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GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AND CHAUVINISTIC PRESSURE IN HOSSEINI'S *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*: A BUTLERIAN FEMINIST ANALYSIS

Zoya Aslam[*1], **Dr. Sannya Sarah**[2]

[2]*MPhil English in Literature at Riphah International University Faisalabad Campus, Faisalabad (Pakistan)*

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Corresponding Author: *
Zoya Aslam

Abstract
Khaled Hosseini's _A Thousand Splendid Suns_ is widely read as a novel of war, female suffering, and patriarchal cruelty. That reading is valid, but it does not reach the full depth of the text. The novel also shows how womanhood is produced through repetition, control, and social correction. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity offers a strong way to read this process. Butler argues that gender is not a fixed inner truth. It comes into being through repeated acts, bodily habits, social pressure, and cultural rules that make femininity appear natural (Butler, 1990, 1993). In Hosseini's novel, Mariam and Laila are pushed into socially approved forms of womanhood through marriage, silence, dress, labor, motherhood, and fear. Their lives reveal that chauvinistic power works not only through open violence, but also through daily routines that train women to accept smaller spaces, lower voices, and limited choices. At the same time, the novel shows that repeated norms are never fully secure. Female friendship, care, and ethical refusal disturb the script. This article offers a Butlerian feminist reading of the novel by tracing the production of gender under pressure, the role of male authority, and the forms of resistance that grow inside imposed roles. It argues that Hosseini's novel is not just about women being oppressed, but about how oppression becomes part of gendered life itself.

INTRODUCTION

A Thousand Splendid Suns is often praised for its emotional force, but its deeper value lies in the way it exposes how womanhood is shaped under pressure. Hosseini does not simply show
women being harmed by men. He shows how gender itself is trained into place through shame, domestic control, marriage, reproductive expectation, and fear. Mariam and Laila are not only victims of patriarchy. They are forced to inhabit roles that have already been written for them.

Their bodies, voices, choices, and silences are shaped by a social order that decides what counts as proper femininity.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity makes this process easier to see. Butler rejects the idea that gender is a natural essence waiting inside the body. For Butler, gender becomes real through repetition. Acts, gestures, clothing, speech, movement, and behavior are repeated so often that they begin to look natural (Butler, 1990, 1993). This means gender is not simply something one has. It is something one is made to do. That insight is central to Hosseini's novel, where womanhood is not a private identity but a social demand.

This article argues that _A Thousand Splendid Suns_ stages femininity as a pressured performance shaped by male authority and public discipline. Rasheed, family custom, war, and Taliban rule all work to narrow what women can

be. Yet the novel also shows that repeated norms can fail. Mariam and Laila do not escape patriarchy in a neat way, but they do disturb it. Their friendship, care, and acts of refusal reveal that even rigid roles can be altered from within.

Literature Review

Butler and the Idea of Performativity

Judith Butler's work remains the most useful theoretical base for this study. In _Gender Trouble_, Butler argues that gender is not an inner truth but "an identity tenuously constituted in time" through repeated acts (Butler, 1990). That claim matters because it shifts attention away from essence and toward social production. Gender appears stable only because it is repeated often enough to seem natural. In _Bodies That Matter_, Butler develops this point by showing how the body itself becomes readable through social norms and repeated regulation (Butler, 1993).

Gender is therefore not free expression. It is a disciplined form of being.

This idea fits Hosseini's novel closely. Mariam and Laila are taught how to stand, speak, dress, mother, obey, and suffer. Their femininity is not a private truth. It is a repeated social script.

Butler's theory helps explain why the novel feels so intimate and so harsh at the same time. It is not only that the women are hurt. It is that they are made to live inside roles that keep reproducing their hurt.

Feminist Criticism, Patriarchy, and the Politics of Voice

Feminist scholars such as bell hooks and Chandra Talpade Mohanty are also important here. hooks argues that patriarchal systems are sustained through the control of women's voices, labor, and self-definition (hooks, 1984). Mohanty warns against reading women in non-Western settings as a single victim group without attention to history, location, and difference (Mohanty, 2003). Their work matters for Hosseini's novel because it resists a shallow reading that treats Afghan women as one uniform image of suffering. Mariam and Laila are shaped by different histories, classes, family structures, and forms of social exposure. Their oppression is real, but it is not identical.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question about whether the subaltern can speak also matters here because women in the novel are repeatedly blocked from full speech and recognition (Spivak, 1988). Mariam is silenced by shame, while Laila is silenced by force and crisis. In both cases, female speech is constrained by male authority and public violence. Hosseini's novel gives these women voice, but only after showing how hard it is for that voice to exist at all.

Masculinity, Ownership, and Symbolic Violence

Read through R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, Rasheed appears not as an isolated abuser but as a local form of male power that claims social authority over women (Connell, 1995). He expects obedience because he sees masculinity as naturally entitled to command. Pierre Bourdieu's idea of symbolic violence also helps here. Bourdieu explains how domination becomes accepted when it is repeated as custom, habit, and common sense (Bourdieu, 2001). That is exactly what happens in Rasheed's home. Violence is not only physical. It is also symbolic, domestic, and normalized.

