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Symbolism and the quest for a new social awareness in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007)

Anna Kelvin Kesuwo

Department of English, University of Jos, Nigeria

Email: annakelvin89@yahoo.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3036-7885>

Abstract

This paper dwells on symbolism and a quest for a new social awareness in Khaled Hosseini's novel. The work surveys the condition of women in Afghanistan and how Hosseini uses symbols to create certain emotions and moods in his work. Khaled Hosseini provides a brilliant portrait of a country shattered by a series of ideological leaders and wars imposed on it by foreign and internal forces. Furthermore, he uses pen to portray the life in the war-ravaged Afghanistan, Hosseini's female characters just like the country of Afghanistan, appear to be propelled by the impulse of outside forces and society with little chance of influencing their own lives and futures.

Keywords: female subjugation, patriarchy, religion, symbolism, social awareness

Public Interest Statement

The quest for a new social awareness is portrayed in the female characters in Hosseini's text, they are brought together by their loss and fate. As they endure escalating dangers around them, they come to form a bond that makes them both sisters and mothers to each other, and that will ultimately alter the course of their lives and the next generation.

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Introduction

Social awareness is being aware of the problems that different societies and communities face on a daily basis and to be conscious of the difficulties and hardships of society. *A Thousand Splendid Sun* is Hosseini's response to the women condition in Afghanistan. According to Nelofar in Amnesty.org UK, Afghan women were first given the right to vote in 1919, which is fairly early if compared to Women in America who gained theirs in 1920. During that same period women were required to cover all skin on their body and wear burqas, women were not allowed to attend school, partake in political affairs, leave their home unaccompanied, work in offices and use healthcare facilities.

Raj Gomez and Silverman note that: Middle-Eastern women, specifically Afghan women, are often misunderstood. Beyond the stereotypical media representatives of Afghan women as submissive and in need of liberation, most people outside Afghan society lack knowledge about these women. Much of the challenges stem from hearing repugnant stories about infants and female teenagers being married to elderly men, or seeing of pensive images of abused women covered from head-to-foot with the traditional burqa. Due to these negative depictions those who rely mainly on the media often make quick conclusions about this culture. However, Asne Sierstad, the author of *The Bookseller of Kabul* and Khaled Hosseini among other authors use storytelling to depict the realities of Afghan culture. In Hosseini's work, Afghan women and female characters strive for a new social awareness in spite of the limits imposed on them by their families, religion and patriarchal society. In a sense, the women are portrayed as fighting to reinvent themselves as modern archetypes instead of traditionally subjugated females.

Hosseini's interest in Afghan women's quest for freedom began when he visited Kabul Afghanistan in 2003, 23 years after he first left his homeland. Before his trip Hosseini was already an established writer, having written New York, best seller *The Kite Runner*, but after visiting the Afghan people and witnessing firsthand how different life was, particularly for women, he began to focus on Afghan women and their desire for freedom particularly in his second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Though there are many male characters in the novel, the focus of this study is on Afghan women and their quest for a new social awareness from the society. Out of all the female characters in the novel only two will be analyzed: Mariam and Laila. Though these women do not reflect every Afghan woman, their perspectives and actions represent an ideal that women in oppressive environments desire a new social awareness. Moreover, these women are particularly interesting because Mariam follows the tradition, while Laila refuses to follow tradition, but their desire to escape oppression and embrace freedom is what unites them.

Symbolism in the Novel

Burqa as a Symbol of both the Social Plight of Women and a Hidden Sense of Freedom. In the novel, Khaled Hosseini uses the motif of burqa to symbolize the freedom in imprisonment as the following shows:

Attention women: you will stay inside your house at all times. It is not proper for women to wonder aimlessly about the streets... you will not, under any circumstances,

show your face. You will cover with a burqa when outside. If you do not, you will be severely beaten (Hosseini 278).

