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War, Patriarchy, And Institutionalized Gender Violence in a Thousand Splendid Suns: Community and Societal Dimensions of Heise's Ecological Framework

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Abstract

Gender-based violence in conflict-affected societies is not just an individual/ domestic issue. It is exacerbated by conflict, migration, economic suffering, social breakdown, male dominance, institutional failure and ethnically biased political frameworks. This is a qualitative literary study to explore the community and societal aspects of gender based violence in the novel A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini. The theoretical underpinning is provided by the Integrated Ecological Framework of Lori Heise, emphasising the community and societal aspects of this framework. In the interpretative text analysis method, the study examines the depiction of war ravaged communities, forced displacement, social isolation, institutional apathy, patriarchal gender norms, discriminatory legislation and Taliban administration. The results show that armed conflict not only damages physical infrastructure, but social networks that could protect women, as well. Without the support of family and community she is at risk of forced marriage, domestic violence, poverty and exploitation. Both Mariam and Laila are vulnerable to forced marriage, domestic violence, poverty and exploitation due to the lack of a family and community support system. Community institutions, such as police and transport services, do not question or take the place of male authority, as women's attempt to escape is met by their return to Rasheed. On the societal level, gender roles and norms link women with the roles of mother, wife, and subordinate worker; and political regimes are institutionalised versions of these roles. Taliban's edicts on women's education, employment, attire, health, mobility and social engagement morph cultural inequality into gender violence institutionalization. The study finds a relationship between the abuse of both of them, Mariam and Laila, and a social ecology which, at large level, is the overlapping and reinforcing influence of war, patriarchy, institutional failure, and authoritarian power. The paper is adding value to the field of literary studies in two ways: First, it demonstrates the link between private violence and public structures; second, it underscores the need for community reconstruction, gender-inclusive justice, women's political engagement, teaching, economic empowerment, and responsible institutions for a durable prevention.

Keywords: *structural violence, gender-based violence, patriarchy, war, Taliban, Afghan women, community institutions, ecological framework, A Thousand Splendid Suns*

1. Introduction

GBV is often envisioned as an interpersonal violence. This interpretation is incomplete as violence is mediated by the social context where perpetrators and victims live. Violence is not just personal misconduct when communities condone it, they are not willing to protect victims, discriminatory laws limit women's mobility, and political systems keep women from education and employment. It turns into structural and institutional.

Women face uniquely hazardous situations in conflict affected societies. Africa's conflicts not only take the lives of family members, but they devastate homes, uproot communities, disrupt schools, job markets, and justice systems, and create economic insecurity. While all civilians are affected by these, the effect is gendered. Women can be more likely to fall victim to forced marriage, domestic violence, exploitation, trafficking, sexual violence, and economic dependence. Meanwhile, institutions were supposed to offer protection but they may either fail or come to be run by actors who consider male authority and female submission legitimate.

These relationships can be discussed in the context of Afghanistan. The country's existence for decades has been marked by invasion, civil war, factional conflict, authoritarian governance and political transition, impacting all facets of Afghan life. The repercussions for women have been displacement, poverty, widowhood, limited education, employment, and political participation, and the experience of gender violence. After the Taliban retook power in August 2021, women and girls' rights were progressively curtailed and their access to the public life was restricted. UN Women has recently undertaken assessment of Afghanistan and found it to be one of the worst cases in the world for the exclusion of women from education, jobs, public engagement and decision-making (UN Women 2024). *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini is a fictional account of Afghan women's lives over a span of several decades in the era of political transformation. The novel is about Mariam and Laila - two people from different social backgrounds who are brought together ultimately in an abusive marriage with Rasheed. They are always part of their home lives, and their experiences are never separate from the political history. Laila is born in Kabul with an emphasis on education and schooling, and Mariam is born separately, outside of Herat. As the war escalates they find their circumstances changing. Familiar people and place, social connections, mobility and life are lost. These disruptions eventually lead to the control of these women by Rasheed.

The political context of the novel is the communist era, the Soviet occupation, resistance, civil war, Mujahideen rule and the rise of the Taliban. Hosseini does not look upon these events as something that happened in the distant past, in a country far, far away. Their impacts are in the home, in marriage, in schools, on the street, in hospitals and in bodies. Laila's family and house are destroyed by rockets. When there is no community protection, there is armed conflict. Poverty increases dependency. Women face limitations on education, employment, access to public space and health care, and freedom of movement under Taliban rule. The novel shows that there is a social ecology of public and private violence.

Recent scholarship has focused on the portrayal of patriarchy, political ideology, the marginalization of women, and resistance in Hosseini's novel. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khan et al. (2021) discuss the male chauvinism of Afghan society, and Yasin (2021) explores the characters of Mariam and Laila by drawing on the concept of subaltern endurance. In this article, Sreevidhya and Sridevi (2022) study the situation of women in selected novels in the context of extremist rule in South Asian countries. Through this, Naymat et al. (2023) link the idea of patriarchy with that of politics in Hosseini's story and demonstrate that women are oppressed by domestic and material structures. However, more recently, Qazi et al. (2025) have suggested that the novel is a product of the intermingling of gender oppression, political chaos, women's resistance, and resilience.

The studies cited above underscore the significance of patriarchy and political violence and a deeper understanding of the interplay between community and societal factors is needed. War is sometimes seen as a historical context; patriarchy as a cultural belief; and Taliban rule as a political condition. Heise's ecological model allows for the study of these as interrelated aspects of an environment that helps create and perpetuate gender-based violence.

The community level refers to the neighbourhoods, social networks, transportation systems, police, hospitals, education systems and other social environments that surround the community. These institutions may serve to shield or expose the women. In the novel, Kabul's war torn community is unable to offer a stable social support. Homes are evacuated, families are split, schools shut down, poverty grows and the police don't protect women from leaving abuse.

