

EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN IN A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS  
(NOVEL) BY KHALED HOSSEINI: FEMINIST DISCOURSE ANALYSISAreesha Afzal<sup>1</sup>, Maveria Saeed<sup>2</sup>, Shazia Andleeb<sup>3</sup><sup>1,2,3</sup>Department of English, Institute of Humanities and Arts, Khawaja Fareed University of Engineering and Information Technology, Rahim Yar Khan<sup>1</sup>areeshaafzal2000@gmail.com, <sup>2</sup>mawrasaeed732@gmail.com, <sup>3</sup>shazia.andleeb@kfueit.edu.pkDOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18873408>**Keywords***patriarchal domesticity, religious authoritarianism, narrative silence, focalization, re-signification of female agency***Article History**

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**Abstract**

This thesis explores the discursive construction of female exploitation, resistance, and subjectivity in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* through the perspective of Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis (FDA). Situated within the intersecting frameworks of feminist literary criticism, postcolonial feminist theory, and critical discourse studies, the research interrogates how language operates as a site of both patriarchal domination and feminist subversion. While previous scholarship has largely focused on the novel's thematic portrayals of domestic violence, motherhood, and war trauma, this study offers a micro-linguistic and discourse-analytic approach that foregrounds the grammatical, lexical, and narrative mechanisms through which gendered power is naturalized, challenged, or reconfigured. Drawing on Mills' emphasis that power is embedded "right down at the clause level," the analysis investigates four primary discursive domains in the novel: patriarchal domesticity, state and religious authoritarianism, narrative silence and focalization, and the re-signification of female agency. Through close readings of character speech, modality, metaphor, and narrative structure, the research reveals how characters such as Mariam and Laila negotiate discursive subject positions shaped by intersecting forces of class, religion, legitimacy, and trauma. Their linguistic evolution from silence to assertion, from erasure to agency demonstrates how discourse can be both a mechanism of control and a tool of resistance. Moreover, the study critically engages with postcolonial debates around reader positioning, Orientalist gaze, and representation, acknowledging the ethical tensions in a male-authored Anglophone narrative about Pakistani women. This study adds to the relative novelty of feminist literary linguistics, by combining feminist discourse analysis with intersectional and postcolonial criticism, and provides an example that can be replicated to examine the issue of gendered discourse in literary fiction. Finally, it testifies that literature does not simply reflect the gendered realities but it is a place of discursive practice in and through which the realities are constructed, challenged, and occasionally changed.

**1 INTRODUCTION**

Literature is not a passive mirror of society but an active site where cultural values and power relations are produced, challenged, and normalised. Feminist critics such as Elaine

Showalter, Toril Moi, and Sara Mills have shown that literary traditions are historically androcentric, embedding gender hierarchies not only in themes and characters but within narrative voice, syntax, and discourse structures

Abu-Lughod, (2002). Drawing on Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis (FDA), this research examines *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as a linguistic battleground where patriarchal authority and female resistance are negotiated. Set against decades of Pakistani political turmoil, the novel reveals how institutional and domestic discourses encode women's subjugation through obligation, control, and silencing. Simultaneously, it stages counter-discourses through female solidarity, reclaimed identities, and expanded interiority. Informed by postcolonial feminist debates, the study also questions representation, authorship, and global readership. By focusing on discourse rather than theme alone, this research fills a gap in existing scholarship and demonstrates how language itself becomes a vehicle for both oppression and feminist re-signification Ahmed, (2010).

Although Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has attracted extensive feminist commentary, most criticism emphasizes themes rather than the linguistic processes that construct gendered power Bouzenag, (2020). This study applies Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis to examine syntax, voice, and silence, showing how language simultaneously silences and enables Mariam and Laila, thereby extending FDA into long-form, post-conflict fiction within contemporary feminist studies. This study aims to:

1. Examine the discursive portrayal of women's oppression and exploitation in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, focusing on the socio-political, cultural, and personal dimensions of gendered subjugation.
2. Analyze how linguistic elements such as narrative voice, modality, focalization, and dialogic interactions construct and challenge power relations and female subjectivities.
3. Apply Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis (FDA) to uncover how the novel negotiates patriarchal ideologies and constructs spaces for resistance, agency, and voice within a context of systemic oppression.

This study employs Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis (FDA) to examine how

language constructs and contests gendered power. Drawing on poststructuralist notions of discourse, including Michel Foucault, FDA rejects essentialist views of womanhood and treats subjectivity as fluid and context bound. Applied to *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the analysis focuses on focalization, dialogue, silence, and modality to show how Mariam's and Laila's identities are discursively negotiated, revealing language as both a mechanism of patriarchal control and a site of resistance and agency.

