

**PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED: APPRAISING CRITICAL
CONSCIOUSNESS, SOLIDARITY AND HUMANIZATION IN KHALED
HOSSEINI'S *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS***

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Abstract

*The present study analyzes Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) with particular emphasis on the concepts of critical consciousness, solidarity, and humanization. The study employs Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) as theoretical framework. The study argues that the narrative functions as a pedagogical space where oppression is internalized, questioned, and ultimately resisted. The study highlights patriarchal domination, political violence, and ideological control. Drawing on Freire's critique of false consciousness and the banking model of domination, the study examines how awareness of structural injustice emerges through lived experience and collective struggle. It further contends that solidarity operates as a transformative force that enables resistance and disrupts systems of dehumanization. The analysis demonstrates that acts of resistance in the novel are not merely individual reactions to suffering but constitute a broader process of humanization, restoring agency, dignity, and ethical subjectivity. The study contributes to literary and pedagogical perspectives by highlighting how fictional narratives can illuminate processes of liberation and critical awakening under oppressive conditions.*

Keywords

Critical Consciousness, Humanization, Ideological Oppression, Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Patriarchy, Resistance, Solidarity

INTRODUCTION

Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) is a profound narrative set against the backdrop of Afghanistan's volatile history, spanning the Soviet invasion of the 1980s, the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s, and the subsequent impact of the U.S. intervention in the early 2000s. The novel follows the intertwined lives of Mariam and Laila, two women from distinct socio-cultural backgrounds, whose paths converge through fate. Over time, their evolving relationship becomes a source of mutual security and love, offering them both a sense of belonging and emotional refuge that had long eluded them. Khaled Hosseini, being a renowned Afghan-American author, skillfully blends personal stories with broader historical events, illustrating how the turmoil of Afghanistan's recent past, marked by violence, displacement, and societal upheaval, impacts the lives of ordinary people. Through his portrayal of Mariam and Laila's struggles, Hosseini depicts the systemic deep-rooted history of gender based violence as well as the resilience of women who, despite being trapped in cycles of oppression, find ways to resist and reclaim their humanity and autonomy. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* offers an insightful theoretical framework for understanding the experiences of individuals living under oppressive systems, such as those depicted in Hosseini's novel. Freire's emphasis on critical consciousness, the role of education in liberation, and the

need for solidarity among the oppressed aligns closely with the challenges faced by the novel's protagonists. By applying Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, this study tends to explore how Mariam and Laila's transformation reflects the potential for resistance, empowerment, and solidarity in times of war and oppression. Freire's theory will guide this analysis, highlighting how education and collective action can offer pathways to liberation even in the most oppressive contexts.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

There are extensive critical engagement with Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), much of the existing scholarship primarily examines the novel through feminist, postcolonial, trauma, and human rights perspectives. While these approaches effectively highlight gender oppression, war, and patriarchal violence in Afghan society, they often overlook the pedagogical dimensions of oppression and resistance embedded within the narrative. In particular, there is limited scholarly attention to how the characters' transformations reflect Paulo Freire's concepts of critical consciousness, solidarity, and humanization. This gap becomes significant because Hosseini's portrayal of Mariam and Laila does not merely depict suffering but illustrates a gradual process of awareness, resistance, and ethical agency which are the central concerns of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Without applying a Freirean lens, the novel's deeper engagement with consciousness-raising, collective struggle, and the reclamation of humanity remains underexplored. Therefore, this study addresses the need to analyze *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as a narrative of pedagogical awakening, where oppressed individuals move from internalized submission toward collective resistance and humanization.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To examine how Mariam and Laila's experiences reflect the development of critical consciousness as conceptualized by Paulo Freire
- To analyze the role of solidarity and collective action in enabling resistance against patriarchal and political oppression in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*
- To explore how acts of resistance in the novel contribute to the process of humanization and the reclamation of dignity under oppressive conditions

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has largely focused on themes of gender oppression, patriarchy, trauma, and the socio-political realities of Afghanistan. Feminist critics argue that the novel foregrounds the systemic marginalization of women and exposes how patriarchal traditions are reinforced through cultural, religious, and political institutions. For instance, Kakutani (2007) emphasizes that Hosseini presents Afghan women not merely as victims but as resilient figures whose emotional bonds enable survival under extreme conditions. Similarly, Hirsch (2012) contends that the novel highlights women's endurance and moral strength in a society structured by violence and gendered exclusion.