Mariam had never before worn a burqa... the padded head piece felt tight on her skull, and it was strange seeing the world through a mesh screen... she practices walking around her room in it and kept stepping on the hem and stumbling. The loss of peripheral vision was unnerving and she did not like the suffocating way the pleated cloth kept pressing against her mouth (71).

For Laila, being out in the street had become an exercise in avoiding injury. Her eyes were still adjusting to the limited, grind like visibility of the burqa, her feet still stumbling over the hem. She walked in a perpetual fear of tripping and falling, of breaking an ankle stepping into a pothole (232)

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* focuses on the plight of women in Afghan society. It is in the society that the burqa is used as symbol of both the repressive nature of male dominance and the suffocation effects of submission. The burqas are used to make the women submissive to their husbands. Mariam quickly learns from her husband that he too will enforce this unfair prejudice, "where I come from, one wrong look, one improper word, and wood is spilled. Where I come from, a woman's face is her husband's business only. I want you to understand that. Do you understand?" (63). Women are to be completely covered by their burqas at times, unless at home with their husbands. Separated and secluded from society, women are silenced by this thin layer of cloth that surrounds their bodies and are forced submission.

Unfortunately, Mariam, like many of the females in the middle to low class in Afghanistan, is forced by her husband to wear a burqa. This form of segregation and degradation is not so for the upper class, Mariam's husband Rasheed says:

The women are uncovered, they talk to me directly, look at me in eye without shame. They wear makeup and skirts that show their knees. Sometimes they even put their feet in front of me, the women do, for measurements, and their husbands stand there and watch. They allow it [...] they think they're being modern men, intellectuals, on account of their education, I suppose (63).

Men in the middle to low class, being of lesser education, may feel as though they are not to handle women being more outgoing and approachable than themselves. Because of this insecurity, they force women to wear burqas so that can consider themselves be dominant and are made to feel as if they control the power over something, even if it only to clad their own wife. They need to feel in control of their home environment since they are in control of the outside one. This excess of aggressive behavior and need for self-reassurance leads many of these men to demand that their wives wear burqa in public.

In Mariam's case, although the burqa did indeed make her submissive to her husband as it was intended. It also gave her a sense of comfort. The narrator states "And the burqa, she learned

to her surprise, she was also comforting. It was like a one-way window. Inside it, she was an observer, buffered from the scrutinizing eyes of the strangers. She no longer worried that people knew, with a single glance, all the shameful secrets of her past” (66). The burqa saves Mariam from the harshness of reality. It is a veil on her past, a protecting fortress, so she does not feel like people can tell who she is and how she came to be; a harami, or child born out of wedlock. Her father a rich and prominent figure in the society, and her mother a lowly maid in his household. Under a veil she is able to see life like she has never seen it before. She is free of people’s unkind stares, and she no longer feels like she is the center of everyone’s grace. Under the burqa, Mariam finds comfort and security in its folds. As well freedom. She feels the freedom to think as she wishes and finds comfort in the fact that no one will be the wiser, about it. Rasheed’s second wife, Laila, has similar feelings about the burqas:

For Laila, being out in the streets had become an exercise in avoiding injury. Her eyes were still adjusting to the limited, grind like visibility of the burqa, feet still stumbling over the hem. She walked into perpetual fear of tripling and falling, of breaking an ankle stepping into a pothole. She wouldn’t be recognized this way if she ran onto to watch the surprise in their eyes, or the pity or glee, at how far she had fallen, at how lofty aspirations had been dashed (208).

The Burqa provided shelter as it humiliated and made the women wearing it submissive. For them it was both hindrance and a blessing. While the burqa shows that the women wearing them have given up their individuality because of a man, they are sheltered in its mass amounts cloth, surrounding and comforted by the fact that they are dressed beyond recognition so that what little self esteem they have left is not stomped on by society, but rather cradled and protected.