This research deliberately focuses on *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini to ensure analytical depth. Using Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis, it examines Mariam's and Laila's language, silence, and focalization as discursive sites of oppression and resistance. Historical contexts function only as narrative backdrops, while the exclusive use of the English text preserves methodological coherence and linguistic precision.

## 2 Literature Review

This chapter establishes a discourse-oriented framework for analyzing gendered oppression and negotiated agency in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). Moving beyond thematic readings, it applies Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis to examine lexical choice, syntax, focalization, and silence. Informed by feminist, poststructuralist, and intersectional theory, the chapter positions the novel as a discursive site where language reproduces and contests patriarchal power shaping Afghan women's subjectivities within narrative form.

### 2.1 Framing Gendered Oppression through Feminist Discourse Analysis

Drawing on Judith Butler, gender is performative rather than fixed, making literature a site of enforcement and subversion. Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis foregrounds agency, context, and intersectionality. Applied to *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, discourse reveals domination through speech yet resistance through Mariam's and Laila's voices within patriarchal narrative structures Bennoune, (2022).

### 2.1.1 Representation, Orientalism, and Discursive Realism

Although Khaled Hosseini writes empathetically, his diasporic, male perspective risks reproducing Orientalist framings. Addressing this, the study applies Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis to *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, examining pronouns, modality, metaphor, and narrative voice. This clause-level focus moves beyond sociopolitical readings, showing how patriarchal ideologies are linguistically naturalized yet discursively resisted through Mariam's and Laila's negotiated agency.

## 2.2 Feminist Literary Criticism: Evolution and Key Perspectives

Feminist literary criticism interrogates how literature encodes gender politics, patriarchal power, and female identity through narrative technique and rhetoric. Evolving from women's recovery projects into an interdisciplinary field, it now draws on structuralist, poststructuralist, and postcolonial theory. Applied to *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, it exposes how women's oppression, resistance, and agency are constructed, contested, or silenced within ideological discourse.

### 2.2.1 Early Foundations: Simone de Beauvoir and the Ontology of Womanhood

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* reframed womanhood as culturally produced rather than biological, exposing literature's role in naturalizing patriarchy. For Sara Mills, this insight grounds Feminist Discourse Analysis, locating power at clause level. Applied to *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, it foregrounds how Afghan subjectivities are discursively constructed and contested.

### 2.2.2 Structural Critique and Canon Revision: Second-Wave Feminist Literary Theory

Second-wave feminism in the 1960s-70s established feminist literary criticism as a political practice interrogating how literature sustains patriarchy. Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* exposed canonical texts as vehicles of misogynistic ideology, while Elaine Showalter's gyn criticism centered women's writing and subjectivity. Although foundational, these models often universalized gender. Building on their insights, Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse

Analysis offers greater linguistic and intersectional precision. Applied to *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, it reveals how patriarchal power is narratively encoded yet discursively contested through language.

### 2.2.3 Poststructuralist and Psychoanalytic Feminism: Language, Subjectivity, and Resistance

Poststructuralist feminism reconceptualized gender as discursively produced, influenced by Michel Foucault and advanced by Toril Moi. Building on this, Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis examines how language generates contradictory female subject positions. Applied to *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, it reveals how narrative voice, silence, and focalization both sustain and disrupt patriarchal power through Mariam's and Laila's discursive agency.

### 2.2.4 Intersectionality and Post-Colonial Feminist Criticism: Contextualizing Afghan Women's Discursive Positions

Late twentieth-century feminism shifted toward intersectional, postcolonial analysis, foregrounding how gender intersects with race, class, and geopolitics. Drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, this study applies Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis to *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, revealing how Afghan women's subjectivities emerge through intersecting discourses of patriarchy, culture, and resistance.

### 2.2.5 Foundational Feminist Theories and Gynocriticism: Locating Women's Voices in Literary Discourse

The philosophical foundations of feminist literary criticism originate in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, which reconceptualized womanhood as socially and discursively produced. Building on this, Kate Millett politicized literary analysis by exposing culture as a key instrument of patriarchy, while Elaine Showalter advanced gynocriticism to foreground women's narrative interiority. Extending these insights, Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis shifts attention from thematic representation to linguistic construction. Applied to *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, FDA reveals how patriarchal power is grammatically encoded yet discursively resisted

through focalization, modality, and silence, situating Afghan women as complex, intersectional subjects rather than symbolic victims.

### 2.3 Postcolonial Feminism, Representation, and Afghan Women in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

Post-colonial feminist scholarship intervenes in mainstream Western feminism by Postcolonial feminists challenge “universal” narratives that erase the historical and cultural specificity of Global South women, a concern central to readings of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. While Khaled Hosseini risks Western humanitarian framing, the novel also resists reducing Mariam and Laila to passive victims. Applying Sara Mills’ Feminist Discourse Analysis enables close examination of how modality, lexis, silence, and narrative voice construct agency within constraint. FDA reveals a clash between institutional discourse and female counter-speech, showing how Afghan women are linguistically positioned as complex, culturally situated agents rather than static symbols of oppression.