Postcolonial readings of the novel situate *A Thousand Splendid Suns* within Afghanistan's turbulent history, examining how war, displacement, and foreign intervention shape personal identities. Ashraf (2014) argues that Hosseini intertwines private suffering with national trauma, demonstrating how political instability intensifies domestic oppression. These studies successfully contextualize the novel within Afghanistan's socio-historical framework but often prioritize political critique over the internal processes of consciousness and resistance.

Trauma-focused analyses further explore how prolonged exposure to violence affects the psychological development of characters. Balaev (2014) suggests that Hosseini's narrative illustrates trauma as both a destructive and transformative force, particularly in shaping female subjectivity. While such readings acknowledge transformation, they seldom theorize it as a process of critical awakening grounded in collective struggle.

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has been widely applied in educational theory, cultural studies, and liberation theology, emphasizing the role of critical consciousness (*conscientização*) in challenging oppressive systems (Freire 1970). Scholars such as McLaren (2000) and Giroux (2011) expand Freire's ideas beyond formal education, arguing that literature and cultural texts function as pedagogical spaces where oppressed subjects learn to name and resist domination. However, the application of Freirean pedagogy to literary texts, particularly South Asian or Middle Eastern fiction which remains limited.

This study bridges that gap by reading *A Thousand Splendid Suns* through Freire's framework, arguing that Mariam and Laila's journeys reflect a pedagogical process of awakening, solidarity, and humanization. By integrating Freire's theory with literary analysis, this research contributes to existing scholarship by demonstrating how Hosseini's novel operates as a narrative of liberation, where personal resistance becomes a collective and ethical act.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher, is best known for his influential work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), during a period of significant social and political upheaval in Latin America. Written against the backdrop of authoritarian regimes and widespread inequality, Freire's theory offers a radical rethinking of education, advocating for the liberation of oppressed groups through critical consciousness and collective action. His ideas emerged in the midst of the civil rights movements and revolutionary struggles of the 1960s, which sought to challenge entrenched power structures and empower marginalized communities. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* emphasizes the importance of education as a tool for liberation, rejecting the traditional banking model of education, where knowledge is deposited into passive students. Instead, Freire advocates for a dialogical model in which teachers and students engage in mutual learning, fostering critical thinking and awareness. This process of learning and unlearning is central to Freire's concept of "critical consciousness" (*conscientização*), which involves the oppressed becoming aware of the societal structures that dehumanize them. Freire argues that this awareness is the first step toward empowerment and liberation. Freire's theory also places a strong emphasis on "solidarity and collective action". He believes that the oppressed can only achieve true liberation when they come together and engage in collective struggle against the forces that oppress them. Moreover, Freire's concept of "humanization" is key to his pedagogy. He posits that oppression dehumanizes both the oppressed and the oppressors. Therefore, the ultimate goal of education and social transformation is the restoration of humanity to both parties through mutual recognition, respect, and solidarity.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a heart-wrenching novel, revolving around the lives of Mariam and Laila. Mariam, born out of wedlock and burdened with shame, suffers first from the distinctive behavior of her mother and then under the oppressive control of her abusive husband, Rasheed. Laila, a bright and optimistic young girl, faces the tragic loss of

her parents and is forced into a similar marriage with Rasheed for survival. Despite their initially strained relationship, Mariam and Laila find strength in their bond, navigating the complexities of war, patriarchy, and loss together. As they resist Rasheed's exploitations, their friendship becomes a symbol of hope, defiance, and solidarity in the face of overwhelming oppression. The novel combines the themes of love, sacrifice, and the resilience of the human spirit amid the devastation of war and societal injustice. Consequently, the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* offers a fertile ground for applying Freire's concepts of education, critical consciousness, solidarity, and humanization, particularly in the context of the struggles faced by Laila and Mariam. Both women live in a society that systematically oppresses them, not only because of their gender but also due to the political and social systems that limit their freedom and autonomy. Freire's ideas provide an insightful framework for analyzing their transformation from passive victims of oppression to active agents of resistance.

