



RESEARCH ARTICLE

**CONTESTING POWER: A CULTURAL MATERIALIST ANALYSIS OF
RESISTANCE IN A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS**

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This paper applies Cultural Materialism to Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, exploring how the material conditions, gender roles, and power structures within Afghan society are both reflected and critiqued. The analysis focuses on the ways in which patriarchy, religion, and economic hardship intersect to shape the lives of women, particularly the characters Mariam and Laila. The paper also examines the novel's criticism on dominant ideologies and explores the potential for resistance within oppressive systems.

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural Materialism argues that literature not only reflects but also reinforces the power structures, ideologies, and economic relationships of its time. This approach sees every cultural artifact, including literature, as a product of its material environment, highlighting how texts can either support or challenge dominant ideologies. Cultural Materialism is particularly interested in the concept of hegemony—the cultural dominance of certain ideas or classes over others. By analyzing literature through this lens, we can uncover how texts support or subvert the power dynamics and social structures of their historical contexts.

One of the main contributions of Cultural Materialism is its focus on the relationship between the economic "base" of society and the cultural "superstructure," a concept rooted in Marxist theory. The "base" refers to the economic foundation of society, including production and class relations, while the "superstructure" includes the cultural and ideological elements that arise from and support the base. Cultural Materialists analyze how literature both influences and is influenced by this relationship, revealing the intricate connections between culture, power, and economics.

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a powerful novel set against Afghanistan's turbulent history. The story follows Mariam and Laila, two women whose lives intersect under tragic circumstances, leading to a deep and complex relationship that defies the rigid gender roles and societal expectations imposed upon them. Hosseini uses their experiences to explore the harsh realities of life in Afghanistan, especially for women, as they

navigate a world dominated by patriarchal values, religious conservatism, and the devastating impacts of war and economic instability. The novel is not just about individual struggles but also a broader commentary on the socio-political landscape of Afghanistan, delving into how gender, class, and power intersect to shape lives. Mariam and Laila's stories reflect the experiences of many Afghan women, who are often subjected to the whims of a patriarchal society that limits their freedom, agency, and opportunities. Through rich characterizations and vivid depictions of Afghan life, the novel offers a critical examination of the cultural and material conditions that sustain these oppressive structures.

THESIS STATEMENT

This paper examines Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* through the lens of Cultural Materialism, focusing on how the novel reflects and critiques the material conditions, gender roles, and power structures within Afghan society. By analyzing the depiction of patriarchal oppression, economic instability, and religious conservatism, this study explores how these barriers shape the lives of the characters and reinforce societal hierarchies. Moreover, the analysis considers how the novel mirrors the realities of life in Afghanistan while offering a critique of the ideologies and power dynamics that perpetuate oppression, especially for women. Through this Cultural Materialist perspective, the paper argues that Hosseini's work provides a nuanced and critical examination of the complex interplay between culture, power, and material conditions in a society marked by inequality and conflict.



LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Materialism posits that literature can serve as a tool for both maintaining and challenging dominant ideologies, making it a powerful site for examining the interplay between culture and power. One core tenet is its focus on ideology and hegemony. Ideology refers to the system of ideas and beliefs that justify the existing social order, while hegemony, as developed by Antonio Gramsci, refers to how dominant classes maintain control not only through force but also through consent, embedding their values within cultural institutions. Cultural Materialism is particularly interested in how literature and other cultural forms can either support or resist hegemonic control by revealing or concealing power mechanisms. Postcolonial literature often grapples with the material realities of colonial and postcolonial societies, including exploitation, oppression, and resistance. By examining how postcolonial texts engage with material conditions like economic disparities and cultural hegemony, Cultural Materialism can reveal how literature both reflects and challenges the legacies of colonialism. Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has received significant scholarly attention, with many analyses exploring its portrayal of gender dynamics, power structures, and Afghan society. Most scholarship focuses on the depiction of women's lives under patriarchal oppression and how war and political instability exacerbate these conditions. For example, several studies have examined how Afghan women endure both physical and psychological abuse at the hands of male authority figures and through the broader social and political systems governing their lives. One

prominent theme in the literature is the exploration of gender roles within Afghan society. Scholars highlight how Hosseini's portrayal of Mariam and Laila illuminates the rigid gender norms that restrict women's freedom and autonomy. Critics often focus on how the novel critiques the way Afghan women are confined to domestic spaces, denied access to education and economic opportunities, and subjected to violence and exploitation by men. These analyses underscore the novel's feminist themes, noting how Hosseini uses Mariam and Laila to challenge patriarchal ideologies and demonstrate women's resilience in the face of oppression.