#### 2.3.1 Problematizing Western Feminist Universality

Postcolonial feminist theory critiques universalist Western feminism for constructing the “Third World woman” as a passive, homogenous victim. Thinkers such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Lila Abu-Lughod expose this politics of rescue. Applied to *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Sara Mills’ Feminist Discourse Analysis reveals Mariam’s and Laila’s discursive agency beyond Orientalist victimhood.

#### 2.3.2 Resisting the Gaze: Trinh T. Minh-ha and the Politics of Voice

Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Woman, Native, Other* critiques Western feminism’s tendency to exoticize Global South women as voiceless victims. This concern is pertinent to *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, which risks aestheticizing suffering for Western readers. Aligned with this critique, Sara Mills’ Feminist Discourse Analysis examines how narrative voice, focalization, and silence position both characters and readers, assessing whether Mariam’s and Laila’s representations enable dialogic agency or reproduce Orientalist pity through discursive framing.

#### 2.3.3 The Silencing of the Subaltern: Spivak’s Intervention

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s *Can the Subaltern Speak?* questions whether marginalized women can be heard within Western discourses that mediate and silence them. This concern is crucial for *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, authored for a Western market. Applying Sara Mills’ Feminist Discourse Analysis enables a clause-level examination of voice, focalization, and silence, assessing whether Mariam’s and Laila’s narratives resist or reproduce representational limits imposed on subaltern subjects.

### 2.4 Discourse, Language, and Power: From Critical Discourse Analysis to Feminist Discourse Analysis

Language functions as a constitutive force shaping identity and power, making discourse central to literary analysis. Developed by Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak, Critical Discourse Analysis exposes how ideology is embedded in language but often marginalizes gender. Addressing this gap, Sara Mills’ Feminist Discourse Analysis reconceptualizes power as fluid and gendered, focusing on micro-linguistic features such as modality, voice, and silence. Applied to *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, FDA reveals how patriarchal authority is discursively produced and how Mariam’s and Laila’s subjectivities are negotiated, repositioned, and occasionally transformed through language and narrative focalization.

#### 2.4.1 Feminist Discourse Analysis in Literary Texts: Methodological Strategies and Critical Application

Applying Sara Mills’ Feminist Discourse Analysis (FDA) to literary texts enables close examination of how language constructs, sustains, and resists gendered power. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, FDA reveals how alternating focalization, modality, lexis, and silence shape Afghan women’s subjectivities. Mariam’s early discursive silencing contrasts with Laila’s emerging linguistic agency, while patriarchal authority is enacted through imperatives and obligation modals. By analyzing micro-linguistic features alongside narrative structure, FDA moves beyond thematic readings

to show how oppression is grammatically naturalised and how resistance is discursively negotiated within postcolonial contexts.

### 2.5 Discursive Formations of Patriarchal Power and Resistance in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* functions not only as a narrative of Afghan women's suffering but as a densely discursive text in which patriarchal power is both enacted and contested through language. Drawing on Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis (FDA), this study shifts attention from thematic representation to the micro-linguistic mechanisms that construct gendered subjectivities. Rasheed's dominance is linguistically realized through imperatives, deontic modality, and degrading metaphors, transforming domestic space into a discursive site of coercion and silencing. Mariam's early marginalization is reinforced through passive syntax, stigmatic lexis such as *harami*, and fragmented focalization, illustrating how patriarchal ideology is grammatically naturalized and internalized. Taliban decrees further exemplify institutional discourse, relying on absolutist modality and moral binaries that erase female agency through authoritative syntax. Against these structures, the novel develops counter-discourses of resistance. Shifts from isolated "I" to collective "we," moments of strategic silence, and lexical re-signification signal Mariam's and Laila's renegotiation of subject positions. FDA reveals how solidarity, maternal language, and decisive modality disrupt imposed identities without collapsing into simplistic empowerment narratives. By foregrounding clause-level choices, narrative voice, and reader alignment, this analysis demonstrates how *A Thousand Splendid Suns* operates as a discursive battleground where subordination and resistance coexist. The study thus extends FDA into post-conflict Afghan fiction, offering a linguistically grounded, intersectional model for analysing gender, power, and agency in postcolonial literature.