Broad political, legal, cultural, religious or economic arrangements are part of the societal level. Patriarchal ideas characterize men as guardians and decision-makers, and women as obedient, domestic servants, producers of children and protectors of family honour. During the Taliban's rule, these gender expectations turn into restrictions by the state. Women are not only discouraged to go to school and work in the first place, they are legally and physically barred from public life.

The present study posits that *A Thousand Splendid Suns* portrays GBV as the result of an ecosystem of reinforcing conditions. War obliterates communities, communities break down and women become more dependent, patriarchal norms become normalized, institutions don't support the survivors, and political regimes establish women's exclusion. Rasheed is therefore a personal violator of violence, but a structural enabler of violence.

The novel also belies any easy characterization of Afghan women as passive. Mariam and Laila fight in difficult circumstances, forge a bond, make an escape, try to keep their babies safe and consider other possibilities. The way they act shows agency, but the constraints applied to them are evidence of why personal bravery is not a substitute for effective institutions. People's capacity to achieve sustainable freedom is not only about personal resilience; it is also the creation of social and political frameworks that value women as citizens.

2. Background of the Study

In recent studies, conflict and gender violence have been a growing concern. There are no gender-neutral risks or resources in war: inequalities in place shape these distributions. Men might be exposed to combat and forced recruitment, while women may be subjected to widowhood, sexual violence, forced marriage, displacement, poverty and increased domestic responsibility. Conflict can also reinforce conservative gender roles, as it can convey a message of the need of male authority for protection.

Formal and informal institutions in Afghanistan have been disturbed many times in their functioning due to armed conflict. Families are losing their bread and butter, children are losing their schools, communities are losing their homes and health care is becoming a question. These situations produce vulnerabilities which can be exploited in the households and public institutions. There may be specific challenges for women who don't have jobs, education, documentation, transportation and male relatives.

But there is more to Afghanistan's gender order than the Taliban. Patriarchal practices were present prior to the Taliban regime, and have manifested in various forms in rural, urban, ethnic, class, and political settings. To portray Afghanistan as a uniformly homogeneous, or monolithic, culture is also untrue, as is to suggest that the country is without cultural variation or oppression. Afghan women have always been educated, employed and involved in politics, journalism, health, literature and activism and had their presence in community life. It is the diversity of the novel itself, through the educated fathers, progressive teachers, working women, restricted men, supportive relationships and the changing political eras, that Laila is able to see this.

With the Taliban's first ascendance to power, however, extreme patriarchal disparities became an all-pervasive form of political control. The novel is a fictionalization of the Taliban's restrictions on women's appearance, movement, speech, education, employment, and healthcare. These limitations make women's dependency a legal obligation.

More relevant to the novel since 2021. Many of the practices depicted in Hosseini's historical story are echoed by restrictions today put in place after the Taliban returned. According to UN Women (2025), the gender gap has grown in the areas of health, education, financial inclusion, decision making, and personal security. The contemporary context does not establish that all the fictional elements are documentary ones, but it does do so that the novel's concerns are still socially and politically relevant. According to Akbari and True (2024), the international Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda has not been able to change Afghanistan's male-dominated power dynamics or reverse the decline in women's rights. They document that women's security has been consistently prioritized below those of peace negotiations, state building, and military operations. The analysis is crucial and significant when it comes to the understanding of Hosseini's novel, as it shows that gender equality cannot be achieved by symbolic pledges. Political settlements which exclude women can perpetuate the structures of their vulnerability.

3. Problem Statement

There have been other interpretations of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* that focus on themes of patriarchy, war, domestic violence, oppression by the Taliban, and women's resistance. However, often times these themes are disassembled individually. War could be a historical event, domestic violence a personal problem, patriarchy a cultural norm and Taliban restrictions a political issue. This separation is not sufficient to capture the interplay between these forces.

Mariam and Laila's violence is not in an isolated household. When war takes the lives of Laila's parents, her home, her body, and her ties to her community, Laila becomes reliant on Rasheed. Mariam tries to escape from violence but it fails because police listen better to Rasheed than the women's right to safety. Taliban policies then further limit their participation in society, healthcare, etc. The community and societal conditions are in turn sustaining and maintaining physical abuse.

Another issue is the blanket explanation of the oppression of women in Afghanistan as stemming from the Afghan cultural context. These interpretations may fall into the trap of assuming Afghan society is consistently and universally patriarchal. They have the capacity to ignore political development, class distinction, local opposition, women's empowerment, and the involvement of armed groups and institutions. The novel is an illustration of a contested patriarchy. Laila's father believes in the importance of women's education, Tariq treats Laila with respect, women form solidarity, and in some times Kabul has had a larger female workforce.

Thus, the problem of the research is that there is no adequate analysis of community breakdown and societal regulation as intertwined. This paper aims to fill this void by using the community/society levels of Heise's Integrated Ecological Framework. It explores the interplay between war, displacement, institutional failure, patriarchal norms and political power in normalizing and institutionalizing GBV.

4. Research Objectives

The study has the following objectives:

1. To examine how war and community destruction increase women's vulnerability to gender-based violence in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.
2. To analyse the effects of displacement, poverty, and the collapse of social-support networks on Mariam and Laila.
3. To investigate how community institutions respond to women seeking protection from domestic violence.
4. To examine how patriarchal norms legitimize male authority and female submission.
5. To analyse how Taliban laws and political practices institutionalize gender inequality.
6. To explain the interaction of war, community breakdown, patriarchy, and political power in perpetuating gender violence.
7. To examine how women's education, solidarity, and public participation challenge structural oppression.