The burqas also protect the women themselves. Many of the women I had to give up their children and place them in orphanages when the droughts came because they had no way of feeding them. Laila has to give up her little girl, and since her husband refuses to go with her to visit the child, she sneaks out. Women are not allowed out on the streets without a man to accompany them; if they are caught, they were beaten and sent home. The burqa offered protection from the beatings, “soon Laila took to wearing extra layers, even in the heat, two, three, sweaters beneath the burqa, for padding against the beatings” (286). While the burqa singled them out to the Taliban in the streets, they offered shelter also, providing a way to soften the blows dealt to them by society.

Tripping is another symbol that goes along with the burqa. Both women tripped over the hem while they were getting accustomed to the feeling of wearing a burqa. This is significant because in both instances, this event occurs after or around the same time that they are trying to convince themselves that wearing a burqa is not such a bad thing. Tripping on the hem brings them back to reality. It is almost like a tease of freedom. As they were walking, their feet have freedom to move, yet as soon as their feet catches the hem, it takes that freedom away and they falter a moment before regaining their balance. This is symbolic of women’s repression by society and of the tease of freedom brought about by concealing veil of the burqa, it is used “as a reminder of how

women like us suffer... how quietly we endure all that falls upon us" (82).

When the Taliban takes over, all women are forced to wear burqas in public, even the doctors. The female doctors, though they have the luxury of being allowed to continue working, are forced to wear burqas even during surgery. Mariam explains this and gives a scenario saying "there was a woman who had understood that she was lucky to even be working, [yet] there was always something, something else, that they could take away" (206). This is simple rule, as well as the fact that all the doctors' burqas are grungy and old, shows how little women are valued in this society. They are treated like dirt and the only solace that they can find for their drop in status is to shrink into the burqas that they wear and embrace what little freedom and comfort it gives them.

Some of the women doctors are strong enough to stand up to this unfair ruling. In secret, they would remove the burqa during surgery as it was difficult and constricting to work in. The removal of the burqa, with the help of a person standing guard to make sure no one would catch them, shows that the removal of this piece of cloth gives women just as much control and dominance over their own lives as it gave the men who forced the women wear them.

Another symbol in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is Laila's virginity; it is symbolic because at the same time that she gives it away her country starts to fall in shambles. Something that she held for so long is lost just as a nation that was loved and stable was torn apart. Her virginity also symbolizes a connection between her and Tariq that couldn't be lost by distance or lies. Even though they are separated for a significant amount of time and people try to tear them apart by lying, they have a bond that couldn't be broken. Laila feels guilty about having sex with Tariq, but at the same time she feels that the act is right. She tries to remember every tiny detail about having sex with Tariq.

A less apparent symbol in the novel is the symbol of snow. It is Mariam who watches from her window as the snow falls down. She is trapped under the influence of her abusive husband, Rasheed. Mariam thinks about the words of her Nana saying that each snowflake is a sign from an individual woman upset by something in the world. They fall upon others and make no noise: "As a reminder of how women like us suffer... how quietly we endure all that falls upon us" (18). So, even though it is a less known symbol in the book, snow is an important symbol. The women of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* are ever oppressed and must vent their emotions in some way in order to keep on living. The element of snow is used as a symbol for suffering throughout the book.

One of the symbols is the title of the book *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. This phrase is used twice in the book, once by Laila's father, Babi, and once by Laila herself. On the first occasion, Babi quotes a poem that Saib-e-Tabrizi has written "one could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs, of the thousand splendid suns that hide behind the wall" (172). Babi quotes a poem to say his farewells to the city of Kabul, where he "went to school...[and] became a father" (172), making it difficult for him to leave the city, even though it had brought him hardships. This shows that the women in Kabul, after the Taliban took control, loved their city and were able to leave a mark, through the bad times. The bad times being when they were trapped in their homes with extreme laws. When Laila used the symbols, she meant it in a difficult context, talking about a woman rather than Kabul. When reminiscing about her best friend, Mariam, it was revealed that,

“Mariam is in Laila’s own heart, where she shines with the sacrifices that Mariam had for Laila and her children made a very big impact on her. The use of the title is meant to symbolize the beauty of Afghanistan and evoke a positive emotion for the country and its culture. Secondly its used to emphasize how Mariam has impacted Laila’s life and has left a mark on her heart that will last forever.