Several readings of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* focus on trauma, motherhood, and war, which are all valid. But many of those readings do not go far enough into the social making of gender. This article builds on feminist scholarship while moving a step further. It asks not only how women suffer, but how womanhood is formed through repeated pressure. That is the gap this paper addresses.

Mariam: Shame as the First Lesson

Mariam's story begins with shame. She is born outside marriage, and that social stain follows her from the start. Her mother, Nana, teaches her a hard truth early: "A man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always" (Hosseini, 2007). This short line captures the logic of the whole novel.

Blame moves toward women even when they are not the source of the problem. Mariam learns that female life is already marked by suspicion.

That lesson is important in Butlerian terms

because identity is shaped through social address. Mariam is not allowed to begin as a neutral self. She is positioned as lesser before she can choose anything. Jalil's refusal to fully claim her in public deepens that wound. He does not only hide her. He teaches her that her place is at the edge of male legitimacy, not at its center. Her gendered subjectivity is therefore built through exclusion, not freedom. When Mariam is later married to Rasheed, the pattern continues. Marriage does not rescue her from shame. It redirects her into another structure of control. She moves from being the hidden daughter to the obedient wife. The role changes, but the pressure remains. Patriarchy simply gives her a new script to follow.

Marriage and the Daily Production of Femininity

Rasheed's home is where female performativity becomes most visible. He wants Mariam to behave like a proper wife in every small detail. He tells her how to cook, how to dress, how to move, how to speak, and how to receive his moods. In that house, femininity is not a feeling. It is a daily job.

The burqa is one of the strongest symbols of this control. It is not only a garment. It shapes the body's relation to space, visibility, and movement. It makes the woman present and hidden at the same time. Through the burqa, female visibility becomes regulated. The body is there, but on patriarchal terms. Butler's theory helps explain why this matters. Gender is built through repeated bodily acts, and the burqa becomes part of that repetition.

Rasheed's demands also show how domination depends on routine. He does not need to argue his authority each day. He expects it to be lived. A delayed meal, a wrong response, a silent face, or a failed pregnancy becomes grounds for punishment because the role of obedient wife must be repeated without friction. Chauvinistic pressure works best when it is absorbed into the ordinary.

Reproduction and the Value of the Female Body

Mariam's miscarriages bring another layer of pressure. Rasheed's cruelty sharpens when she fails to give him a son. This is one of the most painful parts of the novel because it shows how female worth is tied to reproductive use. Mariam's body is judged by what it can produce for male lineage, not by what it feels, loses, or endures.

Here, the novel exposes a harsh form of gender performativity. Femininity is linked to maternity, but only in a narrow and controlling way. A woman who does not produce the "right" child is treated as less than fully valuable. Rasheed's disappointment turns into contempt, and his contempt into violence. The body that is supposed to confirm male pride becomes a site of blame.

This logic is not only personal. It is cultural and social. The novel shows a system in which women are valued conditionally, and that condition depends on whether they serve male desire and family continuity. Mariam's pain is made invisible because the system reads her body only as a failed function.

Laila: Education, Collapse, and Tactical Performance

Laila enters the novel with a different kind of girlhood. Her father values her education, her mind, and her future. For a while, she inhabits a space that seems more open than Mariam's ever was. But the novel does not let that openness last. War destroys her family and cuts away her security. The social conditions that made her freedom possible collapse almost overnight.

That collapse matters because it shows how fragile gendered possibility can be. Laila does not simply "choose" a role. She is pushed into one by crisis. Her marriage to Rasheed is less a romantic decision than a survival arrangement. This is where Butler's theory helps again. Gender roles are not fixed outside history. They depend on what society allows a woman to be. When that support breaks, her options narrow.

Laila's performance of obedience is also different from Mariam's. She performs what is necessary to survive, but she does not fully accept the meaning of the role. Her submission is often tactical. She hides resistance inside it. She protects Aziza, watches carefully, waits, and plans. In Butlerian

terms, she cites the role without fully surrendering to it. That split between outward performance and inward refusal is one of the novel's most important tensions.

Rasheed and Chauvinistic Ownership

Rasheed represents chauvinism in its clearest form. He thinks masculinity gives him the right to own women's bodies, speech, and movement. He does not seek partnership. He seeks control. He wants wives who obey, children who validate him, and a home that reflects male authority.

His violence is physical, but it is also ideological. He wants his dominance to seem normal. That is what makes him dangerous. Chauvinism is not only about force. It is also about making force look natural. Rasheed's treatment of Mariam and Laila shows how patriarchy reduces women to service, silence, and reproductive use. Any refusal becomes a threat to his identity.