5. Research Questions

1. How does war increase women's vulnerability to gender-based violence in the novel?
2. How do displacement, poverty, and community disintegration restrict the choices available to Mariam and Laila?
3. How do community institutions respond to violence against women?
4. How do patriarchal gender norms legitimize male control over women?
5. How does Taliban governance transform social inequality into institutionalized gender violence?
6. How do community and societal ecological factors reinforce one another?
7. What forms of resistance does the novel present against structural gender oppression?

6. Significance of the Study

The study is important because it relates private violence to public structures. To comprehend Rasheed's abuse, the context of the war-ravaged and patriarchal society that grants his economic, social and legal status needs to be recognized. This analysis stops intimate partner violence being defined as the misbehaviour of one bad person.

The paper also advances the ecological literary criticism by incorporating the community and societal levels of the Heise model. In literary uses of an ecological perspective, the emphasis is often on

environmental issues, whereas the present study centres on violence and social ecology. Proves that neighbourhoods, institutions, laws, and economic and political systems influence characters.

The study is applicable to the current issues of Afghan women rights. Representations of women's exclusion are particularly important now, given the Taliban's return to power in 2021. The current limitations in education, employment, mobility and public participation confirm the need for institutionalized gender inequalities to be addressed urgently. UN Women (2025) indicated that in 2025, almost eight of every ten young women in Afghanistan was not in school, in work or training.

Last but not least, the research denies the notion of overcoming oppression through resilience. There's a place for courage in the work of rebuilding schools, reforming police, safe transport, and changing discriminatory laws; and yes, there is a place for it in the work of Mariam and Laila. The study, therefore, is focused on both institutional responsibility and individual agency.

7. Literature Review

7.1 Gender-Based Violence in Conflict-Affected Societies

Gender-based violence can escalate during an armed conflict, even when women are not a direct target of violence. Housing loss and displacement, job loss, food insecurity, institutionalization and loss of family members can lead to increased vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. Conflict can also make violence a more accepted and common way of solving disputes and reinforce militaristic masculinity. Vulnerability of women in conflict should not be interpreted as feminineness. It results from unequal access to resources, mobility, work, political representation and security institutions. The poor socioeconomic status of women coupled with the breakdown of their social support network may create limited choices for women.

Akbari and True (2024) provide an example of the violation of women's security in Afghanistan in the name of political deals between national and international actors. Even though women's rights were formally part of post-2001 state-building, women were not represented at the key political settlements. The peace process eventually paved the way for the return of the Taliban, lacking in any long-term security and participation measures for women.

This argument contributes to the understanding of the political world that is portrayed in the novel by Hosseini. Women are not necessarily secure when governments change. New rules, risks and uncertainties arise with each political changeover. Even liberation periods can leave women under the protection of flaky institutions, while at the same time empowering armed men.

Laila's family is involved in a conflict in their own lives. Her mother's emotional life is transformed by the deaths of her brothers, and education and normal mobility are disrupted by continued war. The death of her parents from a rocket attack causes personal, emotional grief. It eliminates the house as a protective institution and makes Laila dependent on strangers. War, then, is what opens the door for Rasheed to be able to gain power over her.

7.2 Community Disintegration, Displacement, and Social Isolation

Community is more than a geographical location. It comprises networks of trust, schools, markets, neighbours, transport, medical services, religious institutions and local authorities. These can offer protection, emotional support, information and income. With their destruction by conflict, people get more isolated.

Kabul slowly transforms from a city of learning, family and promise to the city of rockets, ruins, uproar and terror in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Women's lives are curtailed as the city changes. In the very same city, Kabul is both a place of schooling and friendships for Laila and a place of injury, homelessness, dependency.

There are gendered impacts of displacement. A displaced woman can lose paperwork, extended-family protection, community reputation, job and knowledge of services. She can also lose independence in housing and mobility in marriage and/or male guardianship. Such is the case of Laila's shift from being an educated girl to Rasheed's slave wife.

The collapse of community can also remove witnesses. Domestic violence is easier to conceal when neighbours are displaced, institutions are closed, and public movement is dangerous. Mariam and Laila's household becomes increasingly isolated from external accountability. Rasheed's authority expands as the surrounding community's protective capacity declines.

7.3 Patriarchy and the Social Construction of Gender Roles

Patriarchy – a social organization where men possess an excessive level of power in relation to women in the areas of property, family affairs, political affairs and cultural significance. Patriarchy doesn't need all of the men to be violent and all of the women to be powerless. It is based on the expectations of leadership, protection, authority, obedience, honour and respectability as applied to gender.

Male chauvinism is an important aspect of the gender relations that Khan et al. (2021) suggest is depicted in Hosseini's novel. Rasheed thinks that the husband has the right to decide on his wives' garments, walking, work, procreation, and social engagement. He's not just showing off his own personal fancy. He constantly refers to cultural expectations to justify domination as 'the normal male behavior'.

Naymat et al. (2023) also relate the novel's patriarchy to the economic and political power. Women's limited access to resources is a facilitative factor for their subordination. Domestic labour is expected but not produces ownership or decision-making authority. Men's authority as providers is then cited as an argument for their own obedience.

The concepts of woman and self understanding are also influenced by the patriarchal norms. Mariam learns that women have to suffer accusations from men. Laila is pushed into leaving the choice of marriage for social survival. The significance of motherhood in women's value, especially in the production of sons. Such expectations put a moral burden on the learner before the formal implementation of rules.

Afghan culture, though not necessarily all-male, is not static, though, in the novel. Hakim educates Laila, Tariq acts as her intellectual and emotional peer, and Laila and Mariam defy the domestic hierarchy. The story is thus not one of a universal body of culture but a conflict between diverging conceptions of gender.

