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Exploring the Theme of Sisterhood in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Deborah Rodriguez's *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul*

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Abstract

*This article explores the representation of female solidarity in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) and Deborah Rodriguez's *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* (2011). Set against the backdrop of war-torn Afghanistan, both novels depict women navigating societal constraints and the brutality of conflict. The analysis focuses on how sisterhood emerges as a crucial tool for survival, fostering resilience and empowering women to defy limitations. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam and Laila's enduring bond offers emotional support and allows them to resist oppression. *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* portrays a broader network of women from diverse backgrounds who find solidarity and purpose within a Kabul coffee shop. Within the patriarchal confines of Afghan society, these acts of mutual aid transcend cultural and social barriers. The women in both novels support each other's physical and emotional well-being, defying expectations that restrict female agency. By working together, they challenge the status quo and carve out spaces where women can experience safety, connection, and empowerment.*

Keywords: Afghanistan, Sisterhood, Feminism, Female Solidarity, Resilience.

Introduction

Afghanistan presents a diverse culture, history, and tradition. Its landscape, with rugged mountains and sweeping deserts, mirrors the resilience and strength of its people. Yet, beneath its picturesque exterior lies a nation plagued by political instability, war, and the oppression of women. Its population of 25 million is predominantly Pashtun, with significant Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek minorities. Islam dominates, with Sunnis forming the vast majority. The novels analyzed here depict Afghan women's lives against this backdrop of turmoil. Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) explores the intertwined narratives of Mariam and Laila, Afghan women whose lives are shaped by war and societal upheaval. Spanning from the 1960s to the early 2000s, the novel depicts the Soviet invasion, the rise of the Mujahideen, civil war, and the Taliban's brutal rule. Through Mariam and Laila's experiences,

Hosseini portrays the resilience of Afghan women facing violence, displacement, and oppression. Deborah Rodriguez's *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* (2011) unfolds within a Kabul cafe, a haven for a diverse clientele brought together by war. Sunny, the American owner, navigates challenges amidst instability. The narrative follows characters like Yazmina, a young Afghan woman with a secret, and Isabel, a journalist, showcasing the struggles of those caught in the conflict. Rodriguez emphasizes the power of human connection and the formation of unlikely bonds that foster hope and solidarity. In recent years, the representation of women in war zones has gained importance. Afghanistan serves as a stark example of the challenges women face in war zones. The concept of sisterhood transcends biological ties encompassing a broader sense of solidarity amongst women. Shared experiences, beliefs, or social positions can forge these connections, contributing to collective identity and resilience. Sisterhood manifests in various forms, offering emotional support and practical strategies for navigating challenges. While related to feminism's pursuit of gender equality, sisterhood emphasizes solidarity built on shared experiences not solely on gender. Sisterhood, in such situations transcends theory and becomes a tangible tool for survival. These experiences forge an unbreakable bond, offering emotional support and strategies to navigate the harsh realities of war. This article will explore how the women in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* utilize sisterhood to navigate and survive war-torn Afghanistan.

Sisterhood as a Weapon of Survival in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

Khaled Hosseini's novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, delves into the plight of women in Afghanistan, particularly focusing on Mariam and Laila. The narrative exposes the harsh realities faced by these protagonists within the confines of their homes and under the oppressive rule of the Taliban regime. Hosseini sheds light on the power dynamics within Afghan society, highlighting the societal limitations placed on women and the prevalence of domestic violence. However, the novel also offers a glimmer of hope through the portrayal of an enduring sisterhood that blossoms between Mariam and Laila.

The story opens by introducing the societal struggles faced by women in Afghanistan. Mariam, an illegitimate child bounded by marginalization and the limitations imposed by a patriarchal system. Laila, initially raised in a loving and progressive household, experiences a drastic shift in her life due to the war. Both women find themselves forced into marriages with Rasheed, a tyrannical and abusive husband. Initially, their encounters are marked by strained silences and a sense of competition fueled by Rasheed's manipulation. However, as they share their experience of oppression and loss, a sense of empathy begins to develop. This is further nurtured by the birth of Laila's daughter, Aziza. Witnessing Laila's unwavering love for Aziza evokes a maternal instinct within Mariam, who has long yearned for a child of her own.

Their shared struggles against Rasheed's cruelty further solidify their bond. A turning point occurs when Laila defends Mariam from physical abuse. This act of defiance strengthens their trust in each other and paves the way for open communication. They share the truth about their pasts revealing the vulnerabilities and hardships they have endured. This creates a deeper understanding and a sense of solidarity. United by their sisterhood Mariam and Laila attempt to escape Rasheed's and Afghanistan's oppressive environment. Their plan is thwarted and they face the consequences of Rasheed's wrath. Witnessing Laila's suffering ignites a sense of fierce protectiveness within Mariam culminating in a selfless act where she defends Laila from further abuse. This event marks a pivotal transformation for Mariam, who sheds her passive demeanor and actively resists oppression.