Beyond gender, existing scholarship also explores the novel's treatment of power and authority. Researchers have analyzed how *A Thousand Splendid Suns* portrays the maintenance and enforcement of patriarchal power through cultural norms and state institutions, particularly under Taliban rule. The character of Rasheed, who controls Mariam and Laila through violence and coercion, is often interpreted as a representation of the broader societal structures that sustain male dominance and female subjugation. Scholars also evaluate how the novel critiques the use of religion as a tool for maintaining patriarchal control, especially through the Taliban's imposition of strict behavioral and dress codes on women.

Despite the substantial body of scholarship on *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, much of the analysis has focused on gender and power, with less attention to its economic dimensions. While some studies address the depiction of poverty and economic hardship, especially regarding women's experiences in war-torn Afghanistan, these analyses often focus more on



personal and emotional impacts than on the broader material conditions underlying these experiences. This leaves room for further exploration of how the novel engages with the material realities of Afghan society, particularly through a Cultural Materialist perspective.

GAP IN THE LITERATURE

A Thousand Splendid Suns has been extensively analyzed through feminist, psychoanalytic, and postcolonial lenses; there is a notable gap in the application of Cultural Materialism. Most existing scholarship focuses on the novel's portrayal of gender and power, particularly patriarchal oppression, but often overlooks the material conditions that underpin these dynamics. A Cultural Materialist approach, which emphasizes the role of economic factors in shaping culture and society, could provide new insights into the novel's depiction of Afghan society and the forces governing its characters' lives.

This paper addresses this gap by applying Cultural Materialism to *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, exploring how the novel reflects and critiques the material conditions, gender roles, and power structures in Afghan society. By examining the economic and social factors shaping the characters' experiences, this analysis offers a fresh perspective on how Hosseini's novel not only portrays individual struggles but also critiques the broader forces sustaining oppression in Afghanistan.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative research approach, ideal for examining the social, cultural, and ideological aspects of literary texts. Unlike quantitative methods

that rely on numbers and data, qualitative research focuses on understanding the deeper meaning within texts. In literary studies, this approach allows for a thorough exploration of themes, characters, and narrative structures, revealing how these elements reflect and critique broader social issues. The main method in this paper is close textual analysis, which involves carefully examining the text to understand elements like language, imagery, symbolism, narrative techniques, and character development. By focusing on these details, the analysis aims to uncover the deeper meanings within the text and how they relate to the social and political context in which the novel was written. In this study, close textual analysis will be applied to *A Thousand Splendid Suns* to explore how the novel portrays the material conditions, gender roles, and power structures in Afghan society. By looking closely at specific passages and character interactions, the paper will analyze how Hosseini's novel reflects the economic and social realities of Afghanistan and critiques the cultural forces shaping its characters' lives. This qualitative approach is particularly suited to this study because it allows for a nuanced understanding of how *A Thousand Splendid Suns* addresses issues of power, oppression, and resistance. Unlike quantitative methods that might overlook the intricacies of meaning, qualitative research focuses on interpreting the significance of these issues within the novel's context.

This study applies Cultural Materialism to *A Thousand Splendid Suns* to analyze the novel through the lens of material conditions, social structures, and cultural ideologies that define Afghan society. Cultural Materialism, influenced by Marxist theory,



looks at how literature reflects and critiques the socio-economic realities and power relations of its time. This approach examines the connection between the economic foundations of society and its cultural products, like literature. To apply Cultural Materialism, the study will first identify the key material conditions and social structures shown in the novel, such as economic hardships, patriarchal systems, and the influence of religious and cultural ideologies. The analysis will then explore how these factors are reflected in the story and character development. For example, the study will look at how women's economic dependency reinforces patriarchal control and how religious ideologies are used to justify gender oppression. In addition to reflecting Afghan society's material conditions and power structures, the novel also challenges these systems by highlighting the potential for resistance and change. The study will analyze moments where characters resist or subvert dominant ideologies and how the novel itself critiques the socio-political conditions it portrays. This approach will provide a comprehensive analysis of how *A Thousand Splendid Suns* reflects and critiques the material and ideological conditions of Afghan society, offering new insights into the novel's engagement with power dynamics and material realities.