7.4 Institutional and Structural Violence

Structural violence is the systematic denial of safety, health, education, economic resources, justice or political participation to a group. Sometimes it will not be a direct attack by a person that is obvious. Institutional rules, unequal resource distribution, exclusion and neglect are all causes of harm.

Examples of institutional violence in the novel include the refusal of the authorities to help with Mariam and Laila's plan to escape. Instead of being treated like an individual who wants to escape abuse, the women are considered to be breaking the authority of the marriage. When they return to Rasheed they

face a brutal revenge. The institution does not directly cause the initial domestic violence, but the Institute's response allows for the continuation of domestic violence.

Healthcare is another case in point. Women have limited access to health providers and hospitals under the Taliban regime. Laila's childbirth is a perilous event because the health workers of the female gender are not well-equipped while men are barred from treating women easily. Political regulation, then, generates unnecessary suffering of the body.

Institutional control in the area of education also exists. Girls' absence from school costs them more than just education. Education is a part of employment, social networks, public confidence and political awareness. Limiting education therefore exacerbates reliance.

New research on Afghanistan reveals that institutional exclusion is still a modern day issue. Gender gaps in decision-making, economic participation, education, health and security are well documented in the country profile (2024) for UN Women. These motifs reflect the timelessness of Hosseini's literary portrayal.

7.5 Taliban Governance and Gendered Exclusion

The novel's most explicit instance of violence on a societal level is the Taliban's gender policies. Official rules for women are those that make the woman's status be mediated and defined by male guardianship and confinement in the house. Women are barred or strongly discouraged from working, learning, travelling alone, or wearing clothes that are not approved by society, or obtaining equal access to medical care.

In their study, Sreevidhya and Sridevi (2022) link the phenomenon of extremist governance and its effect on women's condition in the fictional literature of South Asia. Political extremism is more than conservatism—it's also about the capacity to impose this ideology with police, punishment, and public surveillance.

Patterns of exclusion have continued throughout the pandemic. By 2024, over 70 restrictive decrees had impacted women's participation in the public sphere (UN Women, 2024). The restrictions have impacted secondary and higher education, work, travel, leisure, the ability to express oneself publicly, and access to institutions.

The Taliban's approach illustrates the institutionalization of social norms. Women may be expected to stay at home by their husbands, but this pressure can be enforced by political edict. The state is in practice the continuation of the family leadership by men in public administration.

7.6 Women's Agency, Solidarity, and Resistance

The study of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has increasingly focused upon the character of women, with studies focusing on how they were not just victims. Imran et al. (2022) discuss the women in Hosseini's novels using the terms of obedience, resistance and empowerment, claiming that the female characters evolve in their reactions to gender oppression.

Endurance is also part of the subaltern experience, as Yasin (2021) argues. Endurance doesn't necessarily imply acceptance. Near the enemy, the silence of strategy, the concealment of the situation, the adaptation and waiting for opportunity are sometimes the key to survival.

Qazi et al. (2025) state that Mariam and Laila's solidarity allows them to reclaim agency in a context of a patriarchal and conflictual society. Their friendship makes it harder for Rasheed to keep them separate

and forms a community within the family. Their relationship shows that resistance doesn't have to be formal; small networks of trust can provide resistance when larger institutions fail.

However, it is not enough to have solidarity. They try to escape, but their first attempt fails because there's recognition of male authority in transport and policing systems. Hence, institutional barriers are faced by resistance. The agency of the novel is so effective because it does not attempt to make oppressive structures vanish through courage.

7.7 Research Gap

The novel has been the subject of existing scholarship that has discussed the themes of domestic violence, male chauvinism, political conflict, subaltern identity and women's resistance. But, there has been little emphasis on the relationship between the war damaged communities and institutionalized patriarchy. To-date, this is the first study to examine the community and societal levels in tandem. It sees war, displacement, institutional failure, cultural values and the Taliban as reinforcing aspects of a social ecology. It also differentiates between Afghan society as a diversified social field and the particular political institutions which implement gender exclusion.

8. Theoretical Framework

8.1 Heise's Integrated Ecological Framework

Lori Heise's Integrated Ecological Framework provides a multi-level explanation of violence against women. The personal level relates to personal history and characteristics. The relationship level is about intimate and family power. Community level focuses on neighbourhoods, institutions, workplaces, schools and social networks. At the societal level, it refers to norms, laws, political frameworks, economic systems, and overall gender disparities.

The framework is nested, meaning that each level is part of and dependent on the others. Violence occurs in a family, the family is part of a community, and the community is part of a political system. The more the victim is protected, the more education they have, the more employment and housing they can get, the less control the perpetrator has. Male guardianship and lack of freedom of movement in institutions intensifies his power.

The ecological model is particularly well suited to *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as the novel constantly shifts between home and country. Domestic events are linked to the shifts in political power. No house can ever get away from Kabul and no Kabul can get away from war and national governance.

8.2 Community-Level Factors

The community level of this study includes:

- Armed conflict within neighbourhoods
- Destruction of homes and infrastructure
- Displacement and homelessness
- Loss of family and social networks
- Poverty and unemployment
- Community silence concerning domestic violence
- Police and transport institutions
- Educational and healthcare services
- Absence of shelters and safe support
- Informal women's solidarity

Community factors may be protective or harmful. Schools, neighbours, relatives, police, hospitals, and transport systems can support women, but they may also exclude them or reinforce male authority.