### 2.6 Feminist Discourse Analysis in Literary Studies

Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis (FDA) extends Critical Discourse Analysis by

foregrounding micro-linguistic features—lexis, modality, transitivity, focalisation, and silence—as sites where gendered power is produced and resisted. Unlike classical CDA, FDA emphasises women's negotiation of contradictory subject positions. Applied to *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, FDA reveals how Rasheed's imperatives and deontic modals encode domination, while shifts in focalisation, pronouns, and transitivity enable Mariam's and Laila's discursive agency. By operationalising intersectionality at clause level, the study moves beyond thematic readings to expose how patriarchal norms are grammatically naturalised yet strategically destabilised.

### 2.7 Feminist Readings of a *Thousand Splendid Suns*: From Thematic Analysis to Discursive Inquiry

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini has been widely analysed for its themes of suffering, motherhood, and resilience among Afghan women, particularly Mariam and Laila. However, most feminist scholarship remains thematic, overlooking the linguistic mechanisms shaping these representations. Drawing on Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis redirects attention to how language, focalisation, and silence discursively construct gendered oppression and resistance within the novel.

#### 2.7.1 Narrative Techniques and Discursive Framing in the Novel

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* employs alternating internal focalisation to centre Mariam's and Laila's voices within a patriarchal context. Drawing on Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis, this structure reveals how narrative voice, modality, lexis, and silence distribute power and reader alignment. Labels such as *harami*, coercive imperatives, and discursive silencing encode oppression, while shifts in focalisation and assertive speech signal resistance. FDA thus exposes how gendered subjectivities are linguistically constructed and renegotiated, addressing gaps left by predominantly thematic feminist readings of the novel.

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 research Methodology

This study adopts a critical interpretive feminist paradigm, viewing social reality as discursively produced rather than fixed. Drawing on Michel Foucault and Norman Fairclough, patriarchy is understood as historically contingent “common sense” sustained through language. Methodologically, it applies Sara Mills’ Feminist Discourse Analysis to *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, tracing how micro-linguistic choices—lexis, modality, focalization, and silence—construct and unsettle gendered power. Through Mariam’s and Laila’s shifting subject positions, the analysis reveals how domination is enacted and resisted at clause level.

#### 3.2 Research Design

A qualitative design suits *A Thousand Splendid Suns* because it enables close textual reading, prioritizing interpretive depth and contextual analysis to examine how narrative and linguistic choices construct, naturalize, and contest gendered oppression and agency.

#### 3.3 Data Source and Sampling

The empirical corpus is Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, treated as a discursive site rather than mere narrative. Guided by Sara Mills’ Feminist Discourse Analysis, purposive sampling targets discursive events—silencing, institutional ideology, resistance, and symbolic metaphors—to examine how language naturalises or contests patriarchal power for Afghan and global readers.

#### 3.4 Analytical Procedures

The analytical process for this study unfolds through four interrelated stages, each rooted in the principles of Sara Mills’ Feminist Discourse Analysis (FDA), while adapted for clarity and literary specificity. These stages thematic mapping, micro-linguistic analysis, discursive positioning, and contextual anchoring collectively allow for a layered examination of how *A Thousand Splendid Suns* constructs, reinforces, and sometimes subverts gendered power relations.

##### 3.4.1 Thematic Mapping

The first stage involves close re-reading of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* to annotate silencing,

ideology, metaphor, and resistance, clustering excerpts into discursive domains that map patriarchal power and moments where gendered control fractures into feminist re-signification.

##### 3.4.2 Micro-Linguistic Analysis

The second stage undertakes fine-grained linguistic analysis, examining lexis, modality, voice, pronouns, and silence to trace how gendered power is encoded or resisted. Labels such as harami, coercive modals (“must,” “shall”), passive constructions, and interrupted turn-taking reveal stigma and domination, while active first-person clauses and strategic silences signal discursive agency and subjectivity.

##### 3.4.3 Discursive Positioning

The third stage analyses discursive positioning, following Sara Mills, to assess who speaks with authority and how focalisation shifts. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, expanding interior perspectives grant Mariam and Laila increasing narrative voice, revealing discourse as negotiated and dynamic.

##### 3.4.4 Contextual Anchoring

The final stage situates findings within Afghanistan’s socio-political context, drawing on Norman Fairclough’s orders of discourse and Sara Mills’ interdiscursivity. Reading *A Thousand Splendid Suns* alongside postcolonial critiques by Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the analysis foregrounds culturally situated agency over universalist rescue narratives.

#### 3.5 Reflexivity

Guided by Sara Mills’ Feminist Discourse Analysis, this study adopts reflexivity as an ethical research practice, recognising interpretation as situated rather than neutral. Drawing on Donna Haraway’s concept of “situated knowledges,” the analysis acknowledges the researcher’s cultural positioning when reading *A Thousand Splendid Suns* in English. Reflexive journaling and contextual cross-referencing mitigate interpretive bias while avoiding Western saviourism. Attention is also paid to authorship: as a male diasporic writer, Khaled Hosseini mediates women’s voices, raising representational concerns foregrounded by

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Accordingly, the study prioritises discursive effects over authorial intent, analysing how Mariam’s and Laila’s agency is negotiated within shifting ideological frames.