6.1. Critical Consciousness: The Awakening of Mariam and Laila

The development of critical consciousness in both Mariam and Laila is central to the novel's narrative. Freire's theory suggests that the oppressed can only begin to resist once they understand the nature of their oppression. For Mariam, this understanding is delayed, as she initially accepts her fate as a reflection of her worthlessness. Mariam's upbringing casted the long-lasting effects of False Consciousness on her. Mariam's relationship with Nana and the subsequent dynamics with Jalil illustrate how the construction of identity and self-worth, particularly in women, is influenced by patriarchal norms and the internalization of these ideologies. Mariam's realization of her own "harami" status as imposed by society is a direct consequence of these ideologies. It was Jalil, her father, her only hope and after getting rejected at the doorstep of her father's house, she accepted her fate. Her struggle to comprehend her worth in a society that devalues her identity reflects the impact of false consciousness, as she internalizes these external judgments and comes to believe that she is inferior or undeserving. Her mother had the first hand in this internalization; "A man's heart is a wretched, wretched thing, Mariam. It isn't like a mother's womb. It won't bleed, it won't stretch to make room for you. I'm the only one who loves you. I'm all you have in this world, Mariam, and when I'm gone, you'll have nothing. You'll have nothing. You are nothing!" (Hosseini 2007, 19) This echoes the way oppressive ideologies work through the banking model, in this case, gendered ideologies that dictate a woman's value based on her familial and social status, rendering her powerless to resist the oppressive systems that shape her. The consistent devaluation of Mariam's existence by the people around her, from her mother's angry remarks to her stepfather's neglect, exemplifies how these false ideologies shape Mariam's perception of herself. This belief in her own insignificance is the core of false consciousness: it teaches her to accept oppression as an inherent part of her identity.

Additionally, when Mariam married a man much older than her, she took time but eventually accepted him and his ideologies too: "But I'm 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? Mariam didn't mind. In truth, she was even flattered. Rasheed saw sanctity in what they had together. Her honor, her namoos, was something worth guarding to him. She felt prized by his protectiveness. Treasured and significant" (47) A girl abandoned by her own parents, Mariam romanticized the attention she received from her husband, even if it was misguided. She

convinced herself that his possessiveness and control were signs of love and care. And this is how false consciousness captured her for years. However, the reality unfolded when she found nude pictures of other women in her husband's drawer. This discovery shattered her illusions, revealing the harsh truth of Rasheed's abuse.

Moreover, Laila, much like Mariam, experiences a period of false consciousness, a state in which she accepts the ideologies imposed upon her without critical thought or resistance. Although she comes from a well-educated family still in her early years, she accepts the reality of her societal role and the expectations placed upon her, not fully recognizing the potential for agency. This began when she is taught by Shanzai (Khala Rangmaal), a teacher who enforces a rigid ideological framework that discourages critical thinking. Khala Rangmaal imposes her views on the students, particularly concerning the political climate, and enforces loyalty to the state through commands like; "You must lend your own hand, children. You must report anyone who might know about these rebels. It's your duty." (71) Laila, as a young student, internalizes this notion without questioning, learning to accept the established order without critically assessing it. Her teacher enforces a false consciousness through Freire's banking model, where students are treated as empty vessels, required to absorb ideologies rather than engage with them. This is clear when Khala Rangmaal expresses her belief that: "everyone in Afghanistan would be happy... once the anti-progressives, the backward bandits, were defeated" (71) this kind of narrative has no room for dissent or questioning. Laila's passive acceptance of this worldview reflects the power of this indoctrination. This pattern of ideological submission becomes even more pronounced as she grows older and marries Rasheed, where her false consciousness is perpetuated by his oppressive control. Just as Khala Rangmaal reinforces a singular narrative in the classroom, Rasheed imposes his rigid beliefs onto Laila, convincing her that her existence is only valuable if she submits to him. Laila's upbringing had never prepared her to willingly endure such enslavement. However, the devastating loss of her parents and the societal accusations surrounding her pregnancy left her with no choice but to accept Rasheed's offer. Adding to her despair, Rasheed further manipulated her by fabricating news of Tariq's death, exploiting her vulnerability and isolating her emotionally. This web of manipulation and coercion trapped Laila in a state where she felt resigned to her circumstances, mistaking survival for acceptance. Meanwhile, with the birth of her daughter Aziza, Laila regained her critical consciousness and tried to run away from this trap but failed miserably.

