

**Tribhuvan University**

**Narrativization of Gender Trauma in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid  
Suns* and Siba Shakib's *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep***

**A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, TU  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master's of Philosophy in English Literature**

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Approval Letter

This dissertation, entitled “Narrativization of Gender Trauma in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Siba Shakib's *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep*”, submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Sarmila Joshi has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

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## Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation entitled “Narrativization of Gender Trauma in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Siba Shakib's *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep*” submitted to the office of the Dean, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tribhuvan University, is an entirely original work, and I have made due acknowledgements to all ideas and information borrowed from different sources in the course of writing the dissertation. The results presented in this dissertation have not been presented anywhere else for award of any degree or for any other reasons. No part of the content of this dissertation has ever been published in any form before. I shall be solely responsible if any evidence is found against my declaration.

Date: .....

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## Abstract

This dissertation analyzes the portrayal of marginalized female characters in SibaShakib's novel *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep* and Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* respectively. It investigates into the socio-political challenges faced by the female characters Mariam, Laila, and Shiorin-Gol. This dissertation argues that the novels narrativize the gender-induced trauma due to patriarchy, religious orthodoxy, and neo-colonial ideologies. Furthermore, this study explains how female protagonists navigate and resist cultural hegemonic power amid traumatic circumstances and why they are compelled to flee their homeland due to oppressive ideologies. The dissertation uses the theoretical and conceptual framework of Ruth Leys proposed on Trauma as well as Frantz Fanon's notion of internalized oppression. Moreover, it has utilized Kali Tal's notion of sexual abuse of women to address an individual experience of collective Trauma as well as Urvasi Butalia's concept on politics of silencing women's pain, and Ritu Menon and Kamla Bashin's argument on women as the equilibrium of honor that constructs trauma. Besides, it borrows Stef Crap's idea of postcolonial trauma and Lucy Bond's notion of multidimensionality which discuss psychological, cultural, and socio-historical dimension of trauma. This dissertation employs interpretative strategies to analyze working through of trauma of the major characters, and the theory of gender trauma.

Keywords: trauma, gender trauma, resilience, internalized oppression, patriarchy, religion and neo-colonialism, triple-marginalization of women

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

Abstract

Chapter I:Introduction: Muslim Women’s Traumatic Experiences	1
Chapter II:Gender Trauma: Theories and Implications	7
Chapter III:Oppression and Resistance: Working Through of Gender Trauma	22
Chapter IV:Connection and Disconnection with the Homeland	49
Chapter V: Conclusion: Gender Trauma and Resilience	53

Works Cited

## Chapter I: Introduction: TraumaExperiences

This thesis is a study of the novels *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep*, and focuses on the traumatic experiences suffered by the female characters due to patriarchal social structure, religious orthodoxy, and war (neo-colonialism). These factors caused psychological distress, physical torture, displacement, loss, and marginalization in the female characters before and after the Russian invasion and the Taliban regime.

Patriarchy comes as a dominant structure in most human civilizations. “Patriarchal system, which refers to the concept of male domination, has placed women in the inferior position” (Nurul 13). This can be observed prominently in Islamic societies where there are strict rules like the necessity of maintaining a *purdha* and wearing a *burqa*, and hejab for women. “In a patriarchal system, men manage every detail of women’s lives including the way women dress up... they should wear *burqa*, a garment that covers the whole body including face, every time they go out. The *burqa* becomes a symbol of women’s oppression because it gives women discomfort” (14). The male members of the society or the family govern the rest of the subjects.

Patriarchy contributes to gender discrimination of females that follows with restrictions, limitations, and humiliation. “Gender discrimination is widespread in many countries, one of them is Afghanistan. A 2011 survey by the Thomson Reuters Foundation found that Afghanistan is the most dangerous place for women. Women face many limitations, violence, and humiliation; about 87% of women face abuse and violence” (11). From teaching morality to everyday behavior, regulating the binary opposition and oppression to the subjugation of the female members, patriarchy is heavily practiced. Restriction on female education, working outside one’s home, and

even general independence is a detrimental tradition. The protagonists—Mariam, Laila, and Shirin-Go—are profoundly victimized by this suppressing patriarchal social structure.

Likewise, religious extremism hinders the female characters from achieving freedom. Chauvinistic interpretations of the spiritual text, the Koran, amplify the freedom of males while limiting female independence. “Women cannot go around the places they want because they are forbidden to travel unless they have male’s guardianship or *mahram*. And if the Taliban see women travel alone, they will beat them severely and send them home” (15). Restrictions on physical appearance, limited educational rights, dependence on male members for mobility, forced marriage, and polygamy all contribute to gender-based trauma which is depicted in the novels.

Neo-colonialism in Afghanistan leads to the destruction of peace and livable environment resulting in massive deaths, rapes, displacements, and loss of health and wealth. This also raises questions on faith in God and trust in humanity. The extremity of the characters’ endurance and struggle for survival amidst the adverse situation and the never-ending war distorted their mental peace in the war-torn country. The Russian invasion and war between the Russian soldiers and Mujahedeen lasted for a decade. “For ten years Russians have been firing missiles, throwing bombs, laying mines, attacking villages. For ten years they have been killing the Afghans and been killed in turn. For ten years Russian and Afghan mothers and women have wept for their sons, men, brothers, fathers” (Shakib 50). Almost after ten years, the Russians surrender and return to their nation leaving a devastated Afghanistan behind. But the war wages on among the various groups of Mujahedeen as the party collapses after the Russians leave.

A civil war breaks out in Afghanistan for power politics which kills its people and divides it. “ Shirin-Gol, her daughter, her son, the twins, her mother on foot. They flee the bombs and missiles that Afghans are firing on Afghans in a cruel fraternal war between Ahmad Shah Massoud, Hekmatyar, Dostum, Khalili, Gilani and all the other leaders of the various groups of the Mujahedin” (54). Russians leave behind a devastated Afghanistan that its people face loss, pain and deep scars that the following generations also carry. “The women, children, men are fleeing unemployment and hunger, mines and gunfire, the danger of being robbed and raped” (54). As fighters die in the war, mothers lose their sons, wives their husbands, and children their fathers. They are left emotionally and economically miserable.

All these factors—patriarchy, religion, and war—induce traumatic experiences in women's lives, causing them extreme humiliation for being born female. Besides being regarded as the inferior sex and dishonored beings, they are subjected to starvation, death, multiple rapes, displacement, and numerous other sufferings.

As a product of marginalization and the struggle for survival, the protagonists are more polished, resilient, and assertive. They challenge the hegemonic power discourse, gain agency over their lives, and emerge much more empowered after enduring life's harsh treatments. Such strong attempts to confront life's upheavals carry messages worth sharing through literary texts. Their firm will and determination to live, overcoming fear, anxiety, and trauma, exemplifies the techniques of working through and coping with the adversities of life. Hence, the novels not only portray the hardships of gender trauma but also present a very optimistic approach to justifying life.

To justify the arguments developed in the thesis, the researcher draws on the theoretical insights of Ruth Leys, Frantz Fanon, Stef Craps and Lucy Bond, Kali Tal,

Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bashin. Particularly, Ruth Leys's work on trauma analyzes historical, cultural, and socio-political approaches, along with non-cognitive and pre-linguistic approaches to emotion. Frantz Fanon's theory of internalized oppression is mobilized, as well as Kali Tal's research on the sexual abuse of women and the significance of literary work as a trauma narrative addressing individual experiences of collective trauma.

#### Statement of the Problem

The novels *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *Afghanistan Where God Only Comes to Weep* reflect the growth of violence after the three decades of the Second World War. Although colonialism in the world was on the verge of disappearance, the then USSR imposed its political power upon the sovereign Afghanistan which the national political party, Mujahedeen fought against for the liberation of the country. Shirin-Gol remembers her father's words:

In the past the English occupied our country and decided our fate, now the Russians are having a go. ... The English dishonoured and sullied our country and our religion, took away our power and responsibility for ourselves, robbed us of our freedom and polluted the soil of our homeland, now it is the Russians. We have no other way, it is time for us, too, to join the Mujahedin, go to war against the Russians. (12)

The war took ten years to end and after that, the national party, Mujahedeen fragmented into various other parties which included a so-called religious yet political party called the Taliban.

Taliban, the party formed by the 'students' of the Quran practices orthodoxy which hinders the commoners in their everyday survival. Men and children but more prominently women suffer in their efforts to perform their smooth and natural

lifestyle. This suffering became severe, either mentally, physically, emotionally, or economically. Despite these adversities, the female protagonists cope with the trauma by being hopeful about the future, which is the phase experienced by most women in Afghanistan. Thus, this research attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. In what ways do we see the psychological victimization through the lenses of the neo-colonial, religious, and patriarchal structures in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep*?
2. What social and political challenges do the female characters face and how do they experiment their way through hope and power?
3. How do the female protagonists in these novels relate to or /and disconnect from their homeland, and how does this play into the trauma narrative?

#### Limitations of the Study

The thesis uses two novels written by authors of both sexes: male and female. Since these authors are from different genders, this is expected to bring justice by assimilating both male and female versions of understanding about gender trauma. The study focuses on the selected novels to analyze the historical, religious, socio-political, and psychological context of trauma. The study also uses Ruth Leys and Franz Fanon as critics while analyzing the primary texts.

#### Significance of the Study

Trauma has often been understood as an objective experience. Theories associated with or studying trauma have heavily relied on the assumption that trauma is a natural and inevitable response to certain events. On the contrary, this study renders an analysis of trauma as a social and cultural response that is influenced by time, place, and context. Leys' theory of trauma helps in the critical examination of the assumptions and limitations of trauma theory (as of Freud's and Caruth's) and

questions the way trauma is addressed and treated both clinically and culturally. By recognizing the constructed nature of trauma, trauma scholars can potentially broaden their understanding of the different ways in which people experience and cope with distressing events. This study helps readers understand how the representation of trauma in the novels is shaped by cultural and historical context rather than relying on a universal and objective understanding of the phenomenon.

