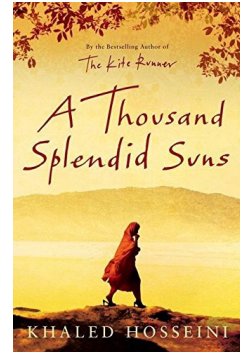


Khaled Hosseini: *A Thousand Splendid Suns* An Emotional, Gut-wrenching Journey

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A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini. An emotional, gut-wrenching journey follows the lives of two Afghani women through the tumultuous history of Afghanistan. Published in May 2007, this story reflects the reality of Hosseini's upbringing, having been born and raised in Kabul, to a diplomat father and a mother who taught Farsi and history at an all-girls high school.



The book starts with Miriam, an illegitimate child married young into an increasingly violent and abusive marriage by her father. Lila is then introduced, coming from an educated background and therefore a prosperous future; the backdrop of war causes this to crumble away, and she's forced to enter this abusive marriage as a second wife. After initial friction, they are forced to navigate the challenges of an oppressive world as they now live for more than themselves with Lila's two children. They experience depressing losses in the search for their freedom.

Women, how they interact, and the attitudes that both men and women have towards them are themes I just couldn't ignore from Hosseini's depiction throughout the book. Especially since these would transcend multiple relationships. The reputation of Miriam as a harami (illegitimate child) causes Jalil (her father) to rather brutally ignore her in public, and in efforts to avoid judgement from her presence He quickly marries her off young. For the husband, Rasheed, the proximity of Miriam and Lila to the increasingly restrictive Shari'a laws of the Taliban directly influences his violent and abusive nature. As the story progresses, the wives steer further and further from total conformity and Rasheed lashes out, often beating the women with such intense aggressiveness, that it is hard to carry on reading.

'He was no longer Rasheed, Mariam's husband, or the father of her child. He was a walking rule book, a collection of punitive measures, an assembly of do's and don'ts.'

As for the women's attitudes towards other women, I find the multiple mother-daughter relations an impactful device for representing the complexity of navigating motherhood as the second-class citizen this time in history. Miriam's upbringing is a prime example of this. While bearing the harsher brunt of the judgement that comes with an illegitimate child, Nana (her mother) sees how cruel people could be, and instead of giving Miriam hope for a better life than hers, she pushes her down with that same cruelty for her to never be disappointed. Miriam is only educated in the Quran; I find that faith is a prevalent theme whilst reading and would serve as a way women instil hope and perseverance, juxtaposed by the Taliban who weaponises it. Miriam is told her future was one of service, whether that is being the help or in a marriage to a man. She is to sink into her illegitimacy and be ashamed. In stark contrast, Lila is brought up in a completely different manner at a much different time. Her father greatly supports her academic education, and it is widely believed she'd have a bright future. Her mother would rarely interact with her after her older brothers' death left her distraught, her presence doing nothing to alleviate this.

Their initial friction when meeting in their marriage to Rasheed, I suspect, is for what they each represented to each other. For Miriam, Lila is her fertile replacement and the embodiment of what she is unable to bring to the marriage, as Lila birthed two children, the last being a boy. For Lila, her naivety and immaturity would give her trouble adjusting to her new life, and Miriam is the reason for her isolation where she expects nurture. Her aspirations could no longer be tunnelled in their vision; she has to account for others and adversity. Their relationship metamorphoses, and Lila adopts the sacrificial selflessness required of her by motherhood from Miriam. Miriam then adopts Lila's idealism and persistent hope when Lila's children (considered hers as well) which then drives their pursuit of freedom and Miriam's ultimate sacrifice.

'She was leaving the world as a woman who had loved and been loved back. She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A mother. A person of consequence at last.'

The beautiful and emotional intricacy with which Hosseini presents the natural world made this such an immersive read, offering so many of the harrowing moments with such emotional disparity that it is difficult to continue, but difficult to put down. The reverberations of Afghan history arguably shapes not only the storyline but the characters themselves, with Miriam and Lila's birthdays coinciding with either the take down of a regime or the establishment of a new faction. With Hosseini's background, I believe it would be hard to tell the story without this context, and his optimistic outlook on the future that I now read from, makes this book all the more devastating. A seemingly disregarded cry that has left an indelible impression on me.