GENDER AND PATRIARCHAL OPPRESSION

Mariam's character in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a poignant representation of the marginalization faced by women in Afghan society. From birth, Mariam is branded as a "harami" (illegitimate child), a status that relegates her to the fringes of society and predestines her to a life of suffering. Her illegitimacy is not just a personal misfortune but a reflection of

the rigid social structures that define Afghan society, where a woman's worth is often tied to her legitimacy and adherence to societal norms. Mariam's mother, Nana, instills in her the belief that she is destined for a life of hardship due to her birth status, encapsulating the internalized oppression many women in patriarchal society's experience. This marginalization is further compounded by her gender, as Afghan society's patriarchal norms severely limit women's opportunities and freedoms. Mariam's life trajectory—marked by forced marriage, domestic abuse, and social isolation—mirrors the experiences of countless women marginalized by a society that values them only in relation to men.

Rasheed, Mariam's husband, epitomizes the patriarchal authority that governs Afghan society. As a traditional male figure, Rasheed enforces gender roles through violence, control, and domination. His treatment of Mariam and later Laila reflects the broader societal norms that condone and perpetuate the subjugation of women. Rasheed's authority is rooted in traditional gender roles that dictate a woman's place in the home, her duty to obey her husband, and her lack of autonomy. He justifies his control over Mariam and Laila by invoking cultural and religious norms, illustrating how patriarchal ideology is maintained through the intersection of tradition and religion. Rasheed's character represents the larger patriarchal system that oppresses women in Afghanistan, where men's authority over women is often absolute and unquestioned. His violent enforcement of these roles, including physical abuse and strict control over the women's lives, highlights the ways in which patriarchal power is both personal and institutional.



In contrast to Mariam, Laila's character represents the potential for resistance against patriarchal oppression. Laila's education and awareness set her apart from many other women in her society, providing her with the tools to challenge the norms that confine her. Unlike Mariam, whose life is shaped by submission and survival, Laila actively seeks ways to resist the oppressive forces in her life. Her decision to marry Rasheed is initially one of survival, but it also becomes a strategic choice that allows her to protect her children and herself in a hostile environment. Laila's resistance is further demonstrated in her refusal to fully submit to Rasheed's control and her eventual decision to escape with her children, symbolizing a break from the oppressive structures that have defined her life. Through Laila's character, Hosseini illustrates that resistance to patriarchy is possible, even in the most repressive circumstances. Laila's journey from victim to survivor and resistor highlights the resilience and agency of women who, despite overwhelming odds, find ways to assert their dignity and autonomy.

The economic conditions depicted in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* exacerbate gender inequalities and further entrench patriarchal control. Afghanistan's history of conflict, including the Soviet invasion, civil war, and Taliban rule, has led to widespread poverty and economic instability. These harsh conditions disproportionately affect women, who are often the most vulnerable members of society. The novel portrays how economic hardship limits women's autonomy, forcing them into situations of dependency and subjugation. For example, Mariam's and Laila's economic dependency on Rasheed renders them powerless in many aspects of their

lives. Without financial independence, they are trapped in a cycle of abuse and exploitation, highlighting the intersection of economic and gender oppression. The novel shows that in a society where economic power is concentrated in the hands of men, women's lives are dictated by the whims of those who control the resources.

Rasheed's economic power over Mariam and Laila symbolizes the broader societal norms that reinforce patriarchal control. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, economic dependency is portrayed as a tool of control that men use to maintain their dominance over women. Rasheed's ability to provide for Mariam and Laila, albeit barely, gives him the leverage to enforce his authority and subjugate them. The women's lack of access to economic opportunities outside the home means that they have little choice but to endure Rasheed's abuse, illustrating how economic dependency can entrap women in abusive relationships. This dynamic reflects the broader societal reality in Afghanistan, where women's access to economic resources is severely limited by cultural and legal restrictions, further entrenching their subordinate status.

