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***A Thousand Splendid Suns* as a Re-Representation of Afghan Culture: Power Abuse, Gender Discrimination, and Voices of Resistance Against Forced Islamization**

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the re-representation of Afghan culture in Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) through the analytical lens of Cultural Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of scholars such as Teun A. van Dijk and Shi-Xu, this paper investigates three interrelated thematic dimensions: the abuse of power at both domestic and geopolitical levels, systemic gender discrimination embedded within patriarchal and theocratic structures, and the literary articulation of Afghan voices as an act of resistance against forced Islamization and Western misrepresentation. The study argues that Hosseini's narrative functions as a counter-discourse that challenges the monolithic, often Orientalist, portrayal of Afghanistan perpetuated by Western media and political discourse — particularly in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks. By closely analyzing selected textual passages, this paper demonstrates how Hosseini employs literary discourse to reconstruct Afghan national identity, amplify the silenced voices of Afghan women, and contest dominant ideological narratives rooted in colonial and neocolonial frameworks.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Afghan Culture, Power Abuse, Gender Discrimination, Islamophobia, Postcolonialism, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini, Van Dijk, Shi-Xu

INTRODUCTION

Literature has long served as a medium through which cultural identities are both constructed and contested. In the post-9/11 era, narratives about the Muslim world — and Afghanistan in particular — have been largely mediated through Western political and media discourse, often reducing complex cultural realities to simplistic narratives of terrorism, religious extremism, and gender oppression. It is within this charged ideological landscape that Khaled Hosseini published *A Thousand Splendid Suns* in 2007, offering a richly textured counter-narrative that foregrounds Afghan lived experience, identity, and resilience.

The novel follows two Afghan women, Mariam and Laila, whose lives converge under the oppressive household of Rasheed, a deeply patriarchal and traditionalist man, against



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the backdrop of decades of war, Soviet invasion, Mujahideen conflict, and Taliban rule. Hosseini's narrative is set against nearly forty years of sociopolitical upheaval that has dismantled Afghanistan's cultural fabric. This paper situates the novel within the theoretical framework of Cultural Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) — a discipline concerned with how language, power, and ideology intersect to produce, sustain, and challenge social inequalities.

The research specifically focuses on three analytical dimensions: (1) the multilevel abuse of power operating at both domestic and geopolitical registers; (2) the systemic gender discrimination encoded within Afghan patriarchal and Taliban structures; and (3) the role of literary voice as a form of resistance against both Western universalism and internal oppression. Through the application of CDA frameworks offered by van Dijk (1993, 2008) and Shi-Xu (2005), this study argues that Hosseini's novel constitutes a significant act of discursive resistance — one that reclaims Afghan cultural identity from the margins of Western representational politics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has grown considerably since the novel's publication. Sundaresan, Sumathi, and Kolappadhas (2018) conducted a comprehensive review of Hosseini's major works, identifying recurring motifs of displacement, trauma, and gendered suffering in both *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Their analysis underlines the sociological dimension of Hosseini's writing, situating his work within the broader context of Afghan diaspora literature.

Postcolonial scholars have increasingly examined the ways in which Afghan and Muslim-majority cultures are represented in Western literary and media discourse. Said's foundational concept of Orientalism (1978) remains a critical touchstone: the tendency of Western discourse to construct the 'East' as an undifferentiated, inferior, and homogeneous Other. This representational politics is directly relevant to how Afghanistan has been portrayed in mainstream Western imagination — as a site of barbarism, religious fanaticism, and female subjugation — a portrayal that Hosseini's fiction actively contests.

Within CDA scholarship, van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach (1993, 2008) provides a powerful toolkit for analyzing how dominant ideologies are reproduced through discourse. His concept of 'ideological square' — the tendency to emphasize positive aspects of in-groups and negative aspects of out-groups — is particularly applicable to the geopolitical discourses surrounding Afghanistan. Shi-Xu's cultural discourse analysis (2005) extends this framework by foregrounding non-Western perspectives and challenging the universalism embedded in traditional discourse studies. Together, these frameworks offer the theoretical scaffolding for this study's examination of Hosseini's novel.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CULTURAL CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of discourse that examines how language is used to exercise, reproduce, or resist social power. Unlike traditional discourse analysis, CDA is explicitly committed to social critique — it does not merely describe linguistic structures but interrogates their ideological underpinnings. CDA encompasses a range of approaches, including Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model, Wodak's discourse-historical approach, and van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework.



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For the purposes of this study, two complementary CDA frameworks are employed. Van Dijk's approach emphasizes the relationship between discourse, cognition, and society. He argues that:

Dominance is defined as a kind of social exploitation of power that results in social inequalities.