The defining moment of their sisterhood arrives when the truth about Laila's former love, Tariq, surfaces. Enraged by this revelation, Rasheed attacks Laila. Unable to bear witness to the brutality

any longer, Mariam intervenes. This act of defiance is fueled by years of suppressed anger and a newfound sense of self-worth through sisterhood. Mariam recognizes the injustice she has endured and refuses to be a bystander to Laila's suffering. Driven by a desire to protect Laila and Aziza, Mariam makes a life-altering decision. In a desperate act, she kills Rasheed, prioritizing the safety of her newfound family over her own well-being. This act, though born out of a dire situation, signifies Mariam's claim to agency and her refusal to submit to oppression.

The novel's conclusion paints a poignant picture of the harsh realities faced by women in Afghanistan. Despite taking responsibility for Rasheed's death, Mariam is subjected to a public execution, highlighting the lack of legal recourse and the societal norms that deny women a fair trial. However, Mariam's final moments are marked by a sense of peace and acceptance. She finds solace in the love and connection she shared with Laila and the children.

A Thousand Splendid Suns offers a powerful testament to the transformative power of sisterhood. In a world that seeks to diminish and control women, Mariam and Laila find strength and solace in each other. Their bond empowers them to resist oppression, discover meaning in their shared struggles, and ultimately, transcend the limitations imposed by their circumstances. Mariam's sacrifice stands as a symbolic act of defiance, a lasting testament to the enduring power of sisterhood in the face of oppression. The shared experiences of violence and societal constraints, as highlighted by Ann Whitehead's work *Women's Solidarity - and Divisions Among Women*, become the foundation for a powerful bond that allows Mariam and Laila to not only survive but also find moments of joy and connection within a harsh reality.

Sisterhood as a Tool of Survival in *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul*

Deborah Rodriguez sets the novel, *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* against the backdrop of recent political unrest in Afghanistan around the year 2003. The narrative centers around five women from diverse backgrounds who forge an alliance within a popular Kabul coffee shop. Sunny, the American proprietor, establishes the shop as a haven for cultural exchange, where Afghans and Westerners can interact freely. Halajan, the Afghan owner of the building, embodies a progressive mindset despite her age, challenging restrictive social norms. Yasmina, a young woman fleeing danger from the mountains, finds refuge and employment through Sunny's intervention. Isabel, a London journalist, strives to create impactful reportage, evolving to understand the necessity of action alongside documentation. Candace, a wealthy American accustomed to a life of privilege, relocates to Kabul with her Afghan partner Wakil. Through their interconnected experiences, the novel explores how female camaraderie fosters resilience and empowers these women to navigate a challenging environment.

The novel introduces Yazmina, a vulnerable young woman targeted by a drug lord to settle her uncle's debt, highlighting the precarious situation of Afghan women who are seen as mere commodities. Later, Yazmina's pregnancy with her deceased husband's child compels the thugs to abandon her. Seeking refuge at the Women's Ministry, Yazmina encounters Sunny, the proprietor of the Kabul coffee shop. Sunny deduces Yazmina's demeanor, particularly the protective way she cradles her stomach and figures that she is with child. Despite potential disruptions it could cause to her business and her stay in the country by taking her in, Sunny prioritizes Yazmina's well-being offering refuge and employment. This act of compassion transcends cultural differences and emphasizes the power of women supporting each other in a patriarchal society. Yazmina's silent gratitude and acceptance of Sunny's help highlight the desperate circumstances that demand such dependence. Their initial interaction exemplifies the power of female solidarity in providing immediate security and a pathway to rebuilding a life in a dangerous environment. The narrative employs dual perspectives, native and westerner. This approach illuminates the social constraints

placed on Afghan women. Sunny observes how cultural norms dictate behavior in public and private spheres, requiring women to be veiled and escorted by men. Even as a foreigner Sunny attempts to comply with these expectations for her own safety. The coffee shop serves as a sanctuary for women, a concept born from Sunny's strategic decision to cater to UN employees. To secure UN approval, doubling her clients, the cafe required 13-foot walls and UN safety certification. To raise funds for the construction, Sunny hosts speaker events, attracting new customers. Dr. Ramita Malik, the speaker, sheds light on the concerning health realities of Afghan women. This event marks the introduction of Isabel and Candace, who forge a bond with Sunny and Yazmina that night. These Wednesday gatherings become a recurring event, cultivating a sense of community built on common experiences. The coffee shop transcends its commercial purpose transforming into a safe space where women from diverse backgrounds can connect, share experiences, and offer mutual support while navigating the complexities of Afghan society.

