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Bodies in Conflict: The Gendered Impact of War on Women in Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Bashir's *Scattered Souls*

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Abstract: *When militias and military forces clash in violence it creates war which employs both intrinsic and instrumental weapons. War zones commonly impact males and females to a similar extent based on cultural expectations, but gendering war theory demonstrates women typically endure worse hardships. Women fighting to survive under such adverse conditions experience completely different battles. This research analyzes the war-oriented struggles of Afghan and Kashmiri women using written works by Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns and Shahnaz Bashir's Scattered Souls. Women in these regions suffer due to the patriarchal systems which war propagates through its context. War creates detrimental disruptions in women's lives which make them face extreme challenges to secure their fundamental needs for shelter and sustenance. This research adopts the feminist theory of war by Sjoberg to study the cultural and social elements of Central Asian war regions as displayed in A Thousand Splendid Suns and Scattered Souls. This comparative research evaluates the day-to-day warfare experiences of women who endure violence and face abduction threats and experience rape besides facing aggressive acts and sustained acts of torture. The analyzed novels depict two different historical situations: the United States military intervention in Afghanistan alongside the Taliban's ascension as well as Indian occupation of Kashmir. This study demonstrates how women's bodies make them highly vulnerable during wartime in Afghanistan and Kashmir using Sjoberg's feminist analysis of war and suffering.*

Keywords: Afghanistan, Bodies, Gender, Kashmir, War, Women

Introduction

The conventional understanding of war sees it as a clash between two opposing forces, each striving to achieve specific political goals. In the context of international wars, the objective is usually to promote a state's political interests, while in civil wars, it often involves seeking changes in government policies or structure. From this perspective, the primary goal of war is to secure victory, leading to a favorable political outcome (Keen, 2000).

In *The Functions of War Literature*, Catharine Savage Brosman (1992) notes that war literature has historically "acted on the imagination of the young to shape a sense of national purpose and inspire a bellicose spirit." In this way, war literature has long influenced young minds by shaping national identity and instilling a sense of patriotic duty, often glorifying conflict.

Many scholars regard war as an intrinsic and universal aspect of human nature. They argue that it stems from humanity's instinct to demonstrate power through destructive capabilities. Others attribute it to specific economic, environmental, and socio-cultural circumstances. The Dutch psychoanalyst Joost Meerloo suggests that war manifests humanity's inner fears through acts of mass destruction, serving as an outlet for suppressed rage. According to Meerloo (1956), humans possess an inherent inclination toward violence and a strong desire to protect what they hold dear, often making sacrifices to defend and maintain their possessions and authority.

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Literature Review

Women endure unimaginable atrocities and injustices during conflicts—an undeniable fact. In roles such as refugees, internally displaced persons, combatants, heads of households, community leaders, activists, and peace-builders, both women and men experience conflict in distinct ways. However, women often lack the resources, political rights, authority, or control over their surroundings and needs that men possess (Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002). Women bear significant emotional, social, and physical burdens while living in war-affected regions. These struggles frequently manifest in the loss of loved ones, particularly male family members (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2013). Cases of men disappearing, joining military groups and losing their lives in combat, being kidnapped, or held in military prisons have surged over the years in such areas. Additionally, limited income opportunities often force men to migrate to other countries—especially in regions like Afghanistan and Kashmir, where migration to the Middle East is common. In these situations, women lose fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons— individuals traditionally responsible for earning a livelihood. In their absence, women often depend on extended families or, in some cases, are compelled to earn their own living. Without a male guardian or representative, their societal position becomes vulnerable, exposing them to mistreatment and exploitation by male in-laws or other community members.

Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) examined the consequences of unjust wars and marginalization on Afghan women within a broader geopolitical context. She discussed issues such as the veil, honor crimes, political agendas, and Western narratives tied to "xenophobic immigrant policies." Lughod argued that in many Muslim countries, women voluntarily choose to wear the veil or hijab and do not view their attire as problematic (p. 750). She wrote, "It is deeply problematic to construct the Afghan woman as someone in need of saving. When you save someone, you imply that you save them from something, you save them to something. But what violence is entailed in this transformation, and what assumptions are being made about the superiority of that to which you are saving her?" (Lughod, 2002, p. 778). Lughod emphasized that Afghan women demand justice, not rescue—they seek liberation from subjugation and dual marginalization. Her work critiques Western narratives that exploit the veil as a symbol of Muslim women's oppression.