Another symbol in the novel is the movie, Titanic. This movie played an important role in the story because it was a source of escaping the harsh rule of the Taliban to the people of Kabul. It “gripped Kabu” (270). “After curfew, everyone locked their doors, turned out the lights, turned down the volume and reaped in tears for Jack and Rose and the passengers of the doom ships” (270). It was possible to buy Titanic carpets, and Titanic cloth, from bolts arranged in wheelbarrows. The re was Titanic that had encompassed Kabul, Jack “Everybody wants Jack... Everybody wants Jack to rescue them from disaster. But there is no Jack. Jack is not coming back. Jack is dead” (270). The truth that mostly everyone in Kabul ignored, was that they had rescuer to save them from Taliban. Titanic was their only source of hope, it provided a bond that united everyone together. The symbol off Rose and Jack in Titanic, plays another crucial role in the text. Jack stands for Mariam, who gives her life to save Laila and her children from a cruel husband. Her sacrifice let Laila, Aziza and Zalmai leaves Afghanistan and it let Laila be with her true love, Tariq. The characters are also symbolic, through their actions and their relationships. Rasheed is the symbol for the culturally acceptable way men are allowed to treat women in the country; he beats imprisons and abuses his wives to the point where he almost kills them. The use of this character type wasn’t incidental, the author is using the brutality and evil of Rasheed to symbolize men in Afghanistan and the terrible treatment of women there. Conversely, the character of Laila and Mariam are symbolic of the struggles and hardships women face in that culture, as well as the strength it takes them to survive. The author takes these characters and holds them up to the readers as a representation of what is going on in Afghanistan today and how the treatment of women is unacceptable.

Bamiyan Buddas, one of Laila’s most treasured memories. The Buddas has testimony to an ancient community of monks that live in caves within the cliffs, symbolizes the cultural richness of the national heritage. The Buddhas also come to stand for a sense of contentment and security for Laila, one that she will yearn for in the tumultuous years to come.

The Quest for a New Awareness

A Thousand Splendid Suns seems to grapple with how to create a new social awareness in the life of the characters. None of the characters in the novel is a stranger to pain and suffering, either physical or emotional. However, this suffering takes different forms. The loss of loved ones brings its own kind of acute pain, often in a way that seems to lack any kind of redemption. On the other hand, there are other types of suffering that he characters willingly endure in the service of others.

The novel exposes the cultural, political, religious and social structure of Afghanistan in degrading and devaluing Afghan women. The strict Islamic laws undermine women’s basic human rights and sabotage their equal participant in human community. The quest for a new social

awareness includes how the Afghan women struggle to survive and to free themselves from the suffocating chains of oppressions and violence. All the female characters of the novel endure tarrying situations where they are abused beyond human imaginations. Hosseini draws a similarity between the fate of two characters, Mariam and Laila, who hail from drastically different backgrounds but are connected by tragic twists in their lives. They share same pain and agony and undergo similar stereotypical trials of being women in Afghanistan. The author shows how their struggles and trials lead them to fight back and to hope for happiness and a better social awareness. Hosseini underlines the parallel of Afghan women's suffering with the fate of Afghanistan. He masterfully weaves the personal narrative of Laila and Mariam into the backdrop of Afghanistan's turbulent recent history. Women's rights have diminished in the society of Taliban authority; they are banned to laugh loudly, to play sports, to even talk or shake hands with non-mahram males and most importantly to study in schools or any other educational institutions.