**3.6 Ethical and Quality Considerations**

In qualitative feminist research, rigor rests on credibility, reflexivity, and transparency rather than statistics. Applying Sara Mills’ Feminist Discourse Analysis, claims are grounded in textual evidence, triangulated with CDA, documented through audit trails, and handled ethically, ensuring confirmable, transferable interpretations.

**4 Data Analysis and Interpretation**

This chapter applies Sara Mills’ Feminist Discourse Analysis (FDA) to the purposively-sampled passages identified in Chapter Three. FDA demands a two-tier reading: first, a macro-thematic mapping of recurring discursive domains; second, a micro-linguistic scrutiny of lexical choice, grammatical voice, modality, focalisation, and silence. By moving continually between these planes, the analysis exposes the “messy multiplicity” (Mills 2008) of female subject positions in Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). The discussion is organised around the four overlapping domains established earlier: patriarchal domesticity; religious-nationalist control; surveillance and silence; and feminine resistance and re-signification but foregrounds their intersections to illustrate how power both coheres and fractures in the narrative.

**4.1 Patriarchal Domesticity**

From Mariam’s illegitimate birth to Laila’s coerced marriage, the novel constructs the Afghan household as a discursive micro-state where male authority, embodied by Rasheed, operates with totalising power. This domestic patriarchy is not merely thematic but deeply textual, enacted through a consistent linguistic patterning of domination, subjugation, and silencing. The household becomes a primary site of discursive violence, where everyday language structures embed gender hierarchies.

A clear example of discursive control emerges in Rasheed’s treatment of Mariam upon her arrival in his home:

“You will eat what I cook, wear what I buy you, and stop talking back. This is my house.” (Hosseini, 2007, p. 70)

This short extract exemplifies multiple levels of linguistic enforcement. The use of future tense modal auxiliaries (will eat, will wear, will stop) constructs Mariam’s behaviour as already decided. The repetition of “what I...” marks Rasheed as the sole source of agency and decision-making. The final declarative “This is my house” closes the power loop, spatially coding the home as masculine territory. FDA highlights that this pattern of command is not incidental. It is reinforced through grammatical voice, imperative mood, and possessive determiners, which consistently reduce Mariam to a passive object under patriarchal regulation. Her responses, when present, often take the form of silence or truncated phrases, signifying both discursive erasure and narrative compression.

**Table 1: Micro-Linguistic Features of Patriarchal Domestic Discourse**

Linguistic feature	Text	Function in FDA terms
Deontic Modality	“You will eat / wear / stop...”	Enforces obligation and control
Imperative Mood	“Don’t talk back!”	Asserts dominance, demands compliance
Possessive Determiner	“My house”	Constructs space and bodies as male property
Passive Voice (Mariam)	“She was led to the room”	Erases agency, implies submission
Narrative Silence	Mariam’s non-response after verbal abuse	Suppresses female subjectivity at key points

This analysis directly addresses Research Question 1 by showing how language is used to represent the exploitation of women in the domestic sphere, and Research Question 2 by examining the discursive tools (modality, silence, syntactic form) that construct patriarchal power.

#### 4.2 Religious-Nationalist Control

In Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the Taliban function as a discursive system,

blending religion, law, and nationalism. Using Sara Mills’ interdiscursivity and Michel Foucault’s regimes of truth, FDA shows how modal commands (“will,” “will not”) grammatically naturalise female subordination. Juxtaposed with Laila’s interior questioning, this discourse exposes power’s anonymity while positioning readers to challenge patriarchal authority.

Table 2: Linguistic Structures of Religious–Nationalist Patriarchal Discourse

Linguistics feature	Text	Ideological function
Modal auxiliary (will not)	“You will not laugh in public”	Constructs commands as factual, inescapable truths
Anonymised agent	No speaker named in Taliban decree	Erases source of power, presents orders as absolute
Religious register	“Attention women” + Qur’anic stylization	Blends state and Islamic law to legitimise gender hierarchy
Focalisation shift	Laila’s internal questions after public order	Offers critical counter-voice to authoritarian discourse

A key insight emerges where interdiscursivity intersects with intersectionality in Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Taliban decrees target women unevenly, with widows, the poor, and those lacking male guardians suffering intensified control, as seen when Laila cannot access the orphanage without male escort. This confirms Sara Mills’ view that subject positions are layered and context-dependent. The novel critiques authoritarian patriarchy’s appropriation of religious discourse without reducing Islam to oppression, aligning institutional power with Laila’s inner resistance. Through FDA, the analysis addresses Research Questions 2 and 3 by exposing linguistic domination and emergent female agency.