## Chapter II: Gender Trauma: Theories and Implications

### Review of Literature

Gender trauma is considered a personal issue that is inflicted through mental, emotional, or physical injury. It refers to psychological, emotional, or physical harm experienced due to an individual's gender or gender identity. This form of trauma can arise from various sources, including societal norms, discrimination, violence, and systemic inequalities. Thus in the patriarchal society women are the victims of gender trauma. Since the early twentieth century, the definition has extended beyond physical and mental injuries to include psychological or personal dimensions. As Stef Craps and Lucy Bond write, "The definition of trauma remains unstable" (Craps 2). They further explain, "The traces of the past are all around us, the memories that exert the deepest pull on our emotions are often those connected to violent histories. Trauma experiences leave deep scars that can remain unresolved for decades, generations, even centuries" (2). Trauma becomes a common term in the post-colonial context and is much spoken out by the victims themselves and the literary writers.

Similarly, Ekatherina Zhukova explains, "Trauma has been used to define a social norm. . . This has evolved into a call for humanity, solidarity, and compassion transnationally through the work of humanitarian organizations on behalf of victims of violence" (3). Being carried out by humanitarian organizations on behalf of victims of violence, trauma on female experiences also begins to catch much attention. Women's lived experiences were discussed, recorded, and analyzed during the second half of the twentieth century. Henceforth, gender trauma came out as a new discipline in the post-colonial era.

Many fictional or non-fictional works have dealt with gender trauma. However, this research is based on the two novels which focus on the trauma of

female characters from the Soviet Union's invasion in 1979 to the fall of the Taliban regime in 2003. The researcher has selected two novels on the issue of gender trauma, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep*, as primary texts. These two novels have been discussed repeatedly from various perspectives, for instance, a research scholar, Sunil Kumar, in his research article on Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* writes "It is a soul-stirring story of two victimized Afghan women Mariam and Laila, who are born two decades apart but whose lives are brought together through a series of largely tragic events" (239). Kumar focuses on the trauma experienced by the women, which is similar despite having a considerable gap in time, not only because of the cultural context but also because of war.

The brutal condition of the female characters in the novel magnifies the issues presented in the social context. However, the cultural and political systems make equal contributions to the oppression of women. Kumar, while comparing Hosseini's and Shakib's literary works, derives, "What is distinctive in her approach towards the portrayal of Afghanistan's history is the fact that rather than making comments about survival amidst war-torn country, she presents the existential crisis of characters whose hard life advocates hopelessness" (245). Unlike Hosseini's portrayal which comments on the life of the women and the hardships they experience, Shakib lets her readers feel how difficult the period was to survive under the threat of bombardment, displacement, hunger, diseases, multiple rapes, and many other tragedies for the characters. The protagonists' survival in the adversity of war and oppression is due to their charismatic characters. Thus, Kumar explains that the novels disclose a passage in the country's socio-political scenario by combining the public life of the characters with the country's political history.

“A Thousand Splendid Suns: Rhetorical Vision of Afghan Women” discusses how the novel “unveils the significant contribution made by Khaled Hosseini to orientalist discourse by presenting the courageous and self-motivated women who fight for their rights and freedom” (1). Laila’s attempt to escape Rasheed's brutality and young Mariam’s journey to assert her equality with her legitimate half-siblings highlight their resilience. Moreover, their acknowledgment of internalized oppression and thus, their bonding is their strength to resist the cruelty of their husband, reflects the women's self-acquired agency to get empowerment, which is often overlooked by the Western media. According to Azam Kazemiyan, Hosseini’s novel “uncovers that the mainstream media has notably highlighted Afghan women’s oppression and victimization, which largely serve to ignore their struggle and courageousness” (6). Hence, Hosseini successfully portrays strong and self-empowered women in his literary text. This clarifies how the Western media spreads illusions about the victimhood of Afghan women. Hosseini’s works have challenged this trend of creating propaganda against the East by portraying women as strong pillars who can resist conventional norms moving ahead in search of their life with ambition.

Likewise, EnsiehShabanirad and Elham Seifi’s article “Post-colonial Feminist Reading of Khaled Hosseini” discusses the achievements of a subaltern voice for women in the non-Western diaspora. As they explain:

The novel portrays the resistance of the female characters against the patriarchal and male-oriented society of Afghanistan and the gender oppression imposed on them through their culture, lifestyle, norms, and principles of their community. This particular written text shows the conflicts and struggles that the major female characters undergo when they try to find

their place in their own specific culture and achieve their subaltern voice.

(241)

EnsiehShabanirad and Elham Seifi disagree with the portrayal of Eastern female characters as docile, submissive, and subjugating in the patriarchal structure. Rather they need to be observed for their resistance and emancipation of their own lives, strong and determined.

The women of Afghanistan are often considered pitiable creatures having no voice. Rather, endurance has been "one's lot of life" (Hossieni9). On Mariam's request to go to school, Nana tells her that women of their class have no value in getting an education. They should only learn to tolerate and accept their fate in a male-dominated society as theirs. Women live as second-class citizens without any right in decision-making, either personal or political and war has brought about a hellish circumstance. Basharat Shameen states, "The Afghan women have endured a tough existence as they came to grips with a double subjugation in the form of patriarchal authority and the oppression emanating from the persistent conditions of conflict" (62). Islamic law has its orthodox approach regarding males and females, where the condition of violence and conflict magnify the oppression of women.

Most of the reviewers opine that *A Thousand Splendid Suns* presents a picture of Afghan society along with its political upheavals resulting in double oppression in women's lives. Michiko Kakutani in *The New York Times* writes, "He succeeds in making the emotional reality of Mariam and Laila's lives tangible to us, and by conjuring their day-to-day routines, he has succeeded in giving us a sense of what the daily life was like in Kabul, both before and during the harsh reign of the Taliban" (no page). Readers can easily understand the scenario of extreme suppression of women through this detailed narration, heavily set in Kabul.

Siba Shakib presents a woman's narrative, which makes the character strong and mentally challenging. The psychological conflict of the young Shirin-Gol, either to obey the Russian teachers or the norms she has been practicing, either to marry Morad or to let her brother be ashamed, either to stay back in Afghanistan, or to cross the border, either to sell her body or to let her husband and children starve to death, either to let her daughter marry a Taliban or to let her be raped by a mass, either to return to Afghanistan or to live as refugees. Shirin-Gol, the protagonist of *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep*, spends her life in such psychological conflict of either this or that, and any of the options lead to heart-breaking experiences. As one passes through hardships one is sure to be strong and fearless. UlfiKhoiriyah, in her research paper, argues that "mental toughness is an impact of psychological conflict". Shirin-Gol manages her mental sensitivity well, "people who have self-awareness and a desire to respond better to their adversity, pressure, and stress will develop their mental toughness (6)." Thus, the extreme situations have transformed a simple woman into a tactful, mentally tough and strong personality.

Neha Mahanta has discussed the novel from the perspective of resistance, where Shirin-Gol tries to escape the hegemony of the power holders. She tries to resist the coercion of hegemonic power blocks with every end and means. She refuses to live in a particular place to escape its brutality. She flees from one place to another in resistance to the laws and orders that the power blocs impose on its citizens. Mahanta explains how Shirin-Gol "takes a different path to find her way through resistance and struggle against the predetermined destiny for acquiring a place not colored by other dominating factor's supremacy"(63). As the social structure of patriarchy already oppresses her, she strongly refuses to be oppressed by the warmongers and their forcefully imposed new law.

Another researcher, Asmita Ghimire has analyzed Shakib's work through a New-historicist perspective in which the story of marginalized people is depicted. This work is a revisionist approach to examining the suffering experienced by the commoners due to those in mainstream politics. Ghimire states "Shakib tries to assemble those forgotten voices and explores how catastrophic political upheaval bleeds into the everyday personal life of men, women, and children who have charged both their life and lives to pay the cost of war" (1). It projects the domestic sphere of ordinary women, men, and children mourning death, fear, sickness, homelessness, poverty, rape, cruelty, genocide, humiliation, and forced prostitution faced by the people who never choose to bear arms in war.

These texts by Hosseini and Shakib have been read widely and reviewed in various ways, however this research project, with due respect to all the attempts, explores a new path through the perspective of Gender Trauma incorporating the theories of Ruth Leys (both *Trauma: A Genealogy* and *A Turn to Affect*) which pays attention to the complex ways in which emotions and feelings are intertwined with social, cultural, and historical forces. In the case of Afghan women, a collective experience is shared by them due to years of conflict and displacement that is similar to the condition of the Indo-Pak Partition. Therefore, Partition Trauma feminist theorists such as Urvashi Butalia, Kamala Basin, and Ritu Menon's references are discussed. The protagonists are against the 'Internalized operation' in which Fanon talks about the colonized psyche. Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt* carries the theme of trauma, resilience, and healing of abused women. Hence, it is an innovative approach as it thoroughly analyzes how female characters work through trauma. This study focuses on the traumatic experiences of female characters due to religion, patriarchy, and war, which cause psychological distress, physical torture, displacement, and

alienation from their homeland.

