

---

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Identity Reconstruction after trauma in Khalid Hussani's "A thousand Splendid Suns"**

**Marium Bushra<sup>1</sup>, Abida Yousaf<sup>2</sup>, Saira Parveen<sup>3</sup> and Rubina Noreen<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>1,2,4</sup> Lecturer, Department of Foreign Languages, Jazan University, Saudi Arabia

<sup>3</sup> Instructor, of Foreign Languages, Jazan University, Saudi Arabia

**Corresponding Author:** Marium Bushra, **E-mail:** [mhanif@jazanu.edu.sa](mailto:mhanif@jazanu.edu.sa)

---

**ABSTRACT**

This research paper examines the role of women's gender and identity in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* during a war. This draws parallels with gender expectations, oppression and the search for identity. Drawing on feminist theory, the portrayal of lead protagonists resonates gender resilience as identity is socially imposed but under war-torn conditions, it is reborn through self-empowerment.

**KEYWORDS**

*Gender, identity, women representation, self-realization*

**ARTICLE INFORMATION**

**ACCEPTED:** 01 April 2026

**PUBLISHED:** 28 April 2026

**DOI:** 10.32996/ijts.2026.6.3.4

---

**1. Introduction**

The study contributes to feminist literary analysis by examining how narratives of trauma and oppression intersect with women's identity formation. Hosseini's novel contextualizes the formation and transformation of gender identity under extreme conditions. Afghanistan has historically war torn, with autonomy, opportunity and self-expression depending on political regimes, particularly during Taliban rule, which imposed severe restrictions on women's education, public presence, and personal freedom (Rahimi, 2021). These social and political forces influence how women perceive themselves in the community. These realities are intersected by the lives of the female protagonists, Mariam and Laila, who developed resilience and identity through survival, solidarity, and motherhood, despite oppressive conditions (Jamal, 2021; Shabir, 2023). Mariam's and Laila's experiences reveal different generational perspectives on gender, while their shared suffering and eventual alliance highlight how identity can be reclaimed through solidarity. This novel draws parallels to "the handmaids tail" by Atwood and both authors depict women building resistance in chaos. Walker and Hosseini both argue that female relationships serve as catalysts for self-liberation (Grant, 2023).

**Research Question**

The study seeks to answer the following question:

How does *A Thousand Splendid Suns* represent the reassertion of gender identity?

**2. Literature Review**

The review of related literature highlights both the vulnerability and strength, of Afghan women Hosseini shows women "trapped in systems of violence." (Sultan, 2020). The psychological effects of gender-related injustice are shown through this literary representation. Readers gain insight into how culture, tradition, and politics shape gender roles in Afghanistan (Rahimi, 2021). The novel explores the lives of women in a social setting that suppresses their abilities. The capacity of women to withstand the

extreme oppression and injustice has been highlighted throughout the novel but the strong patriarchal system always deprives women of their rights. Mariam's life portrays limited choices and denies her the right to choose anything for herself. Her mother, Nana, repeatedly reminds her of the lesson of being subordinate. That's why she wanted Mariam to learn and remember that "like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman." At the age of fifteen, she is forced to marry an old man Rasheed in Kabul, who became more abusive with the passage of time.—She had always "pictured herself handing a towel, brewing tea, and sowing missing buttons" so she believed her purpose was to indulge in acts of care and service to become useful for men - However, Rasheed absolute abusive control and bad behaviour crippled her independent thinking and dreams. "It wasn't easy to tolerate 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." The condition of Rasheed's shabby kitchen reminded her of "the havoc that had struck her life, making her feel uprooted, displaced, like an intruder on someone else's life." Her life became more difficult after she couldn't give children to Rasheed. Rasheed oppression, disdain and hate grew for her for no reason. The worst incident was when Rasheed forced her to chew pebbles which resulted in broken teeth declaring "Now you know what have given me in this marriage. Bad food, and nothing."

In a twist of Fate Laila an independent beautiful, educated woman nicknamed "pari, and revolutionar girl", the talk of the valley also ended up marrying old Rasheed who had already made life hell for his first wife Mariam. This shows the limited choice women had in war-torn conditions. The characters of Mariam and Laila displayed a great amount of moral strength, which is an inbuilt attribute of women. The moral courage and dignity in the character of Mariam force her to face the oppressor Rasheed who ended up dead, to save Laila's life. Jamal (2021) and Shabir (2023) emphasize that solidarity between Mariam and Laila serves as a tool for healing and identity reconstruction.