#### 4.3 Surveillance and Silence

In Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, patriarchal power operates less through overt violence than through surveillance and silence, key concerns of Sara Mills’ *Feminist Discourse Analysis*. Rasheed’s insistence that Mariam and Laila wear the burqa—framed through possessive pronouns and declarative commands—discursively constructs women as property and normalises control through grammar. The burqa functions as a symbolic technology of asymmetrical vision, enabling the male gaze while restricting women’s epistemic access. Silence further regulates power: Mariam’s sentencing without speech reveals institutional muting as a discursive act. Yet silence also becomes tactical; Laila’s strategic omissions exemplify resistance through subtle shifts in subject position.

Table 3: Micro-Linguistic Features of Surveillance and Silence

Linguistic feature	Example/ scene context	Ideological function
Possessive Pronouns	“You’re mine. Mine.”	Constructs female body as male property
Metaphorical Framing	Burqa as “one-way window”	Encodes spatial and visual control
Ellipsis and Narrative Gaps	“She did not say anything...”	Creates institutional silencing
Passive Voice	“She was taken to the courtroom”	Erases female agency in institutional discourse

Intentional Silence	Laila hiding her daughter's parentage	Enacts strategic non-disclosure
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Surveillance and silence in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* are unevenly distributed. Mariam’s illegitimacy (harami) enforces domestic and institutional silencing, while Laila’s education affords greater voice. This contrast supports Sara Mills’ view of shifting, intersectional subject positions and discursive repositioning from voicelessness to partial agency.

**4.4 Feminine Resistance and Re-Signification**

While Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns* exposes pervasive silencing, it also foregrounds resistance through language and

symbol. From Sara Mills’ Feminist Discourse Analysis, resistance emerges via discursive repositioning and re-signification. Mariam’s final act—killing Rasheed—marks a rupture that transforms the stigma of harami into moral agency, linguistically reframed through agentive identities (“guardian,” “mother”). Laila’s defiance operates grammatically through declaratives and modal negation (“I won’t... you can’t”), blocking authority at clause level. Symbols like the kolba and burqa undergo semiotic drift, shifting from control to protection, showing how power is contested within discourse itself.

**Table 4: Linguistic and Symbolic Features of Feminist Resistance**

Feature strategy	Example / Context	Function in FDA terms
Active voice	“She took the shovel” Mariam’s final act	Asserts agency in grammatical structure
Re signification	Kolba as sanctuary; burqa as disguise for escape	Redefines oppressive symbols into empowering tools
Lexical Transformation	From “harami” to “mother, guardian, friend”	Shifts self-identification from imposed to chosen
Modal Negation	“I won’t wear it. You can’t make me.” Laila	Rejects patriarchal control through negative modals
Focalisation Shift	Final chapters narrated from Mariam’s empowered view	Repositions the reader to align with female agency

Importantly, these acts of resistance are not only gendered but intersected by class, education, and legitimacy. The rebelliousness of Mariam, which is rooted in the intellectual and moral development, is the result of her deprived background, whereas that of Laila is the fruitage of her education and her city-based life. Both resistance forms are however discursive and equally strong. Through FDA, we are able to enjoy these differences without prioritising them. It would not be wrong to mention that resistance has many forms based on subject positioning.

This section directly addresses Research Question 3 by illustrating how Sara Mills’ FDA reveals the linguistic and symbolic mechanisms through which female resistance and agency are

constructed and re-signified within the novel’s discourse.

**4.5 Interplay and Tension Among Discursive Domains**

Although each discursive domain is analysed separately, their boundaries overlap dynamically. As Sara Mills argues, discourse is a site of struggle where meanings are negotiated. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, domestic patriarchy is legitimated through religious-nationalist language, while surveillance and silence operate across home and institution. Yet resistance circulates too: symbols like the burqa and harami are re-signified, enabling Mariam’s and Laila’s discursive repositioning beyond fixed victim-hero binaries.

Table 5: Discursive Cross-Pollination: Key Intersections

Domain A	Example of interplay	Domain B
Patriarchal Domesticity	Rasheed uses religious rhetoric to justify domestic abuse	Religious-Nationalist Control
Surveillance and Silence	Courtroom muting echoes domestic silencing	Institutional Power
Feminine Resistance	Kolba and burqa re-signified from constraint to agency	Symbolic Metaphor
Narrative Focalisation	Internal monologue opposes Taliban discourse, shaping empathy	Reader Positioning

4.6 Reader Positioning and Ideological Invitation

A key principle of Sara Mills’ Feminist Discourse Analysis is that texts actively position readers ideologically. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, internal focalisation and free indirect discourse draw readers into Mariam’s and

Laila’s inner worlds, fostering feminist empathy. Male characters remain largely external, directing moral judgment. As narrative perspective shifts toward greater female agency, readers move from observers to ethical co-agents, aligning interpretation with critique of patriarchy.