8.3 Societal-Level Factors

The societal level includes:

- Patriarchal definitions of gender
- Male guardianship
- Preference for sons
- Female domesticity and obedience
- Family honour
- Political authoritarianism
- Discriminatory legal rules
- Taliban restrictions
- Gender segregation
- Exclusion from education and employment
- Limited political representation
- Structural economic inequality

These factors provide the broad ideological and institutional environment in which community and household practices acquire legitimacy.

8.4 Structural Violence as a Supporting Concept

Structural violence is an addition to the ecological approach because it accounts for harm that occurs from institutions that never actually assault anyone. Conditions for survival and autonomy are limited by denial of education, healthcare, mobility and justice. In the novel, this denial is not inadvertent. Organized by gender.

9. Research Methodology

9.1 Research Approach

The study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach. This method is appropriate because it seeks to understand meanings, relationships, representations, and social structures rather than measure statistical prevalence.

9.2 Research Design

The research uses contextual textual analysis and close reading. The primary text is Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The analysis focuses on narrative events involving war, displacement, neighbourhood destruction, poverty, transportation, police, healthcare, education, gender norms, Taliban decrees, and women's public participation.

9.3 Selection of Textual Evidence

Passages and events were selected purposively according to their relevance to the community and societal levels. Major areas included:

1. Laila's childhood and education in Kabul
2. The deaths of family members during war
3. Destruction of Laila's home
4. Poverty and neighbourhood disintegration
5. Mariam and Laila's attempted escape

6. Institutional response to the escape
7. Taliban decrees governing women
8. Laila's childbirth and restricted healthcare
9. Women's exclusion from public life
10. Reconstruction and return at the novel's conclusion

9.4 Data-Analysis Procedure

This analysis was carried out in 4 steps. The novel was read first, to elicit information about violence conditions in the community and the society. Second, the chosen material was themed in a manner such as war, displacement, institutional failure, patriarchy, education, healthcare and political control. Thirdly, relationships between themes were explored. Fourth, the results were checked with the latest literature from 2021 to 2025.

9.5 Interpretive Reliability

The application of clear theoretical categories and consistency between the research questions and the findings were used to support reliability. The study highlights the distinction between textual representation and empirical generalization. Close reading of the novel is used to support claims and recent scholarship and institutional reports are used to support contemporary factual observations.

9.6 Ethical Considerations

The paper avoids treating Afghan culture as homogeneous. Patriarchy is analysed as a system of unequal power rather than as an essential characteristic of Afghan identity. The study also recognizes women's resistance and the existence of supportive Afghan men, educators, activists, and families.

10. Analysis and Findings

10.1 Kabul as a Changing Community

The city of Kabul plays more than a role in the novel. It is an illustration of the social changes that have occurred in the country of Afghanistan through political periods. In Laila's childhood, the city still gives her education, friendship, job, and aspirations. Her father's interest in learning is a vision of Afghanistan, where women can participate in the development of the nation.

The city is divided, and Kabul is the scene of growing conflict. Rockets are destroying houses, roads become hazardous to use, families are moving out, and public life is hindered. Social possibility is destroyed when the physical is destroyed. Laila's hopes are increasingly hard to uphold, as institutions that are vital to education and mobility are coming to a crumbling end.

This shift is a reflection of the level of ecological violence in the community. It doesn't take a direct attack on Laila to make her feel vulnerable. It makes a person's autonomy possible by destroying the environment around her, and thus takes away the protection she used to have.

10.2 War and the Destruction of Family Protection

Laila's brothers die and it has an impact on the whole family. Fariba's sense of loss diminishes her emotional ability to support Laila and the father is a more consistent source of encouragement. The family has survived, although war has already become a part of the family's emotional landscape.

When Laila's parents are killed in a rocket attack, the family is destroyed. At the same time she loses her protection, housing, income and her social status. In addition to the injury, she has less mobility. The only immediate shelter is then Rasheed's home.

Conflict and forced dependency are thus directly related. Rasheed is exploiting a weakness that he did not cause, but that is the weakness. The universal absence of alternative institutions expands the role of the man in the domestic sphere. Institutions being removed in the war expands the role of the man in the domestic sphere.

10.3 Displacement and Constrained Survival

Displacement is more than a movement of people. It impairs identity, community recognition, education, employment and access to resources. Laila is living in exile in her own city, having lost her childhood Kabul. Her house is broken down, friends have left her and violence runs through the streets.

Her marriage to Rasheed has to be understood in this exile. She is not able to have a meaningful independence without a home, relatives, money or safe transport. When community breaks down marriage is a survival mechanism.

This result is consistent with the ecology principle on vulnerability which is 'situational'. Laila's intellect and intelligence are not lost, but the conditions are no longer conducive to the use of education for immediate independence.

10.4 Poverty and the Intensification of Gender Violence

As the economy goes down, the economy of the household goes down as well. Rasheed's business fails, the food is running low and life is getting more desperate by the day. Violence is not inherent to poverty, it can exacerbate inequalities in access to power but it can also limit the ability to escape.

When things get tough, Rasheed gets more abusive. He doesn't look at poverty as a common issue, he looks at it and blames and punishes the women. He has the power and can manage scarce resources.

Economic exclusion of women is thus a social and a relational problem. Social norms limit employment, political rules limit women's access to public employment and Rasheed controls the money of the household. These levels build off each other.

10.5 Community Silence and the Normalization of Abuse

A lack of effective intervention by the surrounding community helps explain Rasheed's violence. Domestic violence is concealed in the home and is regarded as a husband's personal jurisdiction.

Not all neighbours are approving of violence when there is no outcry from the community. People's ability to intervene can be diminished due to war, fear, poverty, and institutional weakness. But the outcome is the same: Rasheed has no major external consequences.