Furthermore, both Mariam and Laila live within a system of patriarchal oppression, where they internalize the societal norms that dictate their roles as wives and mothers. However, as they experience Rasheed's escalating abuse, they begin to see the deeper implications of their oppression. This awakening, in Freire's terms, is a shift from false consciousness to critical consciousness, where they start to understand not only their suffering but also the need to challenge the systems that sustain it. Mariam's moment of awakening is profound. Reflecting on her years with Rasheed, she asks; "Had I been a deceitful wife? A complacent wife? A dishonorable woman? Discreditable? Vulgar?" (209) Internal questioning signifies her growing awareness of the injustice she has endured and her recognition of Rasheed's cruelty. The questioning is not only a moment of personal reflection but an awakening to the oppressive forces at play. Mariam's decision to take action against Rasheed is the ultimate expression of critical consciousness. As she prepares to strike him with the shovel, she reflects: "this is the first time that she is deciding the course of her own life" (211) This powerful moment symbolizes her

final break from passivity and her embrace of active resistance, a defining feature of critical consciousness: “He’s 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.” (210) Similarly, Laila’s realization of her oppressed state also emerges as she grapples with Rasheed’s violence. Her act of defiance, when she punches Rasheed after a brutal beating, is a direct response to her growing awareness of her own agency: “At one point, Laila ducked and managed to land a punch across his ear, which made him spit a curse and pursue her even more relentlessly” (209). This act marks a significant moment in Laila’s awakening, where she begins to realize that she is capable of resisting the patriarchal violence inflicted upon her.

Hence, both women’s awakening is framed by their relationship with each other. Their shared experiences of abuse and suffering foster a sense of mutual understanding that sparks their critical consciousness. Mariam’s final act of violence against Rasheed, killing him in an attempt to protect Laila, marks the culmination of her transformation into an active agent of resistance. This is the development of Freire’s concept of conscientização, as Mariam’s decision to act is informed by her new understanding of her oppression and the power she possesses to change it.

6.2. Solidarity and Collective Action: The Power of Unity

The concept of solidarity and collective action is the most significant aspect of Freire’s theory as it is central to the women’s empowerment in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Mariam and Laila’s relationship evolves from one of mutual suspicion to profound solidarity. This bond between the two women becomes the basis for their collective resistance against Rasheed. Their solidarity is not just emotional support but an active, ongoing process of shared struggle. Laila’s act of resistance, when she hits Rasheed with a glass, while he was about to beat Mariam, serves as a catalyst for their solidarity. As the novel describes; “Laila ducked and managed to land a punch across his ear...she watched Laila’s hand rise overhead, hold, then come swooping down against the side of his face” (209) this moment signifies the beginning of their mutual rebellion, and Laila’s courage in the face of Rasheed’s violence strengthens their bond. Soon after that they both resolved their envy as Mariam admitted that she was grateful for Laila’s courage, as no one ever protected her the way Laila did.

Moreover, Mariam, who had long been passive in the face of Rasheed’s abuse, is emboldened by Laila’s defiance. She witnesses Laila’s struggle and becomes determined to protect her, in order to return the favor. When she finally takes action to save Laila’s life, the text describes her resolve: “Mariam steadied her feet and tightened her grip around the shovel’s handle. She raised it. She said his name. She wanted him to see. ‘Rasheed’ (210) this moment demonstrates Mariam’s growing solidarity with Laila, as she acts not only for her own survival but for Laila’s as well. The two women’s solidarity becomes a powerful force capable of challenging Rasheed’s tyranny. Not only is this, but the way Mariam handles the situation afterward truly remarkable. She selflessly sacrifices herself for the better future of Laila and her children, ensuring their escape from Kabul and taking the entire blame for the murder upon herself to protect them. Mariam’s unwavering courage and ultimate act of solidarity embody her transformation into a beacon of strength, showcasing her profound love and commitment to those she holds dear. In this sense, through their collective defiance of Rasheed’s authority, Mariam

and Laila embody Freire's belief that liberation can only be achieved when the oppressed join forces to challenge the systems that oppress them. Their solidarity is not limited to resistance against Rasheed; it becomes a broader critique of the patriarchal structures that dehumanize women in Afghan society.