A Thousand Splendid Suns also explores how religious ideology is used to justify the oppression of women, particularly under the Taliban regime. The novel portrays the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law as a tool for enforcing strict gender roles and controlling women's behavior. Under the Taliban, women are required to wear the burqa, forbidden from working, and denied access to education—all under the guise of religious piety. Rasheed adopts these religious justifications to exert control over Mariam and Laila, forcing them to comply with



oppressive practices in the name of religious duty. The novel critiques this manipulation of religion, showing how it is used to legitimize patriarchal control and suppress women's rights. By portraying the Taliban's use of religion as a means of social control, Hosseini challenges the notion that these practices are inherent to Islam, instead highlighting how they result from a particular ideological interpretation that serves the interests of those in power.

The burqa, which Mariam and Laila are forced to wear, serves as a powerful symbol of oppression and control in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The burqa represents the physical and psychological constraints imposed on women by a patriarchal society. It is not only a garment but also a tool of erasure, obscuring women's identities and reinforcing their subjugation. Through the burqa, the novel illustrates how cultural and religious practices can be used to control women's bodies and limit their autonomy. The enforced wearing of the burqa under the Taliban regime becomes a symbol of the broader oppression faced by women in Afghanistan, where their visibility, mobility, and agency are tightly controlled by patriarchal norms. However, the novel also hints at moments of resistance, as Laila's occasional defiance of the burqa's restrictions symbolizes her rejection of the oppressive ideologies it represents.

Despite the pervasive oppression depicted in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the novel also portrays moments of resistance to inhumane religious and cultural rigidity. Laila's actions, in particular, demonstrate how women can resist the oppressive norms imposed on them, even within a repressive environment. Her education and awareness

empower her to question and challenge the status quo, whether by secretly listening to the radio, teaching her daughter, or ultimately escaping from Rasheed's control. These acts of resistance, though small and often covert, signify a rejection of the oppressive ideologies that seek to define and confine women's lives. By highlighting these moments, Hosseini suggests that even in the most repressive circumstances, there is room for agency and defiance. The novel's portrayal of resistance serves as a testament to the resilience and strength of women who, despite overwhelming forces against them, find ways to assert their dignity and fight for their freedom.

A Thousand Splendid Suns can be compared with other works of postcolonial Afghan literature, such as Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone* and Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, in how they reflect material conditions and social structures. Like Hosseini's novel, these works explore the intersections of gender, power, and social class in Afghan society, often focusing on how women navigate and resist patriarchal oppression. Rahimi's *The Patience Stone*, for example, also portrays the struggles of an Afghan woman trapped in an oppressive marriage, highlighting the cultural and religious ideologies that sustain her subjugation. Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* similarly examines the lives of Afghan women who challenge the rigid gender roles imposed on them, emphasizing the role of economic and social conditions in shaping their experiences. These comparisons demonstrate how postcolonial Afghan literature often critiques the material and ideological conditions that define



Afghan society, using the personal struggles of women to explore broader social issues.

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* makes a significant contribution to the discourse on gender, power, and social justice in Afghanistan. Through his portrayal of Mariam and Laila, Hosseini sheds light on the lived experiences of Afghan women, revealing the deep-rooted inequalities and oppressions they face. The novel's focus on the intersections of gender, class, and religion offers a nuanced critique of the societal structures that sustain these inequalities, challenging readers to confront the harsh realities of life in Afghanistan. Hosseini's work not only reflects the material and ideological conditions of Afghan society but also serves as a call to action, urging readers to recognize and address the injustices faced by women in similar contexts. By bringing these issues to the forefront of contemporary literature, Hosseini contributes to a broader understanding of the complexities of gender and power in postcolonial societies, highlighting the importance of resistance and the potential for change.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* profoundly reflects the material conditions and power structures that have historically defined Afghan society, particularly during periods of conflict and political turmoil. The novel vividly portrays the economic hardships that plague the lives of ordinary Afghans, with a specific focus on how these hardships exacerbate the oppression of women. Through Mariam and Laila, Hosseini explores how poverty and economic dependency make women more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. The narrative

reveals how economic instability, brought about by decades of war and political unrest, leaves women with limited options and forces them into subservient roles. This economic deprivation is intertwined with cultural and religious ideologies that reinforce patriarchal norms, creating a cycle of oppression that is difficult to escape. By focusing on these material conditions, the novel highlights how socio-economic factors contribute to maintaining gender inequality and social injustice in Afghanistan.