In this novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini uses the lives of Mariam and Laila to illustrate the heartbreaking reality of women in Afghanistan. Rasheed is a widower, a poor stone carver desperately in need of a soul mate. He gets maimed and introduces his new wife, Mariam, to his life in Kabul by taking her on tour in the city, patiently explaining its architectural wonders. The incident of forced marriage is continuously associated with conventional orientalist attitude towards the Islamic social institution. Hosseini here generally represents women in Afghanistan as subjects to the male's authority. Only the elder member of the family can decide about their personal choices even when it comes to their lovers or future husbands. A few days after Rasheed's marriage to Mariam, he begins to insist that his wife should wear a burqa in public. The requirement of wearing a burqa signifies fanaticism and subjugation because burqa does not allow women to show their beauty and encloses them inside a black carcass devoid of femininity.

Mariam had never before worn a burqa. Rasheed had to help her put it on. The padded head piece felt tight and heavy on her skull, and it was strange seeing the walking around her room in it and kept stepping on the hem and stumbling. The loss of peripheral vision was unnerving and she did not like the suffocating way the pleated cloth kept pressing against her mouth (71).

Rasheed insists Mariam will get used to wearing a burqa with time. Rasheed is obsessed with hope of having a male heir. When Mariam's first pregnancy ends in miscarriage, Rasheed becomes furious and eventually loses hope after the other miscarriages. Hosseini emphasizes the other savage side of an oriental husband when he depicts Rasheed is totally insensitive to the sadness and pain these miscarriages inflict on Mariam. Within such oriental categorizations, Rasheed is presented as a superior irrational male who cannot accept any possible scientific explanation for these miscarriages. He continues to blame Mariam for failing to give him a male heir. At this stage Rasheed turns into a brutal monster that simply ignores Mariam and mistreats her by frequently criticizing her ways of cooking and cleaning.

Mariam kneeling to the ground and tried to pick up the grain of rice and put them back on the plate, but hands were shaking badly, and she had wait for them to stop. Dread pressed down on her chest. She tried tsking deep breaths. She caught her pale reflections in the darkened living-room window and looked away... He snatched her hand, opened it, and dropped a handful of pebbles into it (102).

Rasheed orders Mariam to put the pebbles in her mouth even when she pleads with him and want to tell him she is pregnant. "His powerful hands clasped her jaw. He shoved two fingers into her mouth and pierce it open, then forced the cold, hard pebbles into it". Mariam struggled against him, mumbling, but he kept pushing the pebbles in her mouth and ordering her to chew it.

Rasheed said is cheeks were quivering. Now you know what your rice tastes like, and you know what you've given me in this marriage. Bad food and nothing else, then he was gone, leaving Mariam to spit out pebbles, blood and fragments of two broken molars (103).

Women in the novel are mere commodities that a man discard when he feels they are no longer useful. Rasheed easily disassociate himself from Mariam the moment he succeeds in persuading Laila to marry him, as one possible strategy to avert local people's suspicion towards the presence of another female in the same conjugal home.

Rasheed's mind is exclusively preoccupied with having a male heir. Rasheed, overjoyed, describes Laila saying "you...are a Benz. A brand-new, first class shiny Benz" (216). Another drastic shift in Rasheed's caring behaviour towards Laila surfaces when she finally gives birth to Aziza, a girl who is not his in the first place. A fit to indescribable anger and fury possesses Rasheed when Laila gives birth to a female. Laila finds a companion in Mariam and they form an alliance that helps them to cope with the miserable life they both share in Rasheed's house.

In the novel, the deferential between the nights, privilege and authority men enjoy compared to those women have, is disgusting, in that men have complete control over the women in their lives. Jalil, Mariam's father, for example is permitted to have three wives, while Mariam and her mother are not even allowed to live in the same house as Jalil because Mariam is a bastard child (harami) and thus a disgrace to Jalil. Upon marriage, Rasheed, Mariam's husband, become the ultimate authority in Mariam's life. He restricts her to the home, requires her to be submissive, to clean, cook and when he is not satisfied, he abuses her as though she is a property. The concept of domesticity is closely tied in the patriarchy. Tradition basically states that a woman's place is at home while men are meant to work in public. Mariam's and Laila's life with Rasheed is a perfect demonstration of this concept.