### 3. Discussion

Sultan (2020) argues that the novel shows Afghan women "trapped in systems of violence" while Akhtar (2022) highlights the psychological consequences of these systems. The story of Laila clearly shows that women with opportunities and support face critical circumstances in war-torn areas. It shows the fragility of women's freedom in times of conflict. One of the novel's important themes is that female characters express their personal hopes. They face a severe chaotic situation, but they dare to deal with it and have the strength to recover from lethal circumstances.

In the beginning of the novel we see Laila mother facing the same cycle. Maryiam's mother – Nana, a poor housekeeper and, as Mulla Faizulla said, "troubled and unhappy woman" – reflects the plight of underprivileged women from poor families who are vulnerable and unprotected. The writer uses pathetic fallacy when the protagonist loses her unborn child "thinking all the sighs drifted up the sky, gathered into clouds, then broke into tiny pieces that fell silently on the people below." The use of a powerful metaphor "the grief washed her over" represents the silent suffering and endurance of women — the ineffable, ongoing pain they bear as Mariam blamed herself for a loss that was not her fault due to societal stress of losing her role as a mother. This is another attempt by the writer to show the horrid health conditions of a war torn country where women and children are the major loss bearers.

The extreme oppression does not prevent Mariam and Laila from bouncing back to "identity reconstruction through unity" (Jamal, 2021; Shabir, 2023).

### 4. Conclusion

Motherhood is central to gender identity in the novel. For Laila, her children symbolize hope and purpose. For Mariam, Laila becomes the daughter she never had. This shared motherhood strengthens their bond and helps redefine their self-worth. **"It would end like this, then, Laila thought. What a pitiable end. But then the darkness began to lift. She has a sensation of rising up. The ceiling slowly came back, and now Laila could make out the crack again, and it was the same old dull smile." Laila's decision to return to Kabul to help rebuild symbolizes gender identity as communal responsibility.**

The novel gives the message of hope and ambition when we see Laila working for her community that has been completely ruined, damaged and displaced by war. The character of Rasheed is contrasted with Ahmed Laila's father, who always worked against inequality and demonstrated how a loving husband and father should be. The unending resilience in the characters of Mariam and Laila gives a strong message of courage, compassion, competence and the power to challenge society

Thus we conclude that through trauma, "new forms of survival and identity develop. Although war amplifies gender-based conflict, it also creates contexts for resilience.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Publisher's Note:** All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

## References

- [1]. Ahmad, S., & Khan, R. (2020). *Patriarchy and gender roles in Afghan society*. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 12(3), 88–101
- [2]. Bates, L. (2020). Women resisting patriarchal control in dystopian fiction. *Journal of Modern Feminist Studies*, 14(2), 77–89.
- [3]. Akhtar, S. (2022). Trauma, resilience, and womanhood in Hosseini's novels. *International Journal of Literary Studies*, 9(2), 45–59.
- [4]. Jamal, F. (2021). Female solidarity as resistance in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. *Feminist Literary Review*, 14(1), 55–70.
- [5]. Grant, M. (2023). Female solidarity and empowerment in global women's literature. *International Review of Gender Narratives*, 11(1), 121–140.
- [6]. Mohammadi, L. (2022). Women, war, and identity in contemporary Afghan fiction. *Central Asian Literary Research*, 6(2), 101–120.
- [7]. Parker, J. (2022). Reconstructing identity after trauma: A comparative study of Hurston and Hosseini. *American Women Writers Review*, 16(4), 98–112.
- [8]. Rahimi, N. (2021). Gender and social identity in Afghanistan. *Journal of Middle Eastern Gender Studies*, 7(4), 210–228.
- [9]. Shabir, A. (2023). Sisterhood as liberation: A feminist reading of Hosseini. *Journal of Global Women's Studies*, 5(1), 112–125.
- [10]. Sultan, H. (2020). Representations of violence against women in Hosseini's works. *Studies in Modern Fiction*, 11(2), 66–79.
- [11]. Sultana, M. (2019). Cultural determinants of Afghan women's identity. *Asian Gender Quarterly*, 8(3), 23–40.
- [12]. Wilson, A. (2021). Motherhood, trauma, and selfhood. *Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 10(2), 55–72.