Gender expectations reinforce the normalisation of abuse. When the concept of obeying is applied to the role of the wife, it may be more severely condemned if she does not obey as opposed to when the concept is applied to the role of the man. The community could thus view a woman's desperation to leave as disorder and not violence, and ignore the violence that is driving her away.

10.6 The Failed Escape and Institutional Complicity

One of the most obvious instances of a failure of institutions is when Mariam and Laila try to escape. They can't travel from Kabul without the help of public transport since that's their plan. But social restrictions on women's mobility make them rely on an outsider male.

When questioned, they cannot exercise an unquestioned right to travel. Their story is disbelieved and the police bring them back to Rasheed. This is a response that sets the couple above all else for safety.

Because the institution knows that the women are trying to leave but they are not investigating why they are leaving or there is a failure to protect the women. If they are returned, they are subjected to serious reprisal. The violence that ensues is thus facilitated by the State.

In this episode, we are given a good look at the need for personal courage as a stepping stone. The women are planning, cooperating and taking action, but are being prevented by institutional rules. They are not weak, but rather they are caught up in their structures.

10.7 Patriarchal Norms and Male Guardianship

The novel's social gender structure is based on the fundamental principle of male guardianship. Women's movements, marriage, dress, and public interactions are under the male's control. Rasheed claims to be a husband and an official guardian for women, and thus able to reign over them.

Protection is there in the language as a cover for domination. Restrictions are justified as being for the sake of honour, safety or morality, but they deprive women of their ability to determine their own interests. When obedience is required, protection is given.

Social value is also defined by patriarchal norms. Men are seen as the leaders, workers and decision makers in the public sphere while women are judged as wives, mothers, and bearers of family honour. This hierarchy is exhibited in Rasheed's preference for sons. Male children are viewed as the legacy and the economic value whereas female children are viewed as a burden.

In the novel, Naymat et al. (2023) shows that patriarchal ideology is related to material power. The male guardianship system is efficient because males dominate the resources and public institutions. Thus, it is cultural and economic.

10.8 Gender Roles and the Restriction of Women's Identity

The social structure also limits women, via symbols as well as physical barriers. It is expected that Mariam will be known for her service to Rasheed. Laila's image as an educator is gradually being superseded by the expectations of domesticity and motherhood.

Domestic labour is seen as women's natural role rather than a viable job. Women cook and clean and look after children, they manage scarcity and they hold onto family life, but they do not create authority. Structural violence is the limitation of identities, because it removes future options. A woman that cannot get educated and employed is not only losing out on opportunities right now, but she's also losing out on income opportunities, public influence, and social networks in the future.

10.9 Taliban Decrees and the Institutionalization of Patriarchy

The Taliban are a clear sign of the change from social patriarchy to institutionalized gender exclusion. Public laws are made around clothing, what to do/what to do not, education, work, speech and healthcare.

In this system, the state enforces the same gender hierarchy as Rasheed does in the house. Ms Rasheed asserts her husband's authority, the Taliban assert their government. In both, obedience of women is seen as the moral order.

The expansion of domestic control is achieved through political enforcement. Women are just as limited as public institutions are, so that Rasheed no longer has to be entirely on his own in the matter of surveillance. The State acts as an extension of the authority of patriarchy in the household.

Similarly, Sreevidhya and Sridevi (2022) note that extremist governance within Hosseini's fiction greatly contributes to the condition of women. It is the power of the regime to turn prejudice into policy and punishment that makes it so important.

10.10 Exclusion from Education

One of the most impactful ways of women's violence in society is denying girls' education. Education is the source of literacy, knowledge, employment, social network, confidence, and the ability to engage in public decision-making.

Laila's father sees education as key to the future of Afghanistan. His vision of the development of the nation is different from what is currently happening in the country, and his belief is one in which the development of women cannot be separated from that of the nation. That's not the vision the Taliban have for the country.

The relevance of the times is apparent. The 2025 Afghanistan Gender Index by UN Women reveals significant lack of participation of young women in education, employment and training. This exclusion has intergenerational implications, as women's opportunities, their household earnings, public engagement, and access to professional services are all diminished.

In the novel, informal education is a form of resistance. Under conditions of constraint, teaching children helps to maintain knowledge and defies the state from monopolising women's futures.

10.11 Employment and Economic Exclusion

Women who do not work depend more on men relatives. It also excludes female professionals from educational institutions, hospitals, government offices and humanitarian services.

Economic exclusion has an impact on the community as a whole. Girls are deprived of education, and female patients of health services when mothers are barred from teaching, health or other roles. A policy aimed at women thus undermines the overall strength of community institutions.

The limitation also further perpetuates domestic violence. A woman with no income will have less options for escaping an abusive marriage. The employment policy in the society thus reinforces the control of the relationship.

10.12 Gender Segregation and the Healthcare Crisis

Laila's birth during the Taliban period is a case in point of how discriminatory policies affect people. Women are channelled to under-resourced facilities and gender barriers restrict access to expertise available.

The ensuing suffering is structural, as it can be predicted and prevented. Those who can get care and from whom depends on the political rules. Women's bodies become a place that ideology is imposed. But the issue of healthcare exclusion also reflects the moral inconsistency of the Taliban's rhetoric. Any system that appears to be protecting the modesty of the women will endanger their lives as it will limit their treatment. The rule is to choose ideological control over health and dignity.

10.13 Public Punishment and the Politics of Fear

Authoritarian power is also manifested in public examples, in addition to rules. Punishment, surveillance and threats tell those resisting what they will get if they resist.

Collective fear is generated by public violence. When no one is around to punish them, women may limit themselves. The exercise of government power is then internalized in the daily behavior.

This is an atmosphere similar to Rasheed's oppressive family. In both situations, uncontrollable punishment promotes self-surveillance. We have the same modes of authority at home and in the state.