In the four years since the day at the bath house, there had been six more cycles of hopes raised then dashed, each loss, each collapse, each trip to the doctor more crushing for Mariam than the last. With each disappointment, Rasheed had grown

more remote and resentful. Now nothing she did pleased him. She cleaned the house made sure he always had a supply of clean shirts, cooked his favourite dishes (98).

In the second chapter which illustrates the lives of Mariam and Laila, the two female protagonists of the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam is a 'harami' or illegal child of a rich business man, Jalil and a maid Nana. At the beginning of the novel, we are dropped into the world of Mariam, a young girl alone with her unmarried mother in the outskirts of Herat. She is a thoughtful child at the start of the book. Both Mariam's and Nana's lives are almost completely absent from the public world by living a life based on the decisions of the men around them. This portrays the poor education system the country has provided in Afghanistan.

The only qualities Mariam learns are the basic survival and endurance. She resents her mother's strict ways and the fact that she only sees her father once a week. Mariam's shame at being illegitimate makes her unable to stand up for herself. As soon as her mother commits suicide, her father forces her to marry a forty five year old man, Rasheed. Laila, the second female protagonist, is the youngest child and only daughter of Hakim and Fariba. Laila has a strong desire to use her intelligence and education to improve the world around her. As her father is a well-educated teacher, education had always been a priority in Laila's life. She has always received encouragement from her parents to achieve her dreams.

Hosseini portrays the lives of Mariam and Laila, presently as the heartbreaking reality of women in Afghanistan. The strong women of the novel, born a generation apart, both are brought together in war-torn Afghanistan due to misfortune and circumstances. The word 'harami' has a lasting impact on Mariam, defining her status in Afghanistan and establishing a life long struggles with self-worth. Nana frequently refers to Mariam as a 'harami', which Mariam learns, with age, "is an unwanted thing". Mariam seems to be misguided due to her complicated upbringing. The combination of a frequently absent father, and an emotionally damaged mother leaves her with little guidance or love throughout her childhood. As a young girl, she wishes to pursue her education and be accepted by her father, but since her early childhood Mariam is rejected by the society for no fault of hers. The less fortunate girl does not go to school" (18). Mariam's half sisters are fortunate to attain education and now planning to join in university. As raised by a sacrificing but bitter mother, Mariam is taught from a young age that she "would never have legitimate claim to the things other people had, things such as love, family, home, acceptance" (4). Rather than rejecting her mother's negative idea, Mariam simply keeps it with her for the rest of her life. Her mother attempts to steel her to hardship in preparation for a future of injustice and abuse by men, assuming Mariam's future will be a parallel to her own past.

To have a peep into her past, Nana is arranged to marry a boy from Shindad, when she is fifteen. A week before the wedding date, she has a seizure which is described to be a 'jinn' an evil spirit, her suitor's family immediately cancels the weddings. The suitor's family is a typical example of Afghan men finding wives who are healthy for only fertility reasons. Such a circumstance forces her to take up housekeeping at Jalil's house to earn a living. This brief stint as a maid leads to a secret courtship between them out of which Mariam is born, the unwanted

child. Looking through the eyes of the society, marrying a woman of her status was inconceivable. Obviously, Jalil knew that and feared the outcome. As we analyze Jalil's intentions, we realize that Jalil entered into an intimacy with Nana for the sake of doing it.

Nana portrays Jalil in dark shades. This is in contrast to Mariam's version, which yields like a fantasy, almost too good to be true. An adorable father daughter relationship. Jalil never called Mariam 'Harami', for him Mariam "was his little flower". He was fond of sitting her on his lap and telling her stories. She admires him for his vast knowledge. She quivers with pride to have a father who knows such things. Nana always warns her not to be attached to her father. But Mariam always dreamed to be with him in Heart alongside her siblings. Nana's life undergoes unfortunate incidents with Jalil thus leading her to suicide. The attitude that women have in these situations is unbelievably obedient. Nana's death confirms to Mariam how lost she really is and she instantly blames the occurrence on herself.