An intergenerational bond between Halajan and Yazmina develops despite the vast age difference because of their mutual connection of finding solace in poems of Rumi. Halajan, a widow in her sixties, embodies defiance against societal norms evidenced by her unconventional appearance, marked by short hair and cigarette smoking, signifies a personal rebellion against Taliban restrictions on women's lives. This act of defiance contrasts with the traditional views of her son, Ahmet. He exemplifies the patriarchal system, disapproving of Sunny's inclusivity, specifically her acceptance of minority group people, Yazmina, a Nuristani and Bashir Hadi, a Hazara and employing them. Similarly, he condemns his mother's secret romance with Rashif and her willingness to defy societal expectations regarding female behavior, particularly for widows. Yazmina and Halajan forge a bond in exchange for secrecy regarding her pregnancy. Yazmina educates Halajan empowering her through literacy. By assisting Halajan with literacy and facilitating her romantic connection, Yazmina empowers Halajan to exercise a degree of agency. In turn, Halajan offers Yazmina a safe haven and protects her secret, developing a sense of trust and mutual understanding.

Halajan uses her experience in being a midwife and with Sunny's assistance to help Yazmina with her childbirth. When Ahmet who has budding feelings for Yazmina witnesses this, he lashes out against Yazmina calling her a "whore" but Sunny and Halajan collectively claim ownership of Yazmina's child stating that "it is my baby too" deflecting potential social condemnation. Initially opposed to Yazmina's situation due to societal pressures surrounding the birth of a girl child, Ahmet eventually undergoes a transformation. He overcomes his ingrained traditions and publicly acknowledges his love for Yazmina, accepting her child as his own. This shift signifies the potential for positive male influence where traditional views are challenged by the strength and unity displayed by the female characters. The women empower Yazmina further by recognizing her sewing skills. Isabel and Candace, provide her the opportunity to create dresses. This fosters self-worth and establishes economic self-reliance. For Yazmina sewing becomes a token of gratitude for the safe haven provided by all of them, reinforcing the bonds of sisterhood.

Isabel, the British journalist, becomes determined to expose the human rights abuses faced by women imprisoned in Pul-e-Charkhi for minor offenses. Her investigation leads to a shocking discovery that Candace's lover, Wakil, is secretly training young Pashtun boys as Taliban fighters under the guise of an orphanage. This revelation creates a deep conflict for Candace, forcing her to choose between love and justice. Tragedy strikes when Isabel, attempting to warn Candace, is caught in a suicide bombing orchestrated by one of Wakil's students. In a selfless act of sisterhood, Isabel shields Candace, sacrificing her own life. This event serves as a crucial moment for Candace. Deeply affected by Isabel's death, she transcends her personal feelings and embraces Isabel's mission vowing to expose the truth about Wakil's activities. Candace's transformation highlights

the ability of the women to prioritize collective well-being and social justice even in the face of personal loss and emotional turmoil.

The pivotal point of emphasis of female networking is evidenced by the rescue of Yazmina's sister, Layla, who is still stuck in her uncle's house in Nuristan. All the five women come together to strategize a plan to rescue Layla from the same thugs who kidnapped Yazmina. Sunny leverages her past relationships with Tommy and the help of her present lover Jack in seeking their assistance in rescuing Layla. Isabel and Candace help with arranging resources. This act demonstrates the women's willingness to utilize their combined social capital even through unconventional means to ensure the safety of a member of their sisterhood. Deborah Rodriguez's *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* portrays the strength found in female solidarity despite cultural and social barriers, these women forge a powerful bond. They offer each other refuge, support, and the courage to defy societal expectations. The novel underscores the potential for positive change when women unite, demonstrating that sisterhood can be a transformative tool for survival.

Conclusion

Both the novels, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* navigate the complexities of war-torn Afghanistan through the lens of female solidarity, the former in private sphere and the later in public sphere. Sisterhood emerges as a powerful tool for survival, fostering resilience and enabling women to defy societal limitations. Hosseini's novel portrays a deep and enduring bond that blossoms between Mariam and Laila offering emotional solace and empowering them to resist oppression. Despite their tragic fates their final act of defiance against Rasheed stands as a testament to the enduring power of sisterhood. Rodriguez's work showcases a broader network of women, united by circumstance and a shared desire for safety and connection. The Kabul coffee shop becomes a sanctuary, facilitating the formation of unlikely bonds that transcend cultural and social barriers. These women empower each other, offering practical assistance, emotional support, and the courage to challenge the status quo. The rescue of Layla exemplifies the strength found in this collective action, where the women leverage their combined resources to ensure the safety of a member of their newfound family. By depicting the transformative potential of sisterhood, both novels offer a glimmer of hope amidst the harsh realities of war and highlight the capacity of women to forge connections, defy oppression, and carve out spaces of safety and empowerment, even in the face of extreme adversity.

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