Hosseini also makes it clear that Rasheed is not alone. He is supported by broader social codes, by public custom, and later by Taliban rule. That wider frame is important because it shows that domestic violence is not just a private evil. It is part of a larger structure that grants male entitlement social legitimacy.

Textual Highlights

Two short lines from the novel carry a great deal of this argument:

"A man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always" (Hosseini, 2007).

"There is only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don't teach it in school" (Hosseini, 2007).

The first line captures gendered blame. The second shows how survival itself becomes a gendered skill under patriarchy. Together, they reveal how deeply the novel ties womanhood to pressure, training, and endurance.

State Control and the Public Life of Gender

The Taliban sections of the novel widen the argument. Patriarchy is not only in the house. It is also in law, public space, and state surveillance. Women's dress, movement, work, and visibility are restricted. A woman's body must signal obedience if she is to move safely at all.

This public regulation fits Butler's view that gender norms are social and institutional, not private and innocent. A woman is not only expected to behave a certain way. She is watched, corrected, and punished for failing to do so. In the novel, that pressure produces a femininity built on fear.

Women lower their voices, hide their bodies, and reduce their movement because survival demands it. Repetition makes the script feel natural, even when it is deeply coercive.

Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence is useful here because the violence is not always loud.

Sometimes it appears as custom, habit, or common sense (Bourdieu, 2001). The novel shows that what looks normal is often the product of long discipline. A woman's silence is not simply

personality. It is social training.

Female Solidarity and the Break in the Script

The relationship between Mariam and Laila is the novel's strongest challenge to patriarchal

structure. Rasheed tries to keep them separate because isolated women are easier to control. At first, suspicion works. Later, trust begins to grow. That change alters the emotional life of the house. Their bond matters because it changes what domestic labor means. Cooking, caring, talking, protecting the children, and sharing pain stop being only signs of obedient wifehood. They become acts of shared survival. The home remains violent, but it is no longer fully ruled by Rasheed's terms.

From Butler's perspective, this is crucial. Since gender norms survive through repetition, repeated acts can also be redirected. The same domestic behaviors can support domination or mutual care depending on how they are lived. Mariam and Laila do not step outside femininity. They work inside it, but with a different purpose. That difference is enough to disturb the system.

Their relationship also reshapes motherhood. Mariam's care for Aziza gives her a maternal role that is not defined by male approval. Her tenderness becomes chosen, not imposed. This matters because it loosens the link between

womanhood and reproductive failure. Mariam is no longer only the woman who could not bear a son. She becomes a woman who gives care, protection, and moral strength.

Mariam's Final Act

Mariam's killing of Rasheed is the novel's strongest break in the pattern of forced submission. For most of her life, she has been trained to endure pain in silence. In that final moment, she refuses the script. She acts to protect Laila. The act is violent, but it is not empty violence. It is a refusal of the whole system that made her into a woman expected to absorb suffering without reply.

A Butlerian reading helps show why this scene matters so much. If repeated submission sustains gender norms, then an act that interrupts submission has real force. Mariam does not discover a pure self hidden beneath performance. She becomes an agent through action. Her identity shifts not because she leaves gender behind, but because she changes what her role means.

Her choice to remain behind after the killing is also important. On the surface, it looks like another version of female sacrifice. But the difference is agency. Mariam chooses it. She does not simply receive sacrifice from the world. She gives it meaning. That choice transforms her final act from passive suffering into moral decision.

Laila and the Reopening of Possibility

Laila's later return to Kabul and her work in education widen the novel's idea of womanhood. She is no longer confined to being only a wife under male control. She becomes part of public life again. She teaches, remembers, rebuilds, and looks forward.

This ending matters because it shows that gendered identity can change when the social field changes. Butler argues that norms are not fixed forever. They can shift, and when they do, new forms of life become possible. Laila's future is not free of loss, but it is no longer trapped in the same narrow role that Rasheed enforced.

The novel does not offer easy hope. It offers a harder, more believable one. The past remains. Trauma remains. Yet the future opens enough for another kind of womanhood to appear.

Conclusion

A Thousand Splendid Suns is not only a novel about women suffering under patriarchy. It is also a novel about how gender is made through repetition, discipline, and social pressure. Through

Mariam and Laila, Hosseini shows that femininity is shaped by silence, dress, labor, motherhood, shame, and fear. Chauvinistic power works not only through violence, but also through ordinary habits that teach women how to behave, how to move, and how to disappear. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity makes this process easier to see because it shows that gender is not a fixed essence. It is a repeated social performance held in place by control.

At the same time, the novel does not leave its women inside complete defeat. Because gender norms depend on repetition, they can also be interrupted. Female friendship, care, strategic obedience, and decisive refusal all disturb the script. Mariam and Laila do not step outside patriarchy in any simple sense, but they do expose its weakness. Mariam's final act, especially, shows that even a life shaped by obedience can end in moral agency and resistance. Read through Butler, Hosseini's novel becomes a serious study of how womanhood is produced, pressured, and finally challenged from within the very roles patriarchy imposes.

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