are obliged to suppress their basic needs. The novel truly reflects the philosophy of life and identification of Afghan women.

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the dreadful influence of patriarchy is efficiently revealed through the presentation of Mariam's life. She becomes the victim of the viciousness of the political and social canon of the Afghan society and her only fault is that she is simply a woman. The really tragic fact about Mariam is her illegitimate birth due to which she tolerates the unsympathetic society throughout her life. Hosseini depicts in the novel not only the critical life of the women folk in Afghanistan but also the humanity at large. Women in Afghan society is really struggling and fighting for their survival and existence of being born women. The study aims to motivate women into developing the resistance and strength which lies within them to fight for their happiness just like the strength that has been displayed by Mariam in the novel. The violence and oppression she endures is not something which has to be moaned only, but it is something to be confronted and fought back. Mariam's efforts and resistance against subjugation and discrimination determines active feminism her part.

### **Works Cited**

Hosseini, Khaled. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation, 2013. Print.

Wikipedia contributors. "Environmental philosophy." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 24 Jan. 2019. Web. 11 Mar. 2019.