Gregory (2012) also highlighted how Western feminism after 9/11 framed Afghan women as symbols of helplessness. According to him, the narrative of giving these women a "voice" is rooted in a Western feminist agenda, portraying Afghan women as victims in need of salvation not only in Afghanistan but globally (p. 131). Gregory argued that this discourse positions Westerners as civilized, masculine heroes saving Afghan women from their own local men. His theoretical analysis exposes how these narratives undermine the legitimacy of Afghan women while reinforcing Western superiority. He noted that the idea of "giving voice to the voiceless" reflects seemingly benevolent Western assumptions that ultimately diminish Afghan women's agency and render their own voices inaudible (pp. 141–142). Gregory's work aligns with this research, as it explores how Western narratives position themselves as the sole saviors of Afghan and Muslim women.

Rich (2014) further examined how Western discourses portray Islam, fundamentalism, and Muslim women. She observed that the term "oppressed Muslim women" intrigues Western media and policymakers, who manipulate this narrative to garner public support for military intervention in the Middle East (p. 2). Feminist organizations and Western media have played a crucial role in fostering support for the "War on Terror" by framing the veil as a symbol of Islamic oppression and governmental failings, thereby justifying colonial invasions (p. 3). Since the onset of European imperialism, images of veiled women have been used to symbolize Islam's alleged mistreatment of women and to validate colonialist endeavors. While acknowledging that the Taliban's actions severely restricted Afghan women's lives, Rich criticized the Western feminist narrative of a villain-victim-hero dynamic. She argued that Western powers, particularly the American military, constructed this framework to rationalize their intervention in Afghanistan. This narrative presents Westerners as civilized and virtuous saviors (heroes), while casting local Afghan men and the Taliban in subordinate masculine roles (villains). The framework

implies that the world depends on the white savior, portraying feminized groups as helpless and incapable of self-protection (Rich, 2012, p. 8).

Theoretical Framework

This study incorporates Laura Sjoberg's theoretical framework from *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War*. Sjoberg argues that gender marginalization significantly influences both the causes and consequences of global conflicts. Her work examines the meanings, practices, and origins of wars, along with their disproportionate impact on one gender. Additionally, she explores how the dominance of one gender can suppress and deny the other gender's fundamental rights. The sentiment of "Women and Children First" underpins many war-related laws, security perspectives, and societal beliefs about women's roles during conflicts. Women are predominantly viewed as victims rather than combatants, as targets rather than threats. Discussions on the causes of war, its execution, and its impact on peace and transitional justice often exclude gender as a critical variable.

In *Gendering Global Conflict*, Sjoberg emphasizes that war and its ramifications cannot be fully understood without integrating gender and addressing the subordination of women within these narratives. She critiques the absence of gender considerations in feminist traditions within International Relations Theory, asserting that war is inherently shaped by gender dynamics and that gendered narratives are a primary driver of conflict. However, Sjoberg does not propose a specific methodology for examining these issues. Instead, she synthesizes insights from various feminist theories and perspectives to create a dialogue that addresses the feminist theory of war.

Using gender as an analytical lens, Sjoberg investigates four main areas: "the causes of war, making war, the experience of war, and the literal meaning of the word 'war'" (Rinehart, 2015). In the fourth chapter, she presents a dyadic analysis of the causes of war, focusing on the interactions between two states and their characteristics. Sjoberg asserts that understanding wars between nations requires a gendered perspective. Rebecca West (1913) once described feminism with a sharp, tongue-in-cheek analogy, stating: "I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is... I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or a prostitute." This quote serves as a critique of how society defines women.

The application of feminism to the study of war remains an underexplored area. While war is universally destructive, women—often perceived as fragile members of society—face heightened vulnerabilities during conflicts. In many developing countries, women tend to be more submissive due to their reliance on male family members. Cultural norms and societal expectations further limit their awareness of basic rights, making the assertion of equality an almost unattainable goal.

Text Analysis

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is set in a deeply patriarchal society. Walby (1990) defines patriarchy as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women." Early in the novel, Nana is ostracized by her family after having an illegitimate relationship with Jalil. Jalil, unwilling to take responsibility, isolates Nana by moving her to a distant hut called *Kolba*, claiming to his other wives that Nana had forced herself on him. This reflects a societal view of women as weak and irrational, a belief echoed in Nana's statement: "This is what it means to be a woman in the world" (Hosseini, 28).

Nana, shaped by her own struggles, passes this worldview on to her daughter, emphasizing that a woman's primary skill is to "endure." She poignantly tells Mariam, "A man's heart is a wretched thing and not soft like a mother's womb. It would not bleed or stretch to make room for you" (Hosseini, 118).