6.3. Humanization: Reclaiming Dignity through Resistance

The concept of humanization is deeply intertwined with the resistance displayed by Mariam and Laila in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Paulo Freire's concept of humanization emphasizes reclaiming dignity and agency in the face of oppression. Mariam and Laila's struggles demonstrate their determination to reject dehumanization and assert their humanity, both in their personal lives and in their broader contributions to society. Mariam's journey of humanization begins with accepting the love from little Aziza, she adores the love of Laila and Aziza with her. This eventually led her to reclaim her freedom. Years of abuse culminate in a moment of profound agency when she takes action to protect Laila and her children. The text vividly captures the moment: "Mariam steadied her feet and tightened her grip around the shovel's handle. She raised it. She said his name. She wanted him to see. 'Rasheed.' He looked up. Mariam swung. She hit him across the temple. The blow knocked him off Laila" (210) this act is more than self-defense, it is Mariam's assertion of her humanity after years of being treated as less than human. It represents her refusal to be a passive victim, reclaiming her dignity and power through resistance.

Moreover, Laila's experiences also highlight the theme of humanization. Despite enduring immense physical and emotional suffering, she refuses to succumb to dehumanization. A powerful example of this is her relentless fight to see her daughter, Aziza, at the orphanage, even when it places her in danger. The Taliban's enforcement of strict rules regarding women's movements without a male companion leads to her being beaten for simply wanting to visit her daughter: One day, a young Talib beat Laila with a radio antenna. When he was done, he gave a final whack to the back of her neck and said: "I see you again, I'll beat you until your mother's milk leaks out of your bones" (192). This scene starkly portrays the dehumanization imposed by oppressive regimes, where women are reduced to objects of control. However, Laila's resilience in continuing to visit Aziza, despite the risk, underscores her refusal to accept this subjugation, exemplifying Freire's assertion that humanization is achieved through struggle and resistance. After the war, Laila's return to Kabul to serve her nation further highlights her commitment to humanization, not just for herself but for her community. Inspired by her parents' dreams of a better Afghanistan, Laila renovates the orphanage and dedicates her life to the wellbeing of the children there. This act symbolizes Laila's transformation from a survivor of violence to a leader and nurturer who actively works to rebuild her nation and uplift its most vulnerable citizens. It is a powerful testament to the humanizing effect of resistance and collective action, as Laila reclaims her agency not just for herself but for the future of her community. Finally, Mariam's ultimate sacrifice, taking responsibility for Rasheed's death, stands as a profound act of humanization. Her choice to ensure Laila's freedom, even at the cost of her life, is a declaration of her worth and agency. Through these acts, both women reject the roles of victims imposed upon them and assert their right to live with dignity. Mariam and Laila embody Freire's vision of humanization as the reclamation of agency and dignity through struggle.

CONCLUSION

Khaled Hosseini masterfully portrays the resilience and resistance of two women, Mariam and Laila, as they navigate the oppressive structures of a patriarchal society. Using Paulo Freire's framework from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, this analysis has explored the themes of critical consciousness, solidarity, and humanization and discussed how the characters transcend their circumstances. Mariam and Laila's journeys from false consciousness to awakened agency highlight the transformative power of education, experience, and mutual support. Mariam, once isolated and resigned to her fate, finds purpose and dignity through her solidarity with Laila, culminating in her ultimate sacrifice, a powerful assertion of agency and humanity. Similarly, Laila's resilience and her eventual return to Kabul to rebuild the orphanage embody the essence of humanization, where the oppressed not only reclaim their own dignity but also work toward the betterment of their community. The study accentuates that literature serve as a mirror to societal structures, inviting readers to reflect on the conditions of the oppressed and inspiring them to envision a world where humanization triumphs over dehumanization.

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