### Concept Theory Review

The definition of 'trauma' was initially introduced by Sandor Ferenczi to address physical wounds in the clinical sector. But at a later phase of his life, he was convinced that it had much more to do with psychology and was not limited to pathology. Later on, various theorists came up with new definitions of trauma relating to psychoanalysis. One of the prominent theorists in this field is Sigmund Freud, who introduced trauma in works such as "Studies in Hysteria", "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", and "Moses and Monotheism". James Berger in "Trauma and Literary Theory," in which Freud argues that "an overpowering event, unacceptable to consciousness, can be forgotten and yet return in the form of somatic symptoms, and compulsive, repetitive behavior" (570). Freud finds his initial opinion limited and thus shifts to another definition, which he describes as "the concept of 'latency' where the memory of a traumatic event can be lost over time, but regained in a symptomatic form when triggered by another similar event" (570). Such a definition of trauma seems objective and structural, which lacks the cultural and socio-historical meaning of trauma. Freud's introduction of trauma in the selected primary texts, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *Afghanistan, where God Only Comes to Weep*, can be applied to analyze such events that Mariam, Laila, and Shirin-Gol have experienced. For instance:

As on all other recent nights, since being raped by the Pakistani police, Shirin-Gol cannot get to sleep. Terrible images, noises, pain, infinite shame, the feeling that her skirts are being hoisted up, the feeling of strange men's hands on her skin, the gold tooth, the rancid breath wake her with a start. Quiet, choking cries emerge from her throat. Shirin-Gol holds her hands in front of

her mouth so that the scream does not jump out of her mouth, opens her eyes wide, stares into the darkness of the hut, trembles, and weeps. (99)

The cited excerpt from the novel describes the outcome of the overpowering event that Shirin-Gol cannot handle with her consciousness. She wakes up in the middle of the night, all startled and shocked.

Another significant trauma theorist, Cathy Caruth, focuses on personal and social histories along with events, wars, and violent disasters to define trauma. She develops her new idea of defining trauma that is understood with the reference of history and takes the reference of the Freudian view of 'latency'. She states; "we can understand that a rethinking of a reference is not aimed at eliminating history, but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, of precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not" (182). Her statement in her essay raises the question, 'Is trauma eliminated in history?' If yes, can it be resituated in history? To which she opines 'yes,' trauma can be resituated in history. She further adds, "For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or, to put it somewhat differently, that history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" (187). Thus, one can interpret that the possibility of traumatic history is always with the recurrence of memories, though implicitly or explicitly, that transmits to the upcoming generation.

Caruth also identifies trauma as an overwhelming experience that disrupts the individual's ability to process and integrate the event into their normal experience of life. Another amplifying symptom of trauma is delayed response which the major characters in the novels, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *Afghanistan, where God Only Comes to Weep* often undergo as they process and cope with their traumas.

Likewise, Kali Tal defines trauma with an emphasis on the importance of the

narrative of experiences in literature. She argues that, if possible, the testimony of survivors should be recorded, as this would help examine traumatic experiences. Her work "Worlds of Hurt" focuses on the representation of trauma in conventional narrative forms that are fragmented and non-linear, with a disrupted sense of self and reality. For example, the protagonists Mariam, Laila, and Shirin-Gol remember past events with their loved ones whenever they encounter harsh realities in life. Tal further defines trauma as "the relationship between individual trauma and cultural interpretation, focusing on sexualized violence against women" (1). Writing literature on trauma narratives helps survivors witness their experiences, aiding them in working through and making sense of their trauma.

"Worlds of Hurt" also highlights the significance of literature in articulating and processing trauma, not only for individuals but also in a collective form. She states, "Literature of trauma is written from the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experiences to make it 'real' both to the victim and to the community. Such writings serve both as validation and a cathartic vehicle for the traumatized author" (21) to explain that trauma is not only an individual experience but also a collective one that affects communities and cultural identities. Therefore, the personal narrative of survivors is not simply an act of recounting events but a means of reclaiming the agency and identity of trauma victims after the disempowerment of trauma.

Frantz Fanon in "The Wretched of the Earth" talks about the colonized psyche that is made to carry a sense of inferiority, self-hatred, and internalized oppression that needs to be dismantled by resistance or violence. "The gaze that the colonized subject casts at the colonist's sector is a look of lust, a look of envy. Dreams of possession. Every type of possession: of sitting at the colonist's table and sleeping in his bed.... The colonized man is an envious man"(5). In Khaled Hosseini's *A*

*Thousand Splendid Suns*, one can analyze how the female protagonists Mariam and Laila are oppressed and abused both physically and emotionally by their patriarchal society. The protagonists also suffer from internalized oppression as the restrictions that limit their lives are imposed upon them by their male-dominated society. The characters later dismantle the oppressive structure through various resistances. They attempt to reclaim their lives and find freedom through their friendship with each other. They try to flee Afghanistan and quietly endure the torture of the police and their husband Rasheed. They wait for the right opportunity rather than risk being killed in ruthless anger and finally kill Rasheed in a fight driven by his ego. The psychological scars of violence and oppression remain intact even after the colonizers have left. The so-called elites maintain the legacy of colonialism over the oppressed.

Similarly, Fanon advocates for a strong commitment to decolonization, even at the cost of violence. He states, "National liberation, national reawakening, restoration of the nation to the people or Commonwealth, whatever the name used, whatever the latest expression, decolonization is always a violent event" (1). Fanon believes that violence is a necessary force for the colonized to reclaim their humanity and assert their identity.

In the novel *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep*, Shakib portrays Shirin-Gol and other characters suffering a similar fate as women who resist violence and oppression. They fight against Russian soldiers, seek refuge in places like Kabul, Pakistan, and Iran, refuse to surrender their lives at any cost, maintain hope for a better future, and uphold their humanity in the face of adversity.

Both the novels' protagonists aim to return to their country to build their nation and re-establish the national culture with equality and overall consciousness of both males and females. Laila, despite having a safe and happy life in Pakistan, comes

back to Kabul and works in the orphanage where she once left Aziz to escape starvation. Similarly, Shirin-Gol's return from Iran reflects her love for her nation and her determination to instill in her children the importance of their nation, culture, and language despite the ravages of war. This act involves rejecting a colonial and violent past and striving to establish new values and social structures.

Ruth Leys, a psychiatrist and psychologist, introduces a new approach to analyzing trauma in her book, "Trauma: A Genealogy". She offers a broader lens by highlighting the importance of socio-cultural and historic-political factors. She posits the importance of questioning the universality of traumatic experiences, such as the unconscious repression of memories that leads to anxiety, phobias, or neurotic behaviors. She argues, "The term trauma acquired a more psychological meaning when it was employed by . . . Freud, and other turn-of-the-century figures to describe the wounding of mind brought about by sudden, unexpected, emotional shock" (3). She critically analyzes the trauma concept of Freud and puts forward her understanding "that the rise of trauma theory was associated from the start with hypnosis" (8). She critiques Freud's approach as limited by psychopathology, focusing primarily on repressed memories of intense events, which he believed could be cured through hypnotic techniques. Leys asserts:

Hypnosis or hypnotic suggestion, was how Charcot legitimated the concept of trauma by proposing that the hysterical crises that he suggestively induced in his patients were reproductions of traumatic scenes. What is less understood is that hypnosis was not just an instrument of research and treatment but played a significant theoretical role in the conceptualization of trauma. The disagreement is because of the tendency of the hypnotized people to imitate or repeat whatever they were told to say or to provide a basic model for the

traumatic experiences. (8)

Leys sheds light on the evolution and chronological development of trauma theory, explaining how it gradually transitioned from clinical pathology to psychopathology, and then to the psychology of the individual. This led to the invention of hypnosis as a medical treatment, which she rejects. Leys argues that there is no exact or inherent definition of trauma as it varies across different cultural contexts and historical periods. In one of the book reviews of *Trauma: A Genealogy*:

As Leys shows, there is no theory of trauma. Or, more accurately, there are two opposing theories, 'mimetic' and 'anti-mimetic'. According to the mimetic theory, patients do not consciously remember a traumatizing event, but store in their unconscious mind an imitation of it, in which they identify with whoever caused the trauma. The anti-mimetic theory holds that patients do remember the trauma consciously but as an outside observer. These two theories have implications for treatment which it seems impossible to reconcile. In the first, there is an ambiguity between victim and perpetrator that is absent in the second. There is an issue of whether what patients say can be believed, particularly in the mimetic theory, where the possibility of accurate memory is completely ruled out. Leys shows that the desirable convergence to a single theory has not happened, and indeed could not happen. (563)

John Galloway in *Macmillan Magazines Ltd.* simplifies the concept of Leys's Trauma theory, addressing the theme that both mimetic and anti-mimetic approaches are problematic and that there is no definitive way of approaching trauma. Thus, it should be analyzed broadly, examining time, place, and context.

Furthermore, Leys suggests a new concept to understand trauma through the

Affective responses to emotion in "The Turn to Affect". She examines the historical development of Affect theory, especially focusing on the work of philosophers and theorists such as Gilles Deleuze, Brian Massumi, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Affect theory refers to a field of study that focuses on how emotions, feelings, and bodily sensations shape our experiences and interactions within us and the world outside. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, in their essay 'An Inventory of Shimmers' define Affect by stating ". . . there is no pure or original state for Affect? Affect arises amid in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon" (An Inventory of Shimmers 1). They explain that Affect is the process of experiencing one emotion to another. So does Leys states:

Affect is an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation as well as the passage of forces or intensities. That is Affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves. (1)

It suggests that Affect examines the role of emotions, feelings, and bodily sensations in shaping human and nonhuman experiences and social phenomena.

Leys aims to inspect how emotions and Affect are represented and experienced in literature. She emphasizes the non-cognitive, pre-linguistic dimension of Affect to justify the emotional experiences and socio-political contexts that shape these emotions. In her work, she references the opinions of many philosophers such as Massumi, Deleuze, Guattari, Thrift Shouse, and more.

Likewise, Shouse follows Massumi by remarking that "it is important not to confuse Affect with feelings and emotions... Affect is not a personal feeling.

Feelings are personal and biographical, emotions are social ... and Affects are pre-personal. . . An Affect is a non-conscious experience of intensity; it is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential. . . . Affect cannot be fully realized in language ... because Affect is always prior to and/or outside consciousness. . . . Affect is the body's way of preparing itself for action in a given circumstance by adding a quantitative dimension of intensity to the quality of an experience. The body has a grammar of its own that cannot be fully captured in language. (442)

The gist of Leys' essay is that Affect is experienced directly, without the mediation of cognitive process, highlighting a non-cognitive approach to emotion. Massumi's insight into 'intensity and embodiment' asserts that Affects are understood as intense experiences that are embodied, which means they are felt deeply within the body and are often involuntary responses to stimuli. Similarly, Tomkins and Ekman define the non-linguistic nature of Affect which emphasizes that Affect is experienced before it is articulated in language, highlighting how emotions can be communicated through actions, gestures, and physical sensations rather than words. This helps in examining trauma caused by various factors such as oppressive regimes, war, patriarchal structures, loss, and more.

