



Silence as Oppression and Moral Resistance in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

by Khaled Hosseini

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Abstract: *This article explores silence as a central motif in Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns. It argues that silence operates both as a tool of oppression and as a form of moral resistance in the lives of Afghan women. Through Mariam and Laila, the novel shows how patriarchy, war, and political extremism suppress female voices, while also revealing how silence can become a space of endurance, solidarity, and ethical choice. Hosseini ultimately redefines resistance as something that can exist even in quiet sacrifice.*

Key words: *silence; patriarchy; female resistance; war; moral agency*

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini tells the story of Afghan women whose lives are shaped by war, patriarchy, and rigid social norms. While the novel openly depicts physical violence, forced marriage, and political repression, one of its most powerful and recurring elements is silence. Women in the novel are repeatedly silenced—by their families, their husbands, and the state—yet Hosseini does not present silence as a simple absence of voice. Instead, silence becomes a complex emotional and moral space where suffering, endurance, and eventually resistance coexist. Through the characters of Mariam and Laila, Hosseini demonstrates that silence can function both as a tool of oppression and as a form of quiet moral strength, particularly in a society where female speech is consistently punished or ignored.

Mariam's life is shaped by silence long before she understands its meaning. As an illegitimate child, she grows up isolated from society, taught by her mother that endurance and quiet obedience are the only ways a woman can survive. Nana repeatedly warns Mariam that the world is cruel to women who speak too much or expect fairness. This early lesson deeply influences Mariam's character, convincing her that silence is not only necessary but deserved. Hosseini uses Mariam's upbringing to show how silence is taught and normalized within patriarchal family structures.

Mariam's forced marriage to Rasheed further reinforces this imposed muteness. Rasheed dominates the household through verbal aggression and physical violence, leaving no space for Mariam's opinions or emotions. Her silence becomes a defensive response; speaking would only invite further punishment. In this sense, silence is not a personal choice but a survival



mechanism shaped by fear. Hosseini illustrates how patriarchy operates not only through laws or traditions but through everyday domestic interactions that systematically erase women's voices.

Laila's experience initially contrasts with Mariam's. Raised by an educated father who values learning, Laila grows up encouraged to think critically and speak freely. However, war destroys this environment, and marriage to Rasheed forces her into the same silence Mariam has always known. Through Laila, Hosseini suggests that silence is not inherent to women's nature but socially enforced. Even a woman raised with confidence and voice can be silenced when political instability and male authority converge.

Silence in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* extends beyond the household and becomes institutional under the Taliban regime. Women are forbidden from working, studying, or even leaving their homes without male supervision. These restrictions effectively remove women from public life, turning silence into a legal requirement rather than a personal condition. Hosseini portrays this enforced muteness as one of the most damaging forms of violence, as it strips women of visibility and social existence.

The Taliban's public punishments and loud declarations stand in stark contrast to the quiet suffering of women. Authority is vocal, aggressive, and public, while pain is private and unacknowledged. This imbalance emphasizes how power controls not only bodies but narratives. By denying women the right to speak or be heard, the regime ensures that their suffering remains invisible. Hosseini uses this political context to show that silence is not accidental; it is deliberately produced to maintain control.

One of the most tragic aspects of Mariam's silence is how deeply she internalizes it. Years of neglect and abuse convince her that her pain is normal and unavoidable. She rarely questions Rasheed's cruelty, believing that suffering is her fate as a woman and as a "harami." This internal silence is perhaps more destructive than physical violence because it erases her sense of self-worth. Hosseini suggests that oppression is most effective when it convinces individuals that they do not deserve better.

Laila's silence, however, is marked by inner conflict. Unlike Mariam, she remembers a life where her voice mattered. Her enforced quietness is filled with frustration, grief, and suppressed anger. This difference highlights two forms of silence in the novel: one shaped by lifelong conditioning and the other by loss. In both cases, silence carries emotional weight; it is not emptiness, but a space filled with fear, memory, and endurance.

Despite its oppressive nature, silence in the novel gradually transforms into a form of resistance. The relationship between Mariam and Laila develops largely through unspoken understanding rather than verbal expression. Their shared silence becomes a bond, allowing them to support one another in a hostile environment. Hosseini portrays female solidarity as quiet but deeply powerful, challenging the idea that resistance must be loud or public.

Mariam's final act—killing Rasheed to save Laila—marks the most significant transformation of silence in the novel. For the first time, Mariam acts decisively rather than



enduring passively. Her decision to accept execution without protest is not an act of surrender but of agency. By choosing silence at this moment, Mariam controls the outcome of her life and protects those she loves. Her silence becomes intentional and moral, transforming her from a victim into a figure of quiet heroism.

Hosseini suggests that when speech is rendered meaningless or dangerous, actions become a language of their own. Mariam's silence speaks more powerfully than words ever could in a system designed to dismiss female voices. Through her sacrifice, Hosseini redefines resistance as something that can exist even in stillness.

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, silence is portrayed as both a weapon used against women and a shield they learn to wield. Hosseini presents silence as a product of patriarchy, war, and political extremism, showing how women are systematically denied voice and visibility. Yet he also reclaims silence as a space of endurance, solidarity, and moral courage. Through Mariam and Laila, the novel challenges conventional notions of power and resistance, suggesting that strength does not always announce itself loudly.

Ultimately, Hosseini honors the quiet resilience of women whose stories are often unheard. By giving narrative space to their silence, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* transforms what appears to be absence into meaning, reminding readers that even in the most oppressive conditions, dignity and agency can survive.

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