For the first time, Mariam heard him with Nana's ears. In Afghanistan, women never enjoy any freedom, especially in low class women. Mariam's life is a typical example of this, Mariam's sisters are unmarried and she is being forced into marriage. Forced marriages are continuously associated with conventional attitudes in the Islamic wives and nine children who are legitimate" (5). The author represents women in society she lives in seems intent to prove her mother's statement that "like" a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman" (7).

Mariam's coming to Kabul after her marriage is strange to her, all the people around her are all new to her. When Mariam becomes pregnant, she starts to show more positive traits, as she feels as if being a mother will bring happiness into her life. Her dreams are shattered, however, when she had a miscarriage, Mariam labels the incident as an 'undeserved blessing'. Treacherous daughter did not deserve to be mothers and this as just punishment" (93).

This quote exemplifies the stress that will plague Mariam, and that the containment of her new life has not given her an opportunity to overcome her grief. After four years of marriage, Mariam officially becomes afraid of Rasheed, and does not make attempts to stand up to him. Rasheed always proclaims his masculinity and control over her. He tells her:

I am a different breed of man, Mariam. Where I come from, one wrong look, one improper word and blood is spilled. Where I come from, a woman's face is her husband's business only. I want you to remember that. Do you understand? (63).

Laila is the second protagonist in the novel. She is very unique, especially in a society that undermines the abilities of women. Her traits can be explained through her relationships with other characters. Growing up with Mammy as her mother seems to have forced Laila to become more independent. Mammy is so consumed with her absent sons, whom she refers to as 'sultans', that she neglects her daughter as a result. Mammy's actions give off the impression that she is careless, and she forgets to pick Laila from school and does not express interest in Laila's life. Therefore, Laila responds to her mother's neglect with independence, perhaps as a means of masking her true

feelings regarding her mother. Laila's father, Babi on the other hand, respects Laila and takes pride in her intelligence and maturity beyond her years. Her confidence may originate from this positive encouragement. Babi assures Laila that she will make an impact in the world she lives in, which contrasts with Mammy's impression of Laila's heroic brothers, "you're a very bright girl. Truly you are. You can be anything you want, Laila I know this about you. And I also know that when this is over, Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, maybe even more" (47).

Laila attends school daily, where she is taught that men and women are equal. In her mind, women are not merely destined for marriage and child raising, but careers. Apart from bookish knowledge, Lila is also taught about life and common matters by her parents. While on the other hand, her friends Giti and Hasina are pressured by their families to get married before they reach the age of twenty. But unluckily, Afghanistan seems to be moving in the opposite direction. The war gets so bad that Babi decides to home school Laila and that makes her lose some freedom. In the novel, Laila stresses over the deprived rights of women. Laila's quest for a social awareness in her society is because of the restrictions on education, choices and liberation in the male dominated country. It depicts a gradual adherence of women to the rules and regulations made against them by the society as in the case of Laila. Throughout her life she struggles to obtain freedom from everyman and as she grows up and becomes a woman, she slowly sees the position she has in the world.

Laila's high hope for the future is trampled upon when she is determined to escape and also when she decides to fight with Mariam over Rasheed's brutality. Together they endure and even try to ward off the physical and emotional abuses of Rasheed. As Aziza's birth completely changes his attitude towards Laila. She hides the real truth behind Aziza's birth. Women in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* seems to have different educational experiences. Mariam is tutored by Mullah Faizullah in the Koran, and she learns how to read and write. Yet, when she asks her mother about going to school, Nana insists that the only lesson that Mariam needs to learn is to endure. This shows that women are trained to learn and endure hardship from childhood. While on the other hand, Laila's father emphasizes the importance of her education. Although the Taliban's regime has suppressed women in Afghanistan, Aziza is educated by both Laila and Mariam, who contributes what they know in order to educate her. Mariam teaches the Koran and Laila eventually volunteers to teach at her school.