Stef Crap's and Lucy Bond's "Trauma: A Critical Idiom" defines trauma from a broader perspective as multidimensional which studies psychological, cultural, social, and historical dimensions that induce trauma. It also amplifies the concept of collective trauma as trauma can be vicarious and experienced by the following generation as well.

Finally, this research mobilizes the insights of feminist and partition trauma theorists such as Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon, and Kamla Bashin to analyze the

gender trauma experiences of the protagonists as the product of marginalization in the social, cultural, and historical context of Afghanistan. Urvashi Butalia's "The Other Side of Silence" sheds light on the significance of personal narrative and the importance of strengthening the silenced voices of those who lived through trauma. Similarly, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bashin's "Boarder and Boundaries" depicts the gendered trauma, displacement, loss, resilience, and agency of women, which goes parallel with the protagonists' trauma experiences in both the novels *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep*.

### Chapter III: Oppression and Resistance: Working through of Gender Trauma

Nana, a house help in Jalil's house is impregnated with his child. She is the victim of patriarchal oppression. She spends her life in isolation and is sent to Kholba (a mud house in the clearing) by Jalil's wives. She has to suffer the pain of alienation and humiliation all alone in hardships, whereas Jalil spends his life in respect and luxury among his nine children and three wives. Because of this treatment, Nana has to bear severe frustration and a heart full of pain, which is reflected in her behavior and words. Time and again, she shares her bitter experiences with Mariam and treats her rudely over simple things. For instance, "Nana grabbed Mariam by the wrists, pulled her close, and, through gritted teeth, said, 'You are a clumsy little harami. This was my reward for everything I endured. An heirloom-breaking, clumsy little harami'" (4), for breaking the last piece of porcelain pot that was "the sole relic of Mariam's mother, Nana had of her mother" (3). Her reaction came out of frustration because of the injustice of the patriarchal society along with the religious interpretation of women's chastity and virginity before marriage. She is an outcast by society. The patriarchal social structure marginalizes women like Nana. Her exclusion for having a child out of wedlock reflects the stigmatization and isolation imposed on women who deviate from societal norms. Still, it's not a matter of shame for men like Jalil who is an equal participant in the deed.

Nana's psychological trauma is an outcome of societal rejection, which identifies her as an evil woman for killing her honor by getting pregnant before marriage. Thus, the rude interactions with Mariam about Jalil are what Ruth Leys defines as "socially constructed trauma" (35). Her frustration is the emotion produced involuntarily by her social and cultural experiences because "where neighbors would stare at her belly, point at her, snicker, or worse yet, assault her with insincere

kindness" (9). Thus, "it was a relief to your father having me out of sight. It suited him just fine" (9). In such ways, Jalil escaped social stigma by being a male in the male-dominated society, and Nana bore all the tortures alone. To add to the patriarchal oppression of women, Urvashi Butalia states ". . . the woman as a person did not count, her wishes were of little consequences, she had no right to resist, defy nor even to appeal, for the Act denied even that basic freedom" (The Other Side of Silence 191). Rather than being treated as a victim and asked of her wish to punish Jalil, Nana is blamed for immorality. She has no right to resist such treatment by Jalil and his wives, and she has to accept the loneliness in the kolba.

Patriarchal practices are entrenched in every part of Afghan society, shaping family relationships, social transactions, and cultural mores. Practices such as child marriage, honor killings, and domestic violence symbolize the patriarchy's dominance and dictate the lives of women and girls. These practices perpetuate continual cycles of violence and oppression, marginalizing women and girls.

Similarly, Mariam also gets victimized by forced marriage as she has been an unwanted person to everyone else after her mother's death. Despite her persistent denial – "tell them. Tell them you won't let them do this" (49), she cries, addressing Jalil but he replied, "goddamn it, Mariam, don't do this to me" (49) as if he was the one being coerced. She is forced to marry a much older man, Rasheed because "they had been disgraced by her birth and it was their chance to erase, once and for all, the last trace of their husband's scandalous mistake . . . because she was the walking, breathing embodiment of their shame" (48). Women lack autonomy. They ought to follow the order of the male members. This systematic subjugation highlights the pervasive control of patriarchal structures over women's lives.

Mariam, in a new place, still connects herself with the identity she was

labeled as 'harami'. She finds it difficult to communicate with her neighbors and townsmen. She gets afraid when women approach her to talk. "her hands began to sweat. She imagined they all knew that she had been born a *harami*, a source of shame to her father and his family. They all knew that she'd betrayed her mother and disgraced herself" (65). Mariam bears the trauma of her own identity, the trauma of her birth, and the Trauma of her mother's loss. Although she may not fully realize it, her bodily sensations powerfully reflect this trauma. As Ruth Leys theorizes in "A Turn to Affect", "Affect is a matter of autonomic responses that are held to occur below the threshold of consciousness and cognition and to be rooted in the body" (444). Mariam experiences intense physical reactions evident from acts such as "hyperventilating. Her ears buzzed, her pulse fluttered, her eyes darted from one face to another" (66). To avoid the mass, she "clutched the dough close to her chest and pushed through the crowd around her ... and she ran up the street" (67). Mariam forgets to act normally being composed in her own experiences. Having been excluded from society for most of her life, she finds it difficult to adjust to the masses and cope with social situations. Her past experiences involuntarily weigh heavily upon her thoughts.

Later on, Mariam learns to adjust to a new community, still carrying the fear and shame of her birth and guilt of her mother's death. Rasheed treats her well until she has multiple miscarriages. She was married by Rasheed to cast away his loneliness, give him pleasure, cook and wash for him, and most of all, give birth to a male child. Unfortunately, she bears all the physical and emotional pain of the loss of her unborn children. On top of that, Rasheed starts beating her until his frustration is shattered. Mariam endures the pain of the loss of her children but receives no emotional support. Rather, she is blamed for being incapable of bearing children.

With this, Rashid stops talking to her and becomes more inclined to find flaws in her. For the first time, she suffers domestic violence when he brings pebbles and forces her to chew them.

His powerful hands clasped her jaw. He shoved two fingers into her mouth and pried it open. Mariam struggled against him, mumbling, but he kept pushing the pebbles . . . Mariam mumbled a plea. Tears were leaking out of the corners of her eyes . . . Mariam spit out pebbles, blood, and the fragments of two broken morals. (103)

The trauma of domestic violence is a daily basis for those who lack agency and autonomy in the patriarchal society.

Mariam never counter-argues Rasheed as he tries to tame her through his perspective. Rasheed, being a potent agent of patriarchy, finds ways to teach Mariam how to dress in public and expresses his disdain for the so-called modern males and females.

I have customers, Mariam, men, who bring their wives to my shop. The women come uncovered; they talk to me directly and look me in the eyes without shame. They wear makeup and skirts that show their knees. Sometimes they even put their feet in front of me, the women do, for measurements, and their husbands stand there and watch. They allow it. They think nothing of strangers touching their wives' bare feet! They think they are being modern men, intellectuals, on account of their education, I suppose. They don't see that they are spoiling their own *nang* and *namoos*, their honor and pride. (69)

Patriarchy and religion regard women as a symbol of pride and honor and confine them within the boundaries of *purdha*. Wearing a burqa, scarf, and hejab would

protect their honor. Male domination is imposed on a woman's body to hide her in front of strangers. Women experience such oppression under extreme patriarchy which Mariam never denies out of fear. "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?" (69). Characters like Mariam, who struggle with systemic misogyny and patriarchal oppression compounded by institutionalized violence, corral themselves into a corner that denies them basic rights or freedoms. These include sexual violence and forced marriage experienced by women, and all other forms of gender-based violence that render their trauma and oppression integral to the destruction of their dignity and autonomy.

Mariam faces near-constant adversity until she is left traumatized. She knows nothing of the world behind closed doors except that her status is meaningless in the eyes of a society that would rather pretend she does not exist. Her past is tainted with illegitimacy that sets her apart and leaves her vulnerable. This becomes an integral part of her definition of herself. Mariam also deals with the trauma of familial betrayal and societal oppression, although she possesses the determination to survive. Though Mariam continues to endure the hardships that befall her, she remains resilient in the face of her world's inequities, using its oppression to carve out her own life. The ordeal she undergoes makes her stronger and better equipped to face worldly inequalities.

Laila, an educated and much-loved daughter of a school teacher, Hakim, and Fariba, also has to endure the trauma of an oppressive patriarchal structure. She shares the life of Mariam during the Taliban regime. She is forced into marriage with Rasheed out of fear for her own life. After the deaths of her parents, she has no one to

rely on. Moreover, she is pregnant with Tariq's child. If the Taliban find out the truth she would have to lose the life she is trying to build. It is not her choice but her only option for safety and survival. Societal pressure to marry illustrates the systematic patriarchy Laila also encounters in Afghanistan.

Rasheed behaves sober and gentle at home after marrying Laila. He shows affection to her and expresses his reservations as well. "... when we are out together, you wear a burqa. For your own protection, . . . so many lewd men in this town now. Such vile intentions, so eager to dishonor even a married woman" (217). He equates women with honor. "On and on he went. . . Rasheed's demands and judgments rained down on them like the rockets on Kabul" (218). Laila cannot protest his words and judgments. She has been a submissive woman who obeys her husband's demands. She knows that if she dares to protest, Rasheed will harm her brutally. This could potentially lead to her death, either through Rasheed or through the Taliban men.