The depiction of material conditions in the novel is not limited to economic hardship but also includes the broader social structures that dictate the roles and behaviors of individuals. The rigid gender roles imposed on women, the lack of access to education and employment opportunities, and the strict control of women's mobility all serve to maintain the patriarchal order. These conditions are portrayed not as isolated issues but as part of a larger system of power that is deeply embedded in Afghan society. The novel reflects how material conditions, including economic, social, and cultural factors, work together to sustain the power structures that oppress women and other marginalized groups.

A Thousand Splendid Suns offers a sharp critique of the patriarchal and religious ideologies that perpetuate gender oppression in Afghan society. Hosseini's portrayal of characters like Rasheed and the Taliban highlights how these ideologies are used to justify the subjugation of women and maintain male dominance. The novel illustrates how religious beliefs, when manipulated by those in power, can become tools of control and oppression. For instance, the Taliban's enforcement of strict dress codes and the confinement of women to their homes



are presented as religious duties, but they serve to reinforce patriarchal authority and restrict women's freedoms.

The novel also critiques the cultural norms underpinning these religious justifications, showing how deeply ingrained beliefs about gender roles and family honor contribute to perpetuating violence against women. Mariam and Laila's experiences of domestic abuse are not just personal tragedies but reflections of a broader societal acceptance of male authority and female subordination. Hosseini exposes the hypocrisy and cruelty of a system that allows men to exercise unchecked power over women while claiming moral and religious superiority. Through this critique, the novel challenges readers to question the legitimacy of these ideologies and recognize the harm they cause to individuals and society.

Despite the pervasive oppression depicted in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the novel also explores the potential for resistance within oppressive systems. Both Mariam and Laila, in their own ways, embody this resistance, challenging the power structures that seek to control them. Mariam's act of killing Rasheed, while extreme, is a powerful assertion of her agency after years of subjugation. It is a moment of reclaiming power, not just for herself but for Laila and her children. This act of resistance is portrayed as a necessary and justified response to the violence and oppression she has endured, highlighting the novel's message that resistance, even in its most desperate forms, is a legitimate means of survival and liberation.

Laila's resistance is more subtle but equally significant. Her determination to educate her

children, her refusal to fully submit to Rasheed's authority, and her ultimate decision to escape with her children are all acts of defiance against the oppressive norms of her society. Laila's resistance is rooted in her belief in the possibility of a better future, both for herself and for her children. Through her character, the novel suggests that education, awareness, and solidarity are key tools in the fight against oppression. The bond between Mariam and Laila, forged in the crucible of shared suffering, becomes a source of strength for both women, demonstrating the power of collective resistance in the face of overwhelming adversity.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored how Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* reflects and critiques the material conditions, gender roles, and power structures within Afghan society through the lens of Cultural Materialism. The analysis has shown that the novel vividly portrays the socio-economic and cultural realities that shape its characters' lives, particularly how these realities perpetuate the oppression of women. By focusing on the material conditions of poverty, economic dependency, and social norms, the novel highlights the systemic nature of gender inequality in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the novel critiques the patriarchal and religious ideologies that justify and sustain this oppression, exposing how these ideologies control and subjugate women. Finally, the paper has examined the potential for resistance within these oppressive systems, as seen through Mariam and Laila, who challenge the power structures that seek to confine them.



A Thousand Splendid Suns makes a significant contribution to understanding gender, power, and social justice in a postcolonial context. Through its portrayal of Afghan women's lived experiences, the novel provides a powerful critique of the socio-political and cultural forces that perpetuate inequality and oppression. Hosseini's work not only reflects the harsh realities of life in Afghanistan but also offers a message of hope and resilience, emphasizing the importance of resistance and the possibility of change. By applying Cultural Materialism to this novel, we gain a deeper understanding of how literature can both reflect and challenge the material and ideological conditions of its time. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* stands as a testament to the power of storytelling in illuminating the struggles of marginalized groups and advocating for social justice.

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