10.14 War, Masculinity, and the Normalization of Force

Years of war make people accustomed to armed rule and violence as a means of solving problems. Armed men and armed institutions gain social power; peaceful institutions lose social power.

This sets the tone for Rasheed's manhood. He appreciates strength, authority and strictness. Violence is not excused because of war but war is the social setting where aggression and domination become commonplace.

An ecological interpretation thus separates responsibility from context. The lack of challenge of violent masculinity can be attributed to the societal militarization and the fact that Rasheed still faces abuse.

10.15 Interaction Between Community and Societal Factors

There is a continual reinforcement of community and societal factors. Patriarchal norms affect police responses, and institutional practices reinforce these norms. Women's employment is limited by the rules of the Taliban, thereby increasing the dependency of the household. War ruins schools and hospitals, and political exclusion is much more readily enforced.

The aborted escape is illustrative. The community beliefs about male guardianships inform community transportation and policing. The community authorities then carry out those beliefs by sending the women back to Rasheed. Both of them add to his household power.

Likewise, community schools are a mechanism for excluding learners, and are a social policy. This gap in education then reduces women's contribution to employment and political power in future generations, perpetuating inequality.

10.16 Women's Resistance and Alternative Communities

The novel depicts resistance, in the face of structural oppression. A community of care, not control, is created between Mariam and Laila. They provide emotional recognition and practical cooperation in their relationship.

Laila's determination to educate is also a resistance of the society. She decides to return to Kabul and to help reconstruct a nation, thus contesting the notion that women should be outside of national life. Her deeds connect her healing with her community rebuilding.

For Qazi et al. (2025) the solidarity is a recovery of female agency. The ecological reading notes, however, that it is more sustainable if resistance is linked to working institutions. Friendship is what allows people to live; school and community rebuilding is what allows people to transform on a longer-term basis.

10.17 Return, Reconstruction, and the Possibility of Social Change

This wasn't the only freedom that the novel offers in the end of the novel. Laila goes back to Kabul with Tariq to help rebuild. The return to Afghanistan is a challenge to the stories that say that women only need to leave Afghanistan.

Reconstruction has meaning as both material and symbolic. Reconstructing institutions helps to enhance conditions for education, community, and public participation. When Laila returns it is a reminder that the social environments can be changed, not just endured.

Mariam's sacrifice is also linked to the community life in the future in the conclusion. Her legacy lives on in Laila's memory, family and dedication to reconstruction. Social future becomes individual resistance.

11. Major Findings

There were seven basic findings from the study. War is an indirect but effective catalyst for gender violence, in many cases. War is one such indirect but strong cause of gender violence in many. It breaks up families, homes, schools, jobs, transportation and support networks and leaves women more dependent.

Second: Displacement is both physical and social. When Laila loses her home and family, she loses her sense of community and ends up in a life-changing relationship with Rasheed.

Third, there are lack of protection of women in community institutions. Because police and transport systems enforce male guardianship and not survivor safety when responding to the attempts of escape by Mariam and Laila, this shows that.

Thirdly, patriarchal norms create a societal belief that men should lead and women should obey. These norms define marriage, motherhood, public mobility, economic power and family honour.

Fifth, the institutionalization of Taliban rule extends gender hierarchy to a number of areas including education, employment, health, movement, clothing, and public participation.

Sixth, the influence of community factors and societal factors are mutually reinforcing. Community institutions have discriminatory rules and political restrictions amplify domestic dependency.

12. Discussion

The results validate the pertinence of Heise's ecological model to literary analysis. The novel involves multiple layers of gender violence. Rasheed's abuse is within the relationship, but has community and state backing.

The analysis expands on research which has identified patriarchy as a central theme. Both Khan et al., 2021 and Naymat et al., 2023 deal with male chauvinism. Khan et al., 2021, and Naymat et al., 2023 have both been linked to male chauvinism. The present study demonstrates how these forces become active in the context of the police, transportation, schools, hospitals, employment systems and political decrees.

The findings also help to confirm Akbari and True's (2024) claim that women's rights cannot be secured through symbolic political commitments without changing the existing patriarchal institutions. The novel shows numerous government changes that switch the public discourse, but when institutions are dominated by armed and patriarchy actors, then the female population continues to be at risk.

The failed escape is particularly significant in terms of the failure of individual power. Mariam and Laila are motivated, plan, and courageous. They try to do well but are unsuccessful because public institutions refuse to recognize their independence. It is not that they are absent, it is that agency is punished in the institutional environment.

The findings also demonstrate the relationship between education and violence prevention. Education does not ensure safety but it contributes to increase future opportunities as well as challenges of ideological control. The Taliban opposition to women education is not a fortuitous occurrence, it is a safeguard of the social system of female dependence.

The health episode exposes the physical nature of structural violence. The absence of a person making intentional acts of harm results in pain and medical danger when there is gender segregation and institutional neglect. Unhelpful result is inherent in service organisation.

It also reveals that there is a relationship between war and patriarchy. While not all patriarchal norms are the result of war, war does reinforce actors who rely on force and erode social institutions and gives the license to deny that gender equality is not a priority for security. Women are later put on a waiting list for rights, despite the fact that their rights have been negotiated in the process of conflict.

In the current discourse on peace politics, this is illustrated by Akbari and True (2024), who show that women's rights have been continually bargained for and against military and diplomatic interests. In the novel Hosseini has created the something with ordinary lives. Women's freedom is up for negotiation in each and every political transition that brings order.

The study does not, however, provide a hopeless understanding. Mariam and Laila form a tiny group of resistance. Hakim is an alternative education to the father, who is patriarchy. Tariq is a role model of a balanced relationship. Laila's trip back to Kabul ties women's participation to the reconstruction of the country.