Laila struggles with the patriarchal lifestyle Rasheed imposes on her. She suddenly longs for the days she spent with her parents and friends. ". . . everywhere Laila turned, walls blocked her ways" (224). She is confined within the four walls of Rasheed's house. And even if she is taken out she has to cover herself from head to toe. She struggles with this new get-up that is imposed upon her. "For Laila, being out in the streets had become an exercise in avoiding injury. Her eyes were still adjusting to the limited, gridlike visibility of the burqa, her feet still stumbling over the hem. She walked in perpetual fear of tripping and falling, of breaking an ankle stepping into a pothole" (225). Laila wrestles to adjust herself to a new lifestyle forcefully imposed by the systemic patriarchy. Her experiences so far are the traumatic experiences that carry its own "signification and meaning" (244) which cause the effect of the event.

After the marriage, Rasheed's expectation to have a son doesn't come true. Laila gives birth to a girl, Aziza, born out of love and enduring hatred for being a daughter in the patriarchal society. Rasheed shows indifference to Laila and her daughter. "Mariam detected a shadow in his face, a darkness underlying the coppery light of dusk" (230). For Rasheed, Laila, once a flower, becomes a thorn.

Laila tries to escape the brutality of her husband and society by going to Pakistan. She wants to take Mariam with her and show her the path of liberation. Mariam gives herself a chance to pave a path out of her traumas. However, the police catch both of them. Rasheed demonstrates his male ego again by beating both of them.

Laila didn't see the punch coming. One moment she was talking and the next she was on all fours, wide-eyed and red-faced, trying to draw a breath. It was as if a car had hit her at full speed, in the tender place between the lower tip of the breastbone and the belly button. . . . Hair was ripped from Laila's scalp, and her eyes watered with pain. She saw his foot kick open the door to Mariam's room . . . downstairs, the beating began. To Laila, the sounds she heard were those of a methodical, familiar proceeding. There was no cursing, no screaming, no pleading, no surprised yelps, only the systematic business of beating and being beaten . . . (262)

Mariam and Laila face tremendous individual trauma as a result of domestic violence. Both of them rely on different kinds of coping mechanisms to survive their ongoing violent experiences. By being a male, Rasheed is the head of the family and believes he has the right to undermine the wishes of his female counterparts by brutally beating them, venting his rage, and feeling dishonored by their attempts in trying to escape his tyranny.

The patriarchal practice continues even after the birth of both Aziza and Zalmai. Rasheed buys toys and new clothes for Zalmai and ignores the little Aziza. She is not of any worth to Rasheed. “Rasheed walked briskly to the coffee table, which was now abandoned, and pocketed the last ring of jalebi. He took it home and gave it to Zalmai” (304). Though both his children starve, Rasheed only shows his love for his son.

Years of cultural norms and practices contribute to systemic gender inequalities and stand in the way of women's empowerment in Afghan society. In the area of child marriage, forced marriage, and traditional gender-based violence, these are standard practices, and simply more so in rural and conservative communities where traditional law or tribal code is prevailing. Such practices harm women physically or psychologically and infringe on their fundamental human rights, keeping them oppressed and subordinated.

Unlike the traumatic experiences of domestic violence suffered by Laila and Mariam, Shirin-Gol represents the collective trauma experienced by Afghan women during the conflict-filled years. She witnesses the destruction of her family, experiences sexual violence, and faces social and cultural upheavals. However, she is also forced to marry Moorad, who wins her in a gamble with her brother back in the mountains. Shirin-Gol's experiences of trauma are a bit different than that of Laila and Mariam. She observes the status of females in the male-dominated society as she understands the birth of her brothers was rather a blessing to her mother. “He made her first child a son, so that her husband could feel like a real man, and wouldn't have to knock her teeth out or divorce, take her back to her father's house” (10). The merciful God sent a male child to her mother's lap so that she could have security in her husband's home. This highlights the importance of bearing a male child as the

firstborn and the male's status in society.

Also, having a female child later is the mother's luck as she can get help with household chores. As males are not expected to be involved in domestic chores, mothers suffer loneliness while providing everything for their families. Shirin-Gol is given no other task "but to behave as quietly as possible, to look, and to understand a girl's role in life: to be inconspicuous, to work, and to obey the orders of the boys and men" (11). It reflects that the male roles and female roles are distinguished by society. Women need to fit into those roles; otherwise, they create problems for themselves.

As a child, Shirin-Gol is influenced by and favors a patriarchal society. As she is raised in a male-dominated household, her conscience cannot accept women not hiding their bodies in public. Initially, she struggles to adjust to the social and cultural differences in Kabul when she goes there. She doesn't want to go to school as she fears she will end up being shameless and exposed like the Russian woman who she despises. She is ready to follow her father's words to avoid going to school. Her father accuses the Russians of being "infidels who want to dishonor us. Girls who go to school become confused and curious, they know too much, they get greedy, they start demanding things, they become choosy, and what kind of man is going to marry a woman like that?" (26). Shakib presents the innocence of a child who admits her father's words as words of God. She fears breaking the rules of the family by expressing her thoughts.

Shirin-Gol is about to say something, maybe something along the lines of, I'd rather be dead than end up like the naked woman, or I'm going back to the mountains to kill Russians. Still, then she keeps her mouth shut after all, because her father is so worked up that she'd probably get a clip around the ear for daring to raise her girlish voice, unasked and in public, and say what she

thinks. (26)

Shakib presents Shirin-Gol as the outcome of the patriarchal society, one who doesn't realize the importance of education and dedicates her life to the service of males. She internalizes the notion that males are superior and more knowledgeable than females. A kind of gendered trauma begins with the smallest seed of patriarchal indoctrination within her.

Another example can be observed when Shirin-Gol says, "I don't know whether I want to get married" to which Morad replies, "Your brother decides you would" (40). This reflects the lack of autonomous agency. She doesn't insist on her opinion but agrees that it's done if her brother has decided. By lacking agency, women become victimized by males' wills and demands. "Men do not want wives who are cleverer than they are," says Morad. He further restricts Shirin-Gol's progression as an individual by saying things like, "Earning money is a man's work", "It's not a question of fear, it's a question of honor. If you ask me what we're going to live on, you're telling me you are worried I will not be able to feed us". Moreover his objection to her continuity of education is expressed as "You are a married woman now, what would the neighbors think? From the very start, it was a mistake for you to go to school; you see where it leads, school and all that stuff in your head have spoiled your character" (42). This shows that his thoughts are deeply ingrained with patriarchal beliefs.

Afghan women still grapple with a larger amount of socio-political obstacles today. Violence against women is endemic, education and health opportunities are scarce, and patriarchal norms remain entrenched. Although the past century has seen considerable gains for women in terms of their rights and their representation, advancing gender equality remains an elusive goal, with at least some formidable

obstacles impeding the full entry of women of all ages into public life and the decision-making sphere.

In conclusion, the story of gender roles in Afghanistan is a complex and multifaceted narrative shaped by cultural traditions and influenced by historical events. By examining it through this historical lens, we gain insight into the socio-political challenges that female characters face and understand that the struggle for gender equality and social justice within Afghan society is a long-standing issue.

### Religious Oppression

Religious oppression is often manifested with the oppressor interpreting religious texts in their favor rather than being neutral to fulfill their agenda. The aim is to hold control over the common people by instilling fear in them of defying religious laws. The female characters face the severe restrictions of religious fundamentalism - a version of Islam that is heavily skewed towards male authority that prescribes directly or indirectly how women should behave and how they should present themselves. Those morals and rules are born from religious oppression. They make women the invisible sex and confine them to the background. Religious definitions strip women of their freedom and agency.

Hosseini presents the religious oppression of the female characters in the background of Afghan society, where the female characters are not allowed to work outside their home. Women are not allowed to have a profession. This interpretation of Islam regarding how women should confine themselves within the domestic sphere is a policy of the dominant group to subjugate women's authority over their own lives and in the outer world. Mariam wishes to go to school but is denied by her mother. She even requests Mullah Faizullah to talk to her mother to ask for permission. "What's the point of schooling a girl like you? It's like shining a spittoon. There is

only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, . . . to endure. . . besides they will laugh at you in school" (18). Thus, Mariam is not given the primary schooling in her life outside her kolba. There is no religious boundary to deprive women of formal education as Hosseini exhibits Mullah Faizullah's consent to let the girl have an education. He tries to convince Nana, "Be reasonable. Come now. If the girl wants-" but is interrupted with solid rejection.

However, Laila has been to school and dreamt of being a well-known figure in her nation, helping people and doing social service. She has the education as she was born and grew up during the Russian invasion. Her father tells her that it's the golden time for women and that Russians are liberal for women's education. "*Women have always had it hard in this country, Laila, but they're probably more free now, under the communists, and have more rights than they've ever had before*"(133). But the schools close for girls after the Russians leave. It becomes difficult to complete her education. He adds, "*Women's freedom is also one of the reasons people out there took up arms in the first place*"(133). Various national parties formed, Afghanistan was made the Islamic State of Afghanistan, and the religious parties banned school education for girls as the civil war increased. ". . . Giti was walking home from school, with two classmates. Only three blocks from Giti's house, a stray rocket struck the girls . . . Giti's mother had run up and down the street where Giti was killed, collecting pieces of her daughter's flesh in an apron, screeching hysterically" (175). Education for girls after that becomes a farfetched thing. Education provides autonomy, which religious leaders consider a sin. They do not want to allow women to speak out for their rights or against the injustices practiced against them.

Khaled Hosseini's novel depicts how the Islamic community interprets Islam, bending it in favor of men and creating a religious chauvinistic society. This aims to

control the women's bodies and behavior even before the Taliban's tyranny. Hosseini confirms in his novel, “the freedoms and opportunities that women had enjoyed between 1978 and 1992 were the thing of the past now” (253). After that, Islamic rules prevailed in the lives of the commoners, especially women. “The Supreme Court under Rabbani was filled now with hardliner mullah who did away with the communist-era decrees that empowered women and instead passed ruling based on Shari’a, strict Islamic laws that ordered women to cover, forbade their travel without a male relative, punished adultery with stoning” (253). Women had to leave their jobs, stop going out without a male escort, and stay at home being dependent on the male members for survival which ceases their agency. This religious oppression aims to make women weaker than men and seize their freedom, which contributes to their traumatic survival.