— Van Dijk, 1993

This definition is central to understanding how power operates both at the macro level of geopolitics — where superpowers impose their ideological frameworks on Afghanistan — and at the micro level of domestic life, where Rasheed's patriarchal authority oppresses Mariam and Laila.

Shi-Xu's cultural discourse analysis offers a complementary perspective by decentering Western universalism and insisting on the validity and complexity of non-Western cultural discourses. As Shi-Xu argues:

The Western discourse shows supremacy in constructing their culture, but effectively to undermine and discredit the culture of others.

— Shi-Xu, *Discourse and Culture*, p. 65

This critique is directly applicable to the post-9/11 discursive construction of Afghanistan as a failed, barbaric state. Hosseini's novel intervenes in this representational politics by giving voice to Afghan experiences that are systematically silenced or distorted in Western discourse. As Shi-Xu further elaborates:

Discourse is a construction of human and cultural political context; it involves the viewpoints, interests, and circumstances of those who produce it.

— Shi-Xu, *Theory and Methodology*, p. 60

Furthermore, Wodak (2003) reminds us that language is not merely reflective of power but constitutive of it — and also a potential instrument of its subversion: 'Power does not derive from language, but language can be used to challenge power, to subvert it, to alter distributions of power in the short and long term.' This insight frames Hosseini's novel as a deliberate act of discursive resistance.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Geopolitical Power Abuse and the Construction of Afghan National Identity

The novel is deeply attentive to the way foreign powers have historically invaded and exploited Afghanistan. Through the character of Babi — Laila's father and an intellectual voice of historical consciousness — Hosseini encodes a critique of imperialism directly into the narrative. Consider the following exchange:

"Babi had Laila lean across the seat and pointed to a series of ancient-looking walls of sun-dried red in the distance — that's called Shahr-e-Zohak."

"And that, my young friends, is the story of our country, one invader after another..."

This passage performs a dual discursive function: it historically situates Afghanistan as a nation perpetually subject to foreign aggression, and simultaneously asserts the resilience of Afghan cultural memory. The reference to ancient ruins is not merely nostalgic; it is an act of counter-memory that challenges the Western narrative that positions Afghanistan as a space without meaningful history prior to its contemporary conflicts.

The desire for national self-determination is further articulated in the following passage, which illustrates Afghan aspirations for sovereignty and freedom from foreign occupation:

"I want to see the day the Soviets go home disgraced. The day the Mujahideen come to Kabul in victory... When Afghanistan is free... They will see through their eyes."

Through CDA, this passage reveals how Hosseini constructs Afghan characters not as



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passive victims of history but as agents capable of political vision and resistance. The discourse of freedom here explicitly challenges the hegemonic framing of Afghans as objects of external governance rather than subjects of their own political destiny.

Van Dijk's framework of dominant discourse is directly applicable here: dominant powers — whether the Soviet Union, the United States, or the Taliban — seek to control not only territory but the very terms through which Afghanistan is understood. Hosseini's counter-narrative disrupts this epistemic control by insisting on Afghan interiority, voice, and historical consciousness.

Domestic Power Abuse: Patriarchy, Violence, and the Oppression of Women

While geopolitical power operates at the macro level, the novel's most visceral depictions of power abuse occur in the domestic sphere, centered on the figure of Rasheed. As a husband to both Mariam and Laila, Rasheed embodies a form of hegemonic masculinity that relies on violence, intimidation, and the systematic denial of female autonomy to sustain its authority.

The following passage — one of the novel's most harrowing — illustrates the explicit enactment of domestic violence as an instrument of patriarchal control:

"He snatched her hand, opened it, and dropped a handful of pebbles into it. Rasheed: Put these in your mouth. Mariam: What?... His powerful hands clasped her jaw. He shoved two fingers into her mouth and tried to open it, then forced the cold, hard pebbles into her mouth. Rasheed: Now chew it!"

From a CDA perspective, this act of violence is not merely personal cruelty — it is a discursive performance of dominance. Rasheed's command to chew pebbles as punishment for poorly cooked rice is emblematic of a regime of power in which women's bodies are wholly subject to male authority. The physicality of the violence underscores the embodied nature of patriarchal discourse: it is inscribed not only in language but in flesh.

Van Dijk's observation that CDA 'relates context and structures of text and talk as a major form of exercise of power, controlling people's minds' is particularly illuminating here. Rasheed's domestic tyranny is not only physical; it is psychological. By instilling fear and shame, he constructs a discursive environment in which resistance becomes almost unthinkable — a microcosm of the broader power structures that constrain Afghan women's lives.

It is significant that Hosseini foregrounds two female protagonists from different class backgrounds — Mariam, the illegitimate daughter of a wealthy man, and Laila, the educated daughter of a progressive intellectual — to demonstrate the universality of gendered oppression in the novel's social world. Their eventual solidarity represents a discursive rupture: the emergence of a collective female voice that refuses the logic of their subordination.