In the Novel, women forge strong bond despites the efforts of their husbands and the government to reduce women's power. The author shows how women struggle for a new social awareness and hope of getting a new life. It also reveals how women have the strong ability to find strength and support in one another. Once the two protagonists realize they can become each other's strength and protect each other, they transcend over the role of victims and resist many difficult situations together. Mariam becomes Aziza's second mother and the bond of love between the women is very evident. Their bond gives them freedom from pain not only physically but emotionally by trusting each other. Mariam, who never shows any form of rebellion against Rasheed and his barbarous beatings gains courage to fight and ultimately kill Rasheed when he attempts to murder Laila. Mariam makes sure that Rasheed sees her so that he can acknowledge

her action. HE is going to kill her, she thought. He really means to. And Mariam could not, would not, allow that to happen. He'd taken so much from her in twenty-seven years of marriage she would not watch him take Laila too (340).

We see lack of social amenities for the women in Afghanistan. When Laila is expecting her second baby, it is Mariam who helps her in the pathetic hospital. The issue of health care, especially for women is apparent to a great extent in the novel. When Laila is ready to give birth to her son, only one hospital in all of Kabul serves women. This Hospital is severely short of staff and lacking in medicine and anesthetic. It seems extreme to perform a cesarean section without anesthetic. This indicates the hypocrisy of the male dominated society where women are so segregated against those sanitary medical conditions, even as mixed gender hospitals are denied. The strength these women show during tough time is magnificent and it manifest the activism on their part. Kabul has only one hospital for women, few doctors are working there, and they have little or no medicine or means to anesthetize their patients:

The doctor took a breath, then told Laila that the hospital had no anesthetic... 'then cut me open', Laila said, she dropped back on the bed and drew up her knees...'cut me open and give me my baby'(283).

These are some of the circumstances that the Afghan women underwent during the Taliban regime. Laila is an admirable character in the novel, she has the power to spread her positive awareness to everyone around her. At the close of the novel, she finally reaches the place she is meant to be, she chooses to dedicate her life to help the forgotten children of Afghanistan, the young girls and boys who never received the same encouragement and love that she had when she was at their age. Laila becomes a teacher, like her father and she will spread her determination and intelligence to the people who need it the most. Mariam fits the aspects of modern hero. She is a naturally flawed everyday woman, who is against an unjust society. Her death brings a new social awareness in the society: women could move freely without a male relative accompanying them, they also enjoy the freedom to act and choose their love companions and also have equal medical facilities with the men.

Conclusion

This work has surveyed the condition of women in Afghanistan, their quest for a new social awareness and the symbolism in the novel. We understand the fact that the patriarchal system which is predominate almost all over the world is severely dominating in Afghanistan. Women are considered as commodities that can be spared anytime by their husbands or the society. The women represented in Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* are primarily modern archetypes because they either think about using physical, tradition and untraditional methods to overcome oppression and fight for freedom and social awareness. This also shows that regardless of gender and socio-economic background, men and women desire to escape oppression and embrace emancipation.

Just as these women are used to instruct, show truths and provide hope for all on a journey for a

quest for a new social awareness, Mariam and Laila instruct themselves and those around them to view challenges as temporal. By approaching life this way, Mariam finds comfort in the imagination and thinking about a life outside of the one she leads, as she alludes to in the opening of the novel. Laila on the other hand, instructs others to be vocal about their dreams instead of allowing anyone to dictate who they should be, as is evident when she thinks about education. Because of the education she received, Laila believes she has a new awareness that females are able to live out their dreams if they are educated. Hosseini use of symbol in the novel is to create certain emotion and mood, he also uses objects, events, persons and situations to represent meaning in his novel.

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Author Bionote: Anna Kelvin Kesuwo is a lecturer in the Department of English, University of Jos. She is presently a M.A student of Literature in English in the department and she is conducting her research in literature on gender-based violence and religion in Nigeria.

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