Mariam's husband, Rasheed, serves as a personification of this patriarchal system. He imposes strict control over her, requiring her to wear a burqa, forbidding her from leaving the home unaccompanied, and expecting her to cook and bear him a male child. Rasheed devalues education, viewing it as a threat to traditional notions of honor and pride. He criticizes Mariam for her lack of formal education, stating,

"You're like a child. Your brain is empty. There is no information in it" (Hosseini, 433). However, his disdain for educated, independent women stem from his fear of losing control over them.

Mariam's fear of Rasheed underscores her subjugation. She anxiously wonders about his reaction as she serves her first meal, thinking, "Mariam swayed a bit. What if he was disappointed or angry? What if he pushed his plate away in displeasure?" (Hosseini, 306). Rasheed's authority is further demonstrated by his irrational anger, particularly when hunger makes him irritable. For instance, when Mariam is a few minutes late serving dinner, he begins eating bread with radishes and refuses to touch the meal she prepared, despite her efforts (Hosseini, 346).

Bashir Dada's *Scattered Souls* offers a collection of short stories that examine the everyday struggles of women within patriarchal societies, particularly in the context of Kashmir. In the story *The Gravestone*, Sultan, a middle-aged, handicapped carpenter, faces financial difficulties while raising his three daughters. Each daughter's life reflects the systemic oppression women endure.

The eldest daughter, married into a family that mistreats her due to an insufficient dowry, illustrates the societal practice of valuing women based on material wealth rather than their individual contributions. This dehumanizing tradition highlights the deep-rooted patriarchy prevalent in Kashmiri culture, where women are not celebrated for their roles in supporting homes and communities.

Sultan's second daughter, unmarried and in her late thirties, faces societal stigma as she is labeled a "spinster." Colonial attitudes have created this term which diminishes unmarried women beyond the norm of early marriage by treating them as worthless individuals. The needlework she does brings her family income although she cannot afford to survive comfortably. She welcomes the burqa to conceal herself when she starts begging at a religious ceremony because she has limited alternatives for gaining skills or opportunities.

This narrative exemplifies that how the patriarchal system denies women fair opportunities to become independent because of its controlling nature. The war intensifies gender-based injustices since it creates numerous widowing that confines women even more in poverty-stricken lives without protection. War conditions compel women to take on extra responsibilities. Women become responsible for caring for children as well as elderly individuals and injured people, yet they must also execute traditionally male tasks including farming and commercial trades and warfare duties. The heavy burden of work caused by these circumstances creates major physical along with emotional impacts.

A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini presents an accurate depiction of the multiple forms of abuse that exist in a male-dominated society. The opening section of the novel shows Nana slandering her child Mariam through harsh language by calling her a "clumsy little harami" (Hosseini, 12). Irreparable harm comes to Mariam since childhood through abuse while society denies her most basic human rights such as loving relationships as well as family connections and both home security and societal acknowledgment. The word harami which means illegitimate reveals her position as an outsider within society. Society wrongfully places the blame on Nana for her illegitimate status, yet the real responsibility falls on her father Jalil because of his privileged position that protects him from responsibility. As Hosseini writes, "It is the creators of the harami who are culpable, not the harami, whose only sin is being born" (Hosseini, 13).

Nana, shaped by her own suffering, teaches Mariam that women are inherently burdened by societal accusations, likening men's blame to a compass needle that "always points north" (Hosseini, 29). Later, Mariam's husband Rasheed subjects her to continuous verbal abuse, asserting his control and justifying her subjugation as deserved. The novel also explores the cultural and societal pressures that enforce forced marriages in Afghanistan. Mariam is coerced into marrying Rasheed, a much older shoemaker, despite her reluctance. Jalil's wives justify the marriage, claiming that Rasheed, a reputable shoemaker for Kabul's elite, is the best suitor Mariam could hope for. On the day of the wedding, Mariam's silence speaks volumes, yet societal expectations force her to comply: "Mariam could feel Jalil beside her shifting on his seat, could sense feet crossing and uncrossing beneath the table. There was more throat clearing"

(Hosseini, 232). Her forced marriage reflects the shame her family seeks to conceal, as she is seen as a living reminder of her father's indiscretion.

Similarly, Laila marries Rasheed after the tragic death of her parents, believing she has no other choice. Deceived into thinking her lover, Tariq, is dead, Laila agrees to marry Rasheed, a man twice her age. Rasheed manipulates her vulnerability and even boasts, "Half the women in this city would kill to have a husband like me" (Hosseini, 1264). These marriages symbolize the traumatic consequences of war, and the limited autonomy granted to women in a patriarchal society.