Taliban Theocracy, Islamization, and the Distortion of Cultural Identity

The Taliban's rise to power represents the third and perhaps most institutionalized form of power abuse in the novel. The following proclamation — representing Taliban edicts — encapsulates the regime's totalizing control:

"Our watan is now known as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan... All citizens must pray five times... All men will grow their beards... Singing, writing books are forbidden... If you steal, your hands will be cut off... Attention women: You will stay inside your homes... If you are caught alone you will be beaten... Cover yourselves with burqa... Girls will not attend schools." (pp. 296–297)



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This passage is remarkable for its direct, declarative register — the language of edict and command. It is a textbook illustration of how power operates through discourse: language here is not merely describing a social reality but actively producing one. The performative force of the Taliban's proclamations constitutes women as objects of regulation, as bodies to be covered and confined rather than as subjects with rights, desires, or voices.

From the perspective of Cultural CDA, these edicts represent a forced Islamization — a distortion of Islamic principles that serves the Taliban's political agenda rather than any authentic spiritual tradition. The novel makes clear that the Taliban's version of Islam is not representative of Afghan Muslim culture more broadly; it is a politically constructed ideology imposed through violence and the threat of punishment. By representing this ideology in all its specificity and cruelty, Hosseini refuses to allow it to stand as the defining image of Afghan or Islamic culture.

The consequences of Taliban governance extend beyond individual suffering to cultural destruction on a civilizational scale. The demolition of the Bamiyan Buddha statues — referenced obliquely in the novel — the banning of music, the elimination of girls' education, and the persecution of the Hazara ethnic minority all represent acts of cultural erasure that Hosseini's narrative refuses to allow to go unrecorded. As van Dijk notes, dominant discourse operates by controlling 'people's minds' — and the Taliban's edicts are precisely a form of discursive control that Hosseini's novel resists by making visible what the regime sought to silence.

Voice, Resistance, and the Reconstruction of Afghan Identity

Despite the overwhelming weight of oppression depicted in the novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is ultimately a narrative about resistance. The 'voice' that Hosseini grants to his Afghan characters — particularly his female protagonists — constitutes a form of discursive empowerment that operates in direct opposition to the silencing mechanisms of patriarchy, Taliban theocracy, and Western misrepresentation.

Cultural CDA, as theorized by Shi-Xu, insists on the importance of recovering and amplifying non-Western voices that have been marginalized or distorted by hegemonic discourse. Hosseini's novel does precisely this: it invites Western readers into an Afghan interiority that Western media discourse has rendered invisible. By depicting the full complexity of Afghan life — its warmth, its cultural richness, its historical depth — alongside its contemporary sufferings, Hosseini challenges the reductive image of Afghanistan as merely a site of terrorism and backwardness.

The solidarity that develops between Mariam and Laila is the novel's most powerful act of discursive resistance. In a society designed to atomize women and render them competing objects of male authority, their mutual care and eventual friendship constitute a counter-discourse of female agency and collective strength. Their voices, heard through the narrative, fulfill Hosseini's stated ambition of bearing witness to Afghan suffering and humanity alike.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that *A Thousand Splendid Suns* operates simultaneously as a work of literary imagination and as a sustained act of cultural counter-discourse. Through the analytical frameworks of van Dijk's socio-cognitive CDA and Shi-Xu's cultural discourse analysis, it has been shown that Hosseini's novel engages critically with three intersecting dimensions of power: the geopolitical abuse of power by foreign states seeking to impose their interests on Afghanistan; the domestic abuse of power



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enacted through patriarchal violence and control; and the theocratic abuse of power exercised by the Taliban through the forced imposition of a distorted religious ideology.

In each of these registers, the novel functions as a form of discursive resistance: reconstructing Afghan national identity from within, amplifying the silenced voices of Afghan women, and contesting the Orientalist and Islamophobic representations that have dominated Western discourse in the aftermath of 9/11. Hosseini's rhetorical achievement lies in his ability to humanize and individualize a population that has been systematically reduced to a backdrop for Western geopolitical narratives.

From a theoretical standpoint, this analysis confirms the value of Cultural CDA as a methodology for reading postcolonial literary texts. By situating Hosseini's novel within the broader discourse of power and representation, CDA illuminates how literature can function not only as aesthetic expression but as a political intervention — a medium through which marginalized cultures can speak back to power and reclaim the right to self-representation.

Future scholarship might productively extend this analysis by examining Hosseini's novel in dialogue with other Afghan or diasporic literary voices, or by applying discourse-historical analysis to trace how representations of Afghanistan have shifted across different periods and media contexts. The intersection of gender, ethnicity, religion, and nationalism in the novel also invites further interdisciplinary engagement with feminist and postcolonial theory.

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