ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance:An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol. – VII, Issue-1, June 2026

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DOMESTIC SPACE AS A SITE OF CULTURAL POWER AND FEMALE RESISTANCE IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*

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Abstract

This paper examines Khaled Hosseini's novel A Thousand Splendid Suns through the lens of feminist spatial theory, arguing that domestic space serves as a critical site where patriarchal power is both consolidated and contested. Moving beyond readings that treat the household as a passive backdrop, this study employs the theoretical frameworks of bell hooks, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Leila Ahmed to analyze how domesticity functions as an ideological arena. It explores how the physical and psychological confinement of the protagonists, Mariam and Laila, reflects a broader network of systemic Afghan patriarchy, legal structures, and historical violence.The analysis progresses across three interconnected dimensions. First, it traces Mariam and Laila's domestic interiority, revealing how private emotional trauma is shaped by public ideology and kinship expectations. Second, it investigates the transformation of the household from a punitive prison into a space of relational agency. Finally, the paper broadens this domestic drama to critique the structural nature of misogyny in Afghanistan, illustrating how political extremism and cultural customs amplify preexisting inequalities across generations. Ultimately, by utilizing close narration, spatial symbolism, and relational contrast, the paper demonstrates how Hosseini positions the intimate architecture of the home as the central for both totalitarian domination and radical, solidarity-driven resistance, transforming survival into an ethical and historical act of defiance.

Keywords

Domestic Space, Female Resistance, Patriarchal Power, Domestic Interiority, Cultural Power, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* stages some of its most consequential conflicts inside homes rather than in conventionally public locations. Nana's Kolba, Jalil's mansion, Rasheed's house, and the later reimagined family home in Kabul are never merely settings; they are structures through which legitimacy, shame, discipline, and belonging are distributed. The novel thus invites a reading of domesticity as political, not incidental. In Hosseini's fictional world, the home is where patriarchy appears most intimate and most normalized, and therefore where it often proves most brutal.

A useful theoretical framework for this novel emerges from feminist writing on domesticity, power, and resistance. Bell hooks insists that home may operate either as a site of domination or as a location of care and self-recovery, depending on the relations that govern it (Hooks, 41-49). Chandra Talpade Mohanty warns against homogenizing "third world women" as passive victims and instead emphasizes historically situated agency (Mohanty, 17-19). Leila Ahmed's work on women and Islam is also relevant because it shows how debates about female conduct, modesty, and authority become symbolically overburdened within patriarchal cultures. Ahmed further argues that women's subordinate status often emerges from historically dominant patriarchal interpretations rather than from a singular or fixed religious framework, a distinction that is important when

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examining gender relations in Hosseini's Afghanistan (Ahmed, 1-7). Taken together, these theorists help frame domestic space in Hosseini's novel as an ideological and affective arena in which gendered power is organized, internalized, and contested.

Recent scholarship on Hosseini reinforces this approach. Muhammad Imran and Sayed M. Ismail read Hosseini's women as "obedient, resistant and empowered" figures and argue that his fiction exposes patriarchal hierarchies while foregrounding female solidarity and insurgent agency. Their study is especially useful because it links women's oppression in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* to both intimate domestic relations and wider structures such as war, Taliban rule, and social conservatism. Similarly, the *Journal of Namibian Studies* article on gender stereotypes in the novel argues that Hosseini foregrounds the "unheard voices" of Afghan women through themes of resilience, solidarity, and intersecting oppression (Jayakar, 1-9). Collectively, these critical sources demonstrate that domestic space in the novel cannot be separated from the material realities of patriarchy, violence, and gendered subordination.

This paper argues that *A Thousand Splendid Suns* represents domestic space as a site of cultural power and resistance in three connected ways. First, Mariam and Laila's domestic interiority reveals how private emotional life is shaped by public ideology, kinship structures, and gendered violence. Second, the home gradually changes from a site of confinement into one of relational agency as the two women form a shared ethic of care and mutual defence. Third, Hosseini broadens this domestic drama into a critique of Afghan patriarchy by showing that misogyny is sustained not only by individual men but by social customs, legal structures, and historical violence. Through close attention to imagery, narrative voice, spatial symbolism, and acts of solidarity, the paper shows that Hosseini turns the house into the central theatre of both domination and resistance.

Domesticity and Gendered Power:

From its opening chapters, the novel binds female identity to inhabited space. Mariam's childhood in the kolba is marked by isolation, illegitimacy, and emotional enclosure. The hut is both a home and a social verdict, a structure that materializes her status as a *harami*. Nana's bitter instruction to Mariam, "Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always." (Hosseini, 7), offers one of the novel's earliest lessons in patriarchal ideology. This statement is not delivered in an abstract philosophical context; it is learned in domestic intimacy. Hosseini therefore shows that gender hierarchy is transmitted first through everyday speech and household instruction.

The movement from Nana's kolba to Jalil's mansion and then to Rasheed's home traces Mariam's passage through different but related forms of exclusion. Jalil's mansion embodies wealth and legitimacy, yet Mariam is denied entry into it as a fully acknowledged daughter. Later, her marriage to Rasheed appears to grant social incorporation, but the Kabul house becomes another structure of subordination. Rasheed's home does not give Mariam a sense of belonging or treat her equally; it displaces her from being an illegitimate daughter to controlled wife. Her life demonstrates what Spivak identifies as the problem of women whose subjectivity is mediated by institutions that do not allow them full speech or self-representation (Spivak, 287-308).

Rasheed's domestic authority is enacted through commands concerning dress, movement, visibility, and bodily comportment. He tells Mariam, "A woman's face is her husband's business only" (Hosseini, 70). The line condenses the logic of patriarchal possession: the female body becomes private property under the rhetoric of honor and protection. As Ahmed observes, patriarchal social systems frequently render male authority both socially and institutionally enforceable while reducing women's autonomy within family structures. Rasheed's behaviour therefore reflects not merely personal cruelty but a broader system of gendered power.

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The novel also links domesticity to reproductive value. Mariam's miscarriages intensify Rasheed's contempt because her assigned role as wife is inseparable from childbearing. In a patriarchal order that values women instrumentally, infertility appears to Rasheed as failed usefulness.

Yet domestic interiority in the novel is not equivalent to passivity. Hosseini's narration remains close to Mariam's consciousness, allowing readers to witness her silence as a space of memory, judgment, and moral accumulation. What is externally experienced as obedience contains inward resistance. This is