The novel also portrays the harsh realities of deportation and separation. Laila's daughter, Aziza, is forced to live in an orphanage due to her family's financial struggles. Laila promises her daughter, "I'm your mother. If it kills me, I'll come and see you" (Hosseini, 1415), but the situation reflects the broader suffering of women under Taliban rule, where leaving the house without a male guardian is prohibited. The orphanage head explains that Laila is not alone, as many mothers are forced to leave their children due to similar circumstances. These separations highlight the additional hardships women face in war-affected countries. In wartime, women not only lose their homes and security but also endure deep emotional pain from losing their children. Many mothers are forced to leave their children behind because they cannot care for them due to poverty, violence, or strict laws.

The novel is permeated with instances of physical abuse and violence, particularly by Rasheed, who epitomizes the oppressive male figure in Afghan society. Rasheed's view of women is dismissive and cruel; he considers them emotional, weak, and undeserving of patience: "The sound of women crying. I am sorry, I have no patience for it" (Hosseini, 261). Despite his traditional demeanor, Rasheed's hypocrisy is evident—he secretly hoards vulgar magazines while demanding strict moral conduct from his wives.

Mariam lives in constant fear of Rasheed's volatile temper. His violent punishments escalate to shocking extremes, including forcing her to chew pebbles, resulting in broken teeth. His justification for this act is both degrading and cruel: "Now you know what you've given me in this marriage. Bad food, and nothing else" (Hosseini, 463). Laila also experiences physical violence, beginning with boys throwing urine on her hair as a child. Later, Rasheed brutally beats her when she attempts to flee with Mariam. His aggression is not limited to physical punishment; he uses violence as a means of control, ensuring both women remain subjugated.

The violence reaches its peak when Rasheed discovers Laila's secret meetings with Tariq. Enraged, he beats her with a belt, leaving her body bloodied and bruised: "He caught her up and hurled her, pressed against the wall, and violently beat her with the belt, again and again" (Hosseini). This sustained violence profoundly impacts Laila, who marvels at the resilience of the human body to endure such suffering.

This illustrates that violence against women is not only a byproduct of war—where conquering forces treat women as spoils of victory—but also a reflection of broader societal issues. Even in non-combat settings, Central Asian households often see women experience violence from those closest to them: husbands, fathers, and brothers, who reinforce deeply ingrained attitudes of dominance and control. As Rehn and Sirleaf explain in *Women, War and Peace,* "The extreme violence that women suffer during conflict does not arise solely out of the conditions of war; it is directly related to the violence that exists in women's lives during peacetime." This suggests that violence against women is more closely tied to gender than to circumstance Bashir Dada's *Scattered Souls* also depicts physical abuse, highlighting the plight of women in patriarchal societies. In the story *Psychosis*, Sakeena's life is torn apart when her husband is abducted by the military with the assistance of local collaborators. Four men invade her home, assaulting and raping her in front of her adolescent daughter, Insha. The brutal attack is vividly described: "The men threw her down to the ground and held her legs and arms. One of them stripped her of her shalwaar and stuffed it into her mouth. Insha shrieked, calling out to the neighbors for help" (Bashir, 33). The assault underscores the dehumanizing violence women face during political and social turmoil.

In these narratives, forced marriages, deportation, and physical abuse are presented as interconnected aspects of systemic oppression. Both Hosseini and Bashir highlight the resilience of women who, despite

enduring unspeakable suffering, continue to fight for dignity and survival in societies that marginalize them.

Following such scenerios, Plümper and Neumayer (2006) conducted research on the impact of armed conflict on life expectancy of men and women. According to them most soldiers in armed conflicts are men, they are the primary direct victims of military actions. However, women also suffer greatly, sometimes even more than men. Their analysis revealed that both civil and interstate wars generally have a harsher effect on women's life expectancy. In peacetime, women tend to live longer than men, but their study found that war significantly reduces this life expectancy gap between the two genders. This is because of the violent treatment women get after war when they are deprived of everything they have. Such psychological traumas along with the lack of physical help facilities make it difficult for them to survive.

The novel also explores the struggles of illegitimate children born out of wedlock. Mariam, the result of Jalil's extramarital affair with Nana, faces lifelong discrimination. Society condemns Nana for Mariam's illegitimacy, labeling her *harami*, an "unwanted thing" with no claim to love, family, or acceptance (Hosseini, 14). Nana internalizes this societal judgment, expressing a grim desire that her father had ended her life rather than letting her live with the shame: "It might have been better for me" (Hosseini, 26). She even projects this fatalistic view onto Mariam, suggesting it would spare her the grief of being what she is.