Table 6: Reader Positioning Across Narrative Progression: A Feminist Discourse Analytical Table

Narrative phase	Narrative strategy	Reader Positioning Constructed
Mariam’s Childhood	External narration; minimal focalization	Reader as Detached Observer positioned to observe without deep emotional engagement
Mariam’s Abuse by Rasheed	Gradual use of internal focalization and silence	Reader as Witness to Silencing begins to feel injustice, notices power asymmetry
Laila’s Entry into Narrative	Romanticized tone; youthful idealism	Reader as Hopeful Bystander emotionally curious but not yet fully aligned
Shared Domestic Suffering	Intense interior monologue; free indirect discourse	Reader as Empathetic Ally drawn emotionally into the shared female struggle
Mariam’s Final Act of Resistance	Shift to active voice; moral narration	Reader as Moral Co-Agent participates ideologically in her resistance
Post-Taliban Reconstruction	Reflective tone; closure	Reader as Participant in Feminist Justice supports healing, endorses change

Reader alignment in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is dynamic, shaped by shifting focalisation, modality, and lexical choices rather than plot alone. As Sara Mills explains, these discursive

shifts move readers from detached observers to feminist co-agents. Yet tensions persist: as a male-authored, Western-oriented text, the novel risks Orientalist consumption. Nevertheless,

sustained internal critique, female solidarity, and re-signification of symbols ultimately reposition readers toward ethical resistance to patriarchal discourse.

#### 4.7 Key Findings

This section synthesises the findings of Chapter Four to present a coherent account of how **Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns** discursively constructs gendered power, oppression, and resistance. Guided by **Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis (FDA)**, the discussion is organised around the study's three research questions.

##### **RQ1: Women's oppression and exploitation.**

The analysis demonstrates that female oppression is discursively layered across patriarchal domesticity, religious-nationalist control, surveillance and silence, and resistance. Rasheed's dominance is linguistically realised through possessive pronouns, imperatives, and deontic modality, while Taliban decrees fuse religious, legal, and cultural registers to naturalise women's subordination. Silence and surveillance—symbolised by the burqa and institutional muting—function as linguistic acts that regulate visibility and voice. Crucially, oppression is intersectional: Mariam's illegitimacy (*harami*) intensifies her silencing, whereas Laila's education affords conditional discursive access.

##### **RQ2: Linguistic resources and narrative strategies.**

FDA reveals how modality, grammatical voice, lexis, focalisation, and symbolism encode power. Passive constructions and obligation modals signal subjugation, while shifts to active voice and volitional modals mark agency. Free indirect discourse aligns readers with female interiority, and symbolic re-signification (*burqa*, *kolba*, window) shows how oppressive signs can be repurposed.

##### **RQ3: Reader positioning and Orientalist risk.**

The novel progressively positions readers from observers to feminist co-agents through focalisation and emotional proximity. Yet its global circulation raises tensions identified by

**Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak**, as suffering risks commodification. FDA accommodates this

duality, showing how language both invites feminist critique and courts Orientalist consumption. Overall, the findings establish language as a mutable terrain where patriarchal power is enacted, contested, and re-imagined, forming the foundation for the thesis's concluding discussions

#### 4.8 Discussion

The discursive findings from **Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns**, analysed through **Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis (FDA)**, invite wider theoretical reflection across feminist stylistics, postcolonial feminism, intersectionality, and reader positioning. At the stylistic level, the study confirms Mills' claim that power operates at clause level: imperatives, deontic modality, and passive constructions grammatically encode domination, while later shifts to active voice and volitional modality enable resistance. These findings align with feminist linguistic insights that view grammar as ideological rather than neutral.

From a postcolonial perspective, the novel occupies an ambivalent position. While it risks reproducing humanitarian and Orientalist framings critiqued by **Chandra Talpade Mohanty** and **Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak**, its sustained use of focalisation and interiority complicates reductive victim narratives. FDA captures this duality by revealing both the presence of a Western-facing gaze and the text's internal critique of patriarchal discourse.

Intersectionality is operationalised linguistically rather than abstractly: Mariam's illegitimacy and Laila's education shape their differing discursive access, confirming that subject positions are layered and context-dependent. Finally, reader positioning emerges as a key ideological mechanism. By granting interior access to female characters while withholding male interiority, the novel recruits readers into feminist alignment, though not without tension. Overall, the analysis demonstrates that literary language functions simultaneously as a site of ideological reproduction and feminist re-articulation, reinforcing FDA's value for postcolonial literary criticism.