Kali Tal in her book *The World of Hurt* states:

Recent work in psychiatry suggests that we can make a connection between the trauma of soldiers and the trauma of other persons subjected to severe stress. Studies on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) have shown that similar symptoms may be found in large percentages of traumatized populations, including the Holocaust, atomic bomb, rape, incest, prison camp, refugee camp, and natural disaster survivors. Trauma is a transformative experience, and those who are transformed can never entirely return to a state of previous innocence. According to Lawrence Langer, “The survivor does not travel a road from the normal to the bizarre back to the normal, but from the normal to the bizarre back to a normalcy so permeated by the bizarre encounter with atrocity that it can never be purified again. (120)

After being caged in the home and abused in the domestic sphere, the women would

not dare to work and earn again. Unless they gain their autonomy, they are not valued or considered equals.

Similarly, Shirin-Gol experiences liberation in Kabul amidst the war. She attends school, learns to read and write, studies numbers, and reads stories of women's bravery that inspire her to be like the brave woman she reads about. She imagines being a doctor and treating people, and giving them life. However, after her marriage, she is forced to discontinue school after experiencing traumatic upheavals. She gets pregnant and gives birth to a daughter, Noor-Aftab, and briefly rejoins school while the Russians are still in power. The fire of self-consciousness in Shirin-Gol gradually fades as she gets consumed by the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood.

The female characters face additional hurdles if they defy traditional gender roles or assert their rights as women. They find themselves in a whirl of social stigma and marginalization. Societal attitudes of stigmatization towards women, who reject prescribed roles, challenge social norms, disrespect family honor linked to notions of purity and submission, or assert independence and autonomy remain deeply entrenched. This stigma is wholly pervasive and helps to hold the line of the status quo, discouraging women from exercising their rights and their agency.

To expel the Russians from Afghanistan and reclaim their country, the peasants and the ordinary villagers, driven by their love for their nation and culture, fought against the invaders. On the contrary, the elites and the bourgeois benefited from Russian values and favored them. They were the ones who suffered much later when the Taliban and other factions eventually came to power.

#### Neo-Colonial Interventions and Oppression

Foreign interventions, invasions, and occupations exploded across Afghanistan's landscape throughout the past century, shaping and reshaping the

systemic disparities and conditioning the pathologies of vulnerability in its population. Not only have neo-colonial interventions rendered Afghan society increasingly unstable, but it has also entrenched patriarchal and religious power structures and furthered the marginalization of women in such a way that it would magnify women's experiences of gendered trauma.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1978 was a turning point in the history of the country and has had a lasting impact on the lives of Afghan women. The Soviet-supported government initiated socialist alterations designed to reinforce Afghan society, similar to pursuing widespread status and equal opportunities for women in training and the general public spheres. But the reforms faced opposition from conservatives and Islamists, with a pushback against women's rights and freedom. Characters such as Mariam, the female protagonist, face the consequences of the Soviet invasion as the rights of women diminish due to the beginning of radical ideologies that seek to paralyze their power and capability.

The traumatic incidents caused by neo-colonial intervention are countless. But among them is the notable case of Tariq who is handicapped by shellshock, which was a prevalent reason that often forced adults to stay at home – "A land mine had gotten him again. The way it did in 1981 when he was five... He had been lucky that time, losing only a leg; lucky that he'd survived at all" (125). Many kids lost their lives or became handicapped, forcing their parents to stay busy curing and nursing them rather than fighting against the Russians. Not only were the kids targeted and victimized, but young males were taken to fight for the Mujahedeen to free their country.

Fariba, Laila's mammy, loses both her grown-up sons in war in the mountains fighting against the Russians. To describe the state when they get this news - "Babi's

face was white and getting whiter, and he was looking at his hands and Mammy was screaming, screaming and tearing at her hair" (137). The change of the color of their faces is a matter of Affect. The news shatters them. The effect of the news involuntarily changes Fariba's color and action. Leys argues that "humans and nonhuman animals produce facial behaviors or displays when it is strategically advantageous for them to do so and not at other times because displays are dynamic and often highly plastic social and communicative signals" (472). The pre-linguistic nature of Affect emphasizes that Affect is experienced before being articulated in language, highlighting how emotions can be communicated through actions, gestures, and physical sensation rather than words.

At the time, Afghanistan faced the ravages of British imperialism in the 19th century, which significantly shaped the gender dynamics of the country. The colonial rule imposed new systems of governance and economic relations, trapping women in subordinated roles that were further reified with male hegemony in public and political life.

The neo-colonial intervention causes trauma in female characters' lives as they lose their family members and are left to survive the pain of their loved ones. Many newlyweds lose their husbands and are forced into multiple marriages and rapes. Fariba begins to have "chest pains and headaches, joint aches, and night sweats, paralyzing pains in her ears, and lumps no one else could feel. Babi took her to a doctor, who took blood and urine, shot X-rays of Mammy's body, but found no physical illness" (139). Fariba has traumatic pains from the panic attacks and anxiety that have made her weak. According to Ruth Leys, her pains are Non-cognitive responses to emotions where she argues, "affective processes and even a kind of intelligence go on in the body independently of cognition or consciousness and that

the mind operates too late to intervene" (452). Affect and cognition are separate systems. They work on the deeply inward feeling. Fariba's bodily reaction is the Affective response caused by her experience of the loss of her beloved sons.

Similarly, neo-colonial oppression has torn out so many lives and hearts. And because of neo-colonial intervention, the religious extremists have exercised even more strict rules on women in the country to preserve their national culture. Women are banned from going out of their houses alone. In the outskirts of Kabul, women suffer more violence while trying to fight against neo-colonial supremacy.

From an early age, Shirin-Gol experiences traumatic circumstances in different forms: the loud noises of bombardment, her brother all red with blood and buried in the backyard of their house, her father and brothers fighting in the mountains, her sisters going secretly in their duty and returning with blood-stained skirts, her mother going silent for days and losing her smile. Men, women, and children are all victimized during war but women experience brutality to a greater extent. Women are triply victimized in a war-torn country like Afghanistan. Shakib asserts, "What they don't get given freely they take by force. Afghan food, clothes, money, Afghan women, girls, the honor of Afghan men, fathers, sons, the dignity and pride of the nation, faith and trust in God" (19). What the Russians don't get, they take forcefully, causing severe traumatic effects on the survivors. Kamla Bashin and Ritu Menon have illustrated how women are more victimized, doubly or triply in their book *Borders and Boundaries* about the Indian-Pakistan partition. Menon and Bhasin critique, "Women's sexuality symbolizes 'manhood'; its description is a matter of such shame and dishonor that has to be avenged. Yet, with the cruel logic of all such violence, it is women ultimately who are most violently dealt with consequently" (43). As in Afghanistan, women in the Indo-Pak partition war have been subjugated to

violence and trauma, losing their honor at the hands of men from the opposing religion. Shakib further mentions,

Russian boys in uniform obey orders, overcome fear, perform military rituals, muster courage, and demonstrate power, strength, and superiority. They fall upon villages, carry off women, rape, cut breasts off, and carve stomachs open, sling fetuses into the sand with a slap. They part children's necks from children's bodies, kiss girls' mouths, licks girls' stomachs, grab girls' breasts, and satisfy young Russian cocks in virgin Afghan vaginas. (19)

Women are prone to getting victimized in dangerous circumstances. The target of the opposite party is to turn dignity into shame. Women are considered the honor and dignity of the motherland, so the invaders kill their honor to dehumanize their acts during war. The act of the Russians reflects the misogynistic attitude by hurting and torturing women and treating their bodies as zones for revenge. These actions significantly contribute to the triple marginalization of women.

Following the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s and the resistance by Mujahideen factions, a new era of conflict and instability ensued. The Soviet-backed regime introduced a series of progressive changes designed to rapidly modernize Afghan society. However, this conflict led to a rise in Islamism and the creation of Mujaheddin resistance groups, each of which was supported by its foreign power and pursued the disestablishment of the PDPA (People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, established on January 1st, 1965) government once it came to power. The subsequent forced communism and the already widespread erosion of most rights and privileges of women followed.

Like Hosseini's Character Laila, Shirin-Gol also shares a similar fate of losing her brother with whom she's not much acquainted. It astonishes her to see her

mother's reaction to the traumatic event she experienced. "Shirin-Gol stands there, staring at Madar-with-no-color-in-her-face-and-no-voice-in-her-mouth. Shirin-Gol wonders who has stolen the color of Madar's face and the voice from her mouth . . ." (13). Her mother goes numb for a few days. This act is an effect of the trauma of loss inflicted by the Russian invasion. This silence is the Affective response of 'intensity and embodiment'. Also, the pre-linguistic nature of Affect emphasizes that Affect is experienced before it is articulated in language. It highlights how emotions can be communicated through actions, gestures, and physical sensations rather than words.

Another traumatizing experience is the hunger and starvation that neo-colonialism and the war afterward brought about. Khaled Hosseini presents the severe pain of hunger in his novel when Laila has to abandon her lovely daughter to an orphanage. A mother's heart can survive any pain rather than helplessly see her child starve to death. Moreover, the pain of her child's separation is yet another heart-wrenching episode of war. "Laila had not found the courage to tell Aziza the truth. She had told her that she was going to a special school where the children ate and slept and didn't come home after the class" (306, *A Thousand...*). The pain of separation is heavier for a mother than anything else in the world. So it does for the young kid.