Mariam, however, resists succumbing to this injustice, refusing to apologize for the circumstances of her birth: "To ponder the unfairness of apologizing for the manner of her own birth" (Hosseini, 47). After Nana's death, Mariam seeks refuge in Jalil's home, only to be rejected by his other wives. They view her as a living reminder of their husband's indiscretion and send her away to erase the "last trace of their husband's scandalous mistake" (Hosseini, 215).

Later in the story, Laila's illegitimate child, Aziza, becomes a target of similar prejudice. Rasheed, aware he is not Aziza's biological father, taunts Laila by commenting on Aziza's eye color, saying, "It's neither yours nor mine" (Hosseini, 1261). His resentment culminates in verbal abuse when he finally accuses Laila of deception, calling her a "whore" and Aziza a *harami* (Hosseini, 1522).

This situation highlights a male-dominated society where men are rarely blamed for their wrongdoings, while women face lifelong judgment for the same actions. If a woman engages in adultery by choice, she is labeled a whore. If she is raped during war, she is still shamed and seen the same way. Even her children are treated unfairly, considered illegitimate and outcasts. No matter the circumstances, women suffer injustice in every case.

As Ferris (2007) in her work: Abuse of Power: Sexual Exploitation of Refugee Women and Girls describes that for the past twenty years, the international community has recognized that refugee and displaced women and children are at high risk of violence. Sexual violence is often used as a weapon during war, forcing many women to flee. However, even on their way to safety, they face abuse from soldiers, armed groups, and border guards. In refugee camps, they remain vulnerable, especially when gathering food or firewood, and the loss of social order increases their risk of domestic and community violence.

Bashir Dada's *Scattered Souls* addresses similar themes of societal ostracism and the suffering of illegitimate children, often born as a result of rape. In the story Psychosis, Sakeena is raped by four men after her husband is abducted. The traumatic event unfolds in front of her four-year-old daughter, Insha. Sakeena subsequently gives birth to a boy, Bilal, whose very existence becomes a painful reminder of her assault.

Sakeena's hatred for Bilal manifests in neglect and abuse. She beats him frequently, driven by the emotional scars his presence symbolizes: "He is the human shape of a painful memory" (Bashir, 34). At times, she even tries to harm him indirectly, leaving him alone in the house with knives or rat poison

within reach. This cycle of abuse highlights the complex trauma Sakeena experiences, which psychologically wounds both mother and son.

Bilal, too, endures societal rejection, branded as a harami throughout his childhood and teenage years. However, he earns respect in his community by injuring eleven policemen with his stone- throwing skills, a moment that temporarily transforms his social standing. For Sakeena, this instance brings conflicting emotions, a mix of pride and relief that her son is finally being acknowledged, even in such a violent context. This complex dynamic reflects the multifaceted emotional ties between Sakeena and Bilal, shaped by trauma and societal judgment.

Conclusion

Through A Thousand Splendid Suns and Scattered Souls Khaled Hosseini and Shahnaz Bashir provide realistic chronicles about the violence of war and its persistent impact particularly on female victims. The analysis of these two works demonstrates the hardships faced by women during wartime which show their day-to-day survival efforts. Women throughout both stories experience similar times of unfortunate circumstances irrespective of variations in their cultural and social environments.

The research establishes the large differences between male and female experiences when wartime occurs. Women experience external battles alongside internal fights that include being abandoned and oppressed by society alongside enduring gender-based violence. Both Mariam and Laila endure different forms of violence in A Thousand Splendid Suns where Mariam experiences both familial rejection and forced marital abuse while Laila faces Rasheed's physical violence and her parents' death. Sakeena faces sexual assault by soldiers and receives further rejection by her family in Scattered Souls before becoming isolated and feeling ashamed. War creates even greater exposure of women's vulnerabilities when it transforms them into targets of physical abuse, sociological discrimination and sexual exploitation. Women experience complete loss of their home and family together with their work and dignity, yet their remarkable resilience demonstrates their exceptional powers. The works analyze how Afghan and Kashmiri women who experience conflict thereby illuminate the broad-reaching consequences of war. They demonstrate how women suffer not only from direct violence, such as bombings and domestic abuse, but also from the psychological and emotional scars caused by familial betrayal and societal rejection.

According to Sobjern’s theory and the analysis of A Thousand Splendid Suns and Scattered Souls war demonstrates a masculine character because it exhibits harmful behavior and patriarchal dominance. Men primarily fight wars because of their pursuit of power combined with the need for territorial control and political control leading to women suffering most from war effects. The present research indicates that war possesses male characteristics because it is driven by male power, suppresses women's voices, and increases gender-based violence. Women suffer the most in wars they did not start and have no control over, yet they are often the ones who pay the highest price.

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