In these alternatives, we see that patriarchy is socially constructed and is therefore malleable. Afghan identity is not a negative thing, the novel shows. It portrays conflicts between different social and political ideologies.

13. Social, Educational, and Policy Implications

13.1 Rebuilding Community Protection Systems

Post-conflict reconstruction should include safe housing, transportation, women's centres, legal assistance, and community-based protection. Rebuilding roads and buildings without rebuilding social protection leaves survivors vulnerable.

13.2 Gender-Responsive Police and Justice Institutions

Police must be trained to recognize domestic violence, coercive control, forced marriage, and the risks associated with leaving an abuser. Women seeking help should not be returned automatically to husbands or guardians.

13.3 Protection of Girls' and Women's Education

Education should be treated as a non-negotiable right and a central component of violence prevention. Safe schools, trained female teachers, scholarships, distance-learning options, and international support are essential.

13.4 Economic Participation

Women require access to employment, vocational training, financial services, property, and humanitarian assistance. Economic independence reduces vulnerability to forced and abusive relationships.

13.5 Accessible Healthcare

Gender restrictions should never prevent timely medical treatment. Healthcare systems must employ and train women while ensuring that patients are not denied qualified care because of discriminatory rules.

13.6 Women's Political Participation

Women must participate meaningfully in peace negotiations, constitutional processes, local government, humanitarian planning, and reconstruction. Political agreements made without women may reproduce patriarchal power.

13.7 Context-Sensitive International Engagement

International actors should support local women's organizations rather than treating Afghan women only as symbols of intervention or humanitarian suffering. Akbari and True (2024) emphasize the need to connect international frameworks with locally informed strategies capable of confronting patriarchal power.

13.8 Support for Women-Led Community Networks

Women's informal networks can provide education, information, emotional support, and protection where formal institutions are absent. Such networks require resources and security rather than symbolic recognition alone.

14. Limitations of the Study

This research is based on only one piece of literature and two of Heise's levels of his ecological framework. Individual and relationship factors are mentioned only when they illuminate community or societal factors.

This is an interpretive, not an empirical study. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a fiction work and does not intend to be an accurate representation of all Afghan women. Afghanistan has significant regional, ethnic, class, and education, political and family differences.

The study mainly involves gender violence against women. It does not offer detailed analysis of acts of violence against men, children, ethnic minorities, refugees or other vulnerable groups in the novel.

The contemporary evidence (post-2021) is used to demonstrate the ongoing relevance of the topic, but most of the novel is set in earlier times. It is not assumed that policies implemented in the present day will be exactly the same as past policies.

15. Suggestions for Future Research

A comparison of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* with other Afghan and South Asian novels in which women are depicted during times of armed conflict may be conducted in future studies. Works by Nadia Hashimi, Atiq Rahimi, Bapsi Sidhwa, Kamila Shamsie and Deborah Rodriguez may be considered for comparative analysis.

Women, Peace and Security theory, Feminist institutionalism, Structural Violence theory, Trauma studies, Marxist feminism, Postcolonial feminism, and Intersectionality are some of the theories that may be used to study the novel.

Additional aspects of healthcare, education, displacement, motherhood, childhood and intergenerational trauma could also be explored in future research. A reader-response approach might be used to examine the impact of the novel on students' perceptions of war and gender violence.

Empirical research can be compared to themes in the novel to interviews, oral histories, policy documents, or reports by Afghan women's organizations. This should focus on the words of Afghan women and not literature as a substitute for firsthand testimony.

16. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore war, patriarchy and institutionalized gender violence at the community and societal level in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini using Lori Heise's Integrated Ecological Framework. The analysis illustrates how violence towards Mariam and Laila has no boundaries to her house. They experience other contexts of armed conflict, displacement, poor living conditions, community breakdown, institutional crisis, paternalism and authoritarianism.

The ability to get education, family protection, housing and future possibility is lost in war. Her home is destroyed and her parents die, leaving her in a state of dependence out of which Rasheed exploits her. Community institutions are not neutral, and this is yet another way that the attempt to escape failed for Mariam and Laila. Male guardianship and return of the women to danger is enforced by transportation and police systems.

On the social level, the norms of patriarchy establish the legitimacy of male authority and the virtue of female obedience. Women are confined to the role of wife, mother, homemaker and guardian of family honour. Taliban rule translates these norms into formal constraints on education, work, travel, dress, health and engagement in the public sphere.

These factors combine and create institutionalised gender violence. Weak communities are weak communities; no communities can protect women when they are weak, political systems limit women's independence, and dependency makes abusive household strong. The levels build upon one another.

The novel, however, is also a story of resistance. Mariam and Laila build a bond of care and solidarity, Laila maintains her belief in education, and the story ends with her returning to Kabul where she joins in with reconstruction. All these actions show that women in Afghanistan are not just the subject of political history. They are messengers who hold on to memory, family, and social possibility.

The main argument is that there is no substitute for justice in resilience. The woman shouldn't be expected to show great heroism to make safety possible. To prevent gender violence sustainably, community institutions need to be functional, with safe transport for those who have experienced violence, policies and practices need to be survivor-centred, healthcare must be available and accessible, women's education must be free of violence, women's economic opportunities must include justice, and women must have meaningful participation in politics.

A Thousand Splendid Suns is relevant because it demonstrates that there are no private or public spheres. The society in which the home exists either facilitates or inhibits violence in the home. Hosseini's novel links the plight of individual women to the wrecking of institutions and the imposition of repressive legislation, and demands a corresponding linking response: one in which homes and cities are rebuilt, but also social structures of dignity, equality and freedom.

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