Aziza panicked. All the way home, leaning on Mariam, Laila heard Aziza's shrill cries. In her head, she saw Zaman's thick, calloused hands close around Aziza's arms; she saw them pull, gently at first, then harder, then with force to pry Aziza loose from her. . . kicking in Zaman's arms as he hurriedly turned the corner, heard Aziza screaming as though she were about to vanish from the face of earth . . . (311)

The description of such a painful case by Hosseini evokes pain in the reader's psyche

and heart in the form of pain through cognition, the pain Afghan women endure with the hope of survival. This emotion is the intense expression of a mother-child relationship that the author presents and to which Leys connotes, "Affect is the name for what eludes form, cognition, and meaning" (450). The spectator or the readers would memorize such incidents as they arouse trauma, though they would not be explicitly discussed.

Shirin-Gol gets furious over her child, Nabi for wanting to be a Taleb and choosing the path of war. Initially, she tells him not to do so in a gentle manner, then threatens to abandon him, and finally beats him black and blue. Her kids cast hateful glances at her. She has nobody to lean on, looks at opium-addicted Morad in the corner, and hates everything and everyone. Later on, she cut her wrists to stop her son from being a Taleb. "For four days and four nights Shirin-Gol lies there with scraps of fabrics around her wrists" (296) that her daughter Nafass wrapped. The next day, as there is no way out of starvation, she takes all her children to an orphanage, thinking "at least they would get enough to eat" (298). Neo-colonization and the war tore the women into many parts but they tried to recollect themselves, moving ahead carrying as few scars as they could.

The female characters experience multiple oppression as women, and they have limited access to and control over resources, power, and decision-making. Societal norms, values, expectations, and stereotypes also constrain them. This puts them at risk of discrimination and violence to such an extent that they disproportionately face a range of negative health outcomes. Based on risk and protective factors, the adverse consequences of violence against women as a group are more severe, placing them at a significant disadvantage. Many day-to-day activities put them at high risk of being physically, sexually, or emotionally abused in various

ways.

Afghanistan experienced a series of changes in the 20th century, including a period of modernization under King Amanullah, which aimed to create a secular state and civilize society. The 1920s rulers (led by King Amanullah Khan) and, in some cases, those initiated by King Amanullah Khan worked hard to challenge traditional gender norms and empower women with measures like lifting the veil, education, and employment.

The female characters against this intersectional form of violence and aggression demonstrate remarkable levels of resistance and resilience in challenging patriarchal (men hold the power and men make the decisions), religious (what is written in religious texts should be applied in everyday life), and neo-colonial forms of energy. Through courageous, and collective acts and forms of resilience, Afghan women develop different strategies to resist and counter inherent structural forms of violence. They employ community, culture, identity, faith, solidarity, and identity systems to foster strength, endurance, and honor. In the novels, the female protagonists work through and against multiple oppression, appropriating their voices and pouncing on whatever forms of autonomy are at stake, all while being severely abused.

In Afghanistan, women are still largely excluded from political institutions and decision-making processes, silencing their voices and erasing their perspectives from the public arena. Although the constitution mandates women's political participation, they have little representation in parliament and political leadership and continue to face significant obstacles to representation. This weak political participation prevents structural gender inequality from being reduced and maintains the lifestyle of marginalization for women in Afghan society.

The central characters of both Khaled Hosseini and Siba Shakib proved themselves to be the strongest of women amidst the perpetual violence bringing about the dreadful experiences causing socio-political, religious, and economic trauma in women's lives. Ruth Leys asserts:

Trauma was defined as a situation of dissociation or 'absence' from the self in which the victim unconsciously imitated, or identified with, the aggressor or traumatic scene in a condition that was linked to a state of heightened suggestibility or hypnotic trance. Trauma was therefore understood as an experience of hypnotic imitation or identification -what I call mimesis – an experience that, because it appeared to shatter the victim's cognitive-perceptual capacities, made the traumatic scene unavailable for a certain kind of recollection. (8)

As the victim does not consciously remember the incidents, they may seem fine in the everyday progression of life. They only recall the traumatic incidents if such events reoccur and the recurrence of such events help the victim to work through the traumatic wounds.

Intersectionality offers an ideological foundation for conceptualizing the patriarchy, religion, and neocolonialism underpinning female characters' experiences, as illustrated in Khaled Hosseini's narrative works. The women who suffer tremendous events, experience innumerable traumatizing incidents but have learned to overcome such experiences to lead their lives even in the most unfavourable of situations. Since her childhood, Mariam has been familiar with many experiences that evoke guilt and sorrow. She learns to work through her traumas by expressing love to Laila and her children, especially Aziza. Mariam has become resilient towards depressing emotions by being friends with Laila and sharing her emotional turmoil.

She learns to open up and express her feelings of love and hatred at the time of necessity to save the life of Laila.

Likewise, Laila, after the eternal departure from her parents, feels a disconnection with her life. She is unhappy with her survival but hopes to live for the life inside her. She finds purpose in protecting the last relic of her childhood friendship and love in the form of a new life to which she has been the home. The new friendship and bonding with Mariam teaches her to handle and accept the hardships of life in the patriarchal and religious orthodox society. Michelle Balaev states, "Trauma in my analysis refers to a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense and the standards by which one evaluates society" (150). The motivation to live and lead life, having the ambition to create a livable place for the younger generation, not only her kids but the nation as a whole, is a life she expects to live.

Laila sees optimism through plans to escape the brutality of Rasheed and the warfare and move into a new nation and takes this to action by starting to save money. Laila and Mariam's attempt to give themselves a chance by escaping the domestic tyranny of Rasheed, while knowing the consequence of failure, is an excellent step towards the optimism brought by the hope of life they wish to live. They do not blame the situation or person and instead look forward to creating a livable space of their own. Both of them endure extreme pain from Rasheed's outrageous emotions. Even little Aziza has to endure starvation due to the situation. Laila pleads for forgiveness and makes promises not to repeat such incidents. "Just one glass, Rasheed. Not for me. Do it for her. You don't want her blood on your hands" (264). After two days of trial without a drop of water, she survives and expects a life of normalcy despite Rasheed's warning.

"You try this again, and I will find you. I swear on the Prophet's name that I will find you. And, when I do, there isn't a court in this godforsaken country that will hold me accountable for what I will do. To Mariam first, then to her, and you last. I'll make you watch. You understand me? I'll make you watch.  
(265)

Laila keeps resisting the warnings one after another and gets punished for her deeds. Yet, she is unbreakable, and her thoughts and hope for life make her even more resilient.

During the economic hardship, Rasheed finds a way to get rid of Aziza by sending her to the orphanage. Laila's heart breaks to the core again but she copes with the pain of separation by thinking of ways to reunite with her daughter. Sometimes Rasheed accompanies her; some other times, she goes by herself. On her solo ventures, she becomes misfortunate many times on the way to the orphanage when she gets spotted by the Taliban men, resulting in getting beaten up, dragged by the hair, and left on the street to die.

And so Laila's life suddenly revolved around finding ways to see Aziza. Half the time, she never made it to the orphanage. Crossing the street, she was spotted by the Taliban and riddled with questions-. . . before she was sent home. If she was lucky, she was given a tongue-lashing or a single kick to the rear, a shove in the back. Other times, she met with assortments of wooden clubs, fresh tree branches, short whips, slaps, often fists. One day, a young Taleb 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, (313)

Laila's determination does not quiver by any ends or means of the Talibans or

Rasheed. Instead, she becomes more conscious of her actions and better at her protection.

But, usually, Laila refused to cave in. She made it as if she were going home, and then took a different route down side streets. Sometimes, she was caught, questioned, scolded- twice, three, or even four times daily. Then the whips came down and the antennas sliced through the air, and she trudged home, bloodied, without so much as a glimpse of Aziza. Soon Laila took to wearing extra layers, even in the heat, two three sweaters beneath the burqa, for padding against the beating. (314)

Laila's unending efforts to meet her daughter exemplify her resilience. She refuses to stop despite all the difficulties as she is determined to carve her way to life. The beating and endurance of pain evoke a sense of trauma in the readers who can connect with her pain and experience vicarious trauma. The culture of the Taliban is Trauma for the survivors. Kali Tal comments, "Literature of trauma is written from the need to tell and relate the story of the traumatic experiences to make it 'real' both to the victim and to the community. Such writing serves both as validation and a cathartic vehicle for the traumatized author" (21). He further adds, "Des Pres remind us 'Displacement is the goal of any story, in degree; all fiction aims to usurp the real world with a world that is imagined" (21).

Religious and patriarchal extremism can be analyzed to understand the traumatic experiences suffered by the vast majority of women in the cultural and historical context. Despite the numerous adversities they face due to conflict and displacement, these women display remarkable strength and continue to assert their agency and humanity. Characters like Mariam and Laila in the novels are sustained by their sisterhood, maternal love, and will to live well against all odds. They resist by

taking brave steps while standing in solidarity, engaging in courageous acts of defiance for and with each other, and striving to change a tomorrow for themselves and others.

Mariam and Laila, try to get resurrection and gain agency of their life by breaking the oppressive rule of Rasheed. Rasheed's rage and violent intentions are clear when he learns about Tariq's presence in Laila's life. Mariam witnesses his attacks on Laila: "He was still on top of Laila, his eyes wide and crazy, his hands wrapped around her neck. Laila's face was turning blue now, and her eyes had rolled back... She is no longer struggling. *He's going to kill her*, she thought. *He really means to.*" (339). To save Laila, Mariam takes decisive action and attacks Rasheed: "Mariam steadied her feet and tightened her grip around the shovel's handle. She raised it. She said his name. 'Rasheed.' She hit him across the temple. The blow knocked him off Laila." (340).

Mariam would have stopped there if she believed that it would stop Rasheed. However, realizing his murderous intent for both herself and Laila, she resolves to act differently: "But in Rasheed's eyes she saw murder for them both" and she thinks she should not step back. She must gain her agency for her, for Laila and the kids. She attempts to break the oppressive boundary of Rasheed's tyranny. "She turned it so the sharp edge was vertical, and, as she did, it occurred to her that this was the first time that *she* was deciding the course of her own life." (341).