#### 5 Conclusion

This thesis examined how **A Thousand Splendid Suns** discursively constructs women's

oppression and resistance within Afghan society through language. Using Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis, it demonstrated that patriarchy operates not only thematically but through grammar, modality, voice, and narrative focalisation. Rasheed's imperatives, Taliban deontic commands, and early syntactic silencing encode domination, while later shifts to active voice, free indirect discourse, and symbolic re-signification construct agency. The study also showed how reader positioning fosters feminist alignment yet risks Orientalist voyeurism, echoing Mohanty and Spivak. Crucially, intersectionality emerges at the discursive level: class, legitimacy, and education shape access to voice and silence. Overall, the thesis affirms that language is an ideological battleground where oppression is written—and resistance rewritten clause by clause.

### 5.1 Contributions to Knowledge

This research makes substantial contributions to feminist discourse analysis, literary linguistics, and postcolonial feminist studies by extending Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis (FDA) to a culturally specific, male-authored, post-conflict novel: *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini. Methodologically, it advances FDA by demonstrating its analytical rigor in long-form fiction, a domain often marginal in discourse studies. By applying Mills' concepts of discursive positioning, power asymmetry, and reader alignment to an extended narrative, the thesis offers a replicable framework combining thematic mapping, clause-level linguistic analysis, and socio-cultural contextualisation.

The study further innovates by operationalising intersectionality within FDA. It shows how gender intersects with class, literacy, and legitimacy to shape unequal access to voice and agency, particularly in the contrasting discursive trajectories of Mariam and Laila. Empirically, the analysis documents how imperatives, deontic modality, and passive constructions encode patriarchal authority, while modal negation and active voice enable resistance, affirming Mills' claim that power operates at clause level. Theoretically, the thesis refines postcolonial feminist debates by engaging concerns raised by Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, while showing how narrative focalisation complicates reductive

victimhood. Finally, the study offers pedagogical and activist value, providing tools for feminist literacy, translation sensitivity, and gender-critical reading practices beyond the novel itself.

### 5.2 Practical and Pedagogical Implications

Beyond its academic contribution, this study offers clear implications for pedagogy, feminist advocacy, and applied discourse analysis. By applying Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis to *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini, the research demonstrates how language operates as a site of ideological struggle and provides a transferable model for teaching gender, language, and power. The staged methodology—moving from thematic mapping to micro-linguistic analysis and ideological synthesis—can be readily adopted in literature, linguistics, and gender-studies classrooms to cultivate critical literacy. The reader-positioning framework further encourages students to interrogate how texts shape empathy and judgement. For feminist advocacy, the study highlights discursive resistance strategies—re-signification, silence, and lexical reclamation—that can inform activist storytelling and policy discourse. Finally, the findings underscore the importance of syntactic sensitivity in translation, ensuring feminist agency survives cross-cultural mediation.

### 5.3 Limitations

While this study provides a theoretically grounded feminist discourse analysis of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, it operates within identifiable methodological and epistemological limits. Following Lorraine Code's notion of epistemic responsibility, these constraints are acknowledged transparently. First, the corpus is fictional rather than ethnographic; the analysis therefore explains how gendered power is represented discursively, not how Afghan women's lives are empirically experienced. Second, the novel's English language mediates realities rooted in Dari and Pashto, risking cultural slippage despite Khaled Hosseini's bilingual positioning. Third, interpretive subjectivity is unavoidable in feminist discourse analysis, particularly for a non-Afghan researcher. Reflexive strategies mitigate but cannot eliminate this risk. Finally, the study's single-text focus and historical framing limit

comparative breadth, inviting future research across women-authored Afghan texts and alternative discourse frameworks.

#### 5.4 Recommendations for Future Research

While this study offers a focused application of Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis (FDA) to *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, it also opens several productive directions for future research. One important avenue is the application of FDA to Afghan women-authored texts, such as novels or memoirs by **Nadia Hashimi**, **Homeira Qaderi**, or **Zarifa Ghafari**. Analysing texts written from within Afghan sociocultural contexts would enable comparative insight into how voice, silence, and agency are negotiated without male narrative mediation.

A second trajectory involves multimodal analysis. Applying FDA to film, visual storytelling, or digital activism related to Afghan women would illuminate how discursive elements such as surveillance, veiling, and resistance are re-encoded through image, sound, and framing, thereby extending FDA beyond print-based texts.

Future work could also incorporate empirical reader-response research to test how diverse audiences interpret feminist cues, symbolic re-signification, and narrative focalisation. Such studies would assess whether readers align with feminist critique or revert to Orientalist interpretations.

Finally, integrating FDA with other discourse frameworks, or applying it to translation studies, could reveal how feminist meanings shift across languages and contexts. Together, these directions would expand FDA's reach while preserving its linguistic precision and ideological sensitivity.

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