Mariam's act to kill Rasheed serves as a means of liberation from patriarchal oppression. It also illustrates the importance of solidarity and collective action among the oppressed. Fanon describes such acts of violence as demonstrated by Laila and Mariam as a form of psychological liberation, which is a necessary step for the oppressed to reclaim their dignity and agency. With this act, Mariam transforms from

a passive victim to an active agent of her fate.

In *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep*, Shirin-Gol makes a long journey through life with her children and husband to various places in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran in quest of a peaceful life. She endures physical and emotional turmoil including the separation from her husband on her way, whom she meets again later in Pakistan. She suffers sexual abuse by Morad's boss, is raped by the police officers, and bears children from each of them. Despite these sufferings, she shows great resilience by delivering her child by herself and helping others to make deliveries. She assists a doctor to earn a living, takes the responsibility of teaching her own and other kids, and helps with food portions. No matter what comes in life she moves on with the attitude of living rather than merely surviving through it. The character of Shirin-Gol encapsulates the collective experiences of a majority of women in Afghanistan. Her story represents the collective trauma experienced by Afghan women during the conflict-filled years. She witnesses the destruction of her family, experiences sexual violence, and faces social and cultural upheavals. Through her character, one can feel the strength and resilience of women in Afghanistan and their broader struggles.

The implications of conflict and the subsequent displacement of the female characters are depicted in the novels of Khaled Hosseini and Shiba Shaqib. From physical and psychological trauma to economic hardship and vulnerability, the female characters are confronted with countless challenges that endanger their safety, security, and dignity. However, amid all conflict and chaos, the women continue to resist and march with heads held high to adorn the emblem of survival, and to demand reparation and equal rights at the heart of adversity.

#### Chapter IV: Connection and Disconnection with the Homeland

Trauma, in its general sense, is defined as the emotional response someone has to a highly adverse event. Trauma was understood primarily as a physical wound. The understanding gradually broadened to encompass the psychological breakdown of war survivors. In the realm of gender trauma, this definition has further expanded to reflect both the immediate effects of violence and abuse and the subliminal results of being oppressed and marginalized on the individual level(s).

The characters in Hosseini's text *A Thousand Splendid Suns* are the victims of cultural and historical trauma. The protagonists in the novel are women who experience marginalization under the oppressive structure of patriarchy, religious orthodoxy, and neo-colonialism. The characters' relationship with their country combines love, memories, and hatred. Mariam's recollection of her kolba where she grew up with her mother is her memory of Afghanistan. Though she couldn't understand her mother's perspective and the harsh realities she faced, she is grateful for the life her mother provided. She finds herself deceived by the patriarchal father who spoils both their lives and leads to the death of her mother. She remembers the humiliation she experienced during her quest to be with her father in the city. The negligence and abandonment that she experienced made her numb. She feels ashamed and guilty for the cause of her mother's demise. Otherwise, she relishes the memories of the place, the river, the stone, and her little kolba, where, as a child, she used to wait for her father. Those were the happy moments she experienced while waiting for Jalil every Thursday.

Laila connects herself with her homeland through cherished memories of her childhood days and her dreams of the future. She recalls the long talk with her father about their plans to settle in the USA or Pakistan where they intended to start their

‘Afghan Restaurant’ and Laila to complete her university education. “She put an arm around his waist. ‘Oh, Babi. We’ll come back. When this war is over. We will come back to Kabul, *Inshallah*. You’ll see” (186). Laila’s memories also connect her to her schoolmates, those alleys and avenues, the girlish talk with Giti and Hassina, their planning about getting married and delivering children, and her dreams of gaining name and fame for her service to humanity. “By the time we would have shoved four from our bellies and you, you Laila . You will get your picture printed in the newspaper” (164). Laila’s memories also connect her with Tariq, her childhood friend who shared her first kiss, and the lovemaking on the day he left for Pakistan.

Laila wants to disconnect herself from the memories of the time when she lost everything with attacks from shell shocks, and rocketing in her country. She likes to erase her brothers’ death, mammy’s indifference towards her being consumed with the thoughts of her sons, the brutality of Rasheed, and the Islamic fundamentalists from her memory. However, the memories are strongly intertwined with her identity which has shaped her as a strong resilient woman.

The Taliban, who ruled the country in the 1990s, imposed strict interpretations of Islamic law that led women to be regarded as second-class citizens and deprived them of many rights and freedoms. Post 9/11 continued to be a period of international interventions and transition in Afghanistan with a movement to promote democracy, security, and women empowerment in the context of ongoing war and conflict. Laila also returns to her homeland with a wish to rebuild her nation and make it a sustainable place where both males and females receive equal rights.

The central character of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam embodies a complicated perspective that is tangled up in her love-hate relationship with her homeland, Afghanistan. Married off to a man three times her age, born out of wedlock

and marginalized by society, squeezed into a life that she resents, Mariam struggles with rejection and alienation from a very early age. She navigates the beauty of life governed by her own choices, grappling with her brokenness, a woman perceived as unworthy and worse off than death. She is deemed cheap, flawed, and unloved. The only affection she received was from her mother which she couldn't secure for long. Her only haven lies in the harsh climate of Herat, where she wrestles with a profound sense of displacement and shame. Her journey through the brutal truths of patriarchy and oppression, as she struggles with her identity in Afghanistan, carries a visceral weight of mourning and an inextinguishable hunger for validation and belonging.

Where Mariam is left destitute, Laila, the other protagonist of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, forms an opposing bond to Afghanistan no less moving than hers. From the very source of her family, Laila has a deep connection to her motherland, built upon giggles and kisses, and a profound feeling of cultural pride. But the eruption of conflict and the resulting mass exodus from her hometown instantly lands her in a world of chaos and confusion with the memories of her loved ones being overcast by the real horrors of war and loss. But throughout her struggles, Laila's steadfast love for Afghanistan never wanes - an endless supply of hope and grit always propels her toward a better life for herself and Afghanistan.

Shirin-Gol has varied experiences in each place she takes refuge in, along with her own country, Afghanistan. She connects with her nation through her encounter with Morad and her firstborn, Noor-Aftab. In Pakistan, she connects the mishaps she experiences, and in Iran, Shirin-Gol finds solace and is grateful for the new embrace she gets.

The characters are deeply rooted in complex trauma and layered emotional and psychological wounds caused by the deadly combination of patriarchy, religious

oppression, and perpetual neo-colonial interventions in Afghanistan. Mariam and Laila, as female protagonists, experience not only physical violence but also psychological and emotional abuse in familial and societal settings, respectively.

## Chapter V: Conclusion

The thesis asserts that Hosseini and Shakib's novels depict the gender trauma experienced by the female characters due to patriarchy, religion, and conflict in Afghan society. In their everyday life, the characters have experienced trauma. However, they also pave their paths considering the future of their upcoming generation. Although violence is inescapable, individuals can still assert freedom. Solidarity and unity help to acquire independence; acts of violence in self-defence can provide psychological relief. Resilience is the key to overcoming adverse circumstances. Education and knowledge play a pivotal role in fostering change. Most importantly, hope and integrity are necessary for enjoying true freedom.

Laila and Mariam's cases, as Fanon derives, demonstrate the importance of solidarity in dismantling oppressive structures. As they both unite to resist Raseed's oppression, they succeed in gaining autonomy. They fight collectively and maintain solidarity and unity through their actions by defending each other, as in the attempt to flee to Pakistan and the time they kill Rasheed. They divide the responsibility for the consequences of their action. Laila takes the responsibility of raising their children in a peaceful environment with love and support. She presents a beautiful life ahead not only for her kids but also for the new generation of her nation. Mariam, on the other hand, chooses to sacrifice her life which she finds useless being born a 'harami'. She makes her existence worthwhile by supporting Laila and her family to escape the traumatic life and offering an opportunity for a new beginning.

Similarly, Shirin-Gol and her husband unite to resist the injustice of the Pakistani police officers. She experiences the traumatic incident of being raped by three police officers. Her husband, Morad kills them as revenge and helps Shirin-Gol to overcome the painful and repressing incident. They stay together in every situation

to protect and provide for each other and their family. They extend their hand to help every individual in the Tribal area of Pakistan, from the mountains to the villages, including the doctor who needs assistance. This demonstrates their commitment to unity in combating life's adversities.

Religious misinterpretation by the dominant males needs to be redefined as this belittles women and creates an imbalance in families and society as a whole. The protagonists attempt to challenge the religious definition of male chauvinism as they take the forefront to protect their families by protesting the conventional rules imposed upon them. Trauma turns the female characters into resilient, hopeful, assertive, and determined individuals who seek autonomous will and agency.

This research paper also studies the similarities and differences between these novels set in the background of Afghanistan. Both books portray conflict, war, poverty, starvation, displacement, multiple factors of oppression, domestic violence, national violence, and the extremity of the Taliban and various other factions as the central theme of the texts.

However, Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* portrays domestic experiences of trauma such as the abuse of Laila and Mariam by their husband, restriction over their physical appearance, torture, beating, demand of son, and lack of agency to protest against unwilling subjugation. On the other hand, Shakib presents oppression within and outside of domesticity. The gender-based discrimination is portrayed at the national level. The way Shirin-Gol is not responded to by the self-claimed Mulla at the Tribal area in Pakistan, the wretchedness of the male's brutality and group rape she undergoes along with other female refugees demonstrate that the trauma Shirin-Gol experiences is the collective experience of the females of Afghanistan. Frequent relocations, responsibility for her family's security, and the

need to lead and take care of her children and her husband depict her experiences of trauma in a broader context.

Therefore, the gendered traumatic experiences of the female characters of both novels are the product of oppression rooted in patriarchal, religious, and neo-colonial ideologies. Their attempts to dismantle these boundaries and seek agency reflect their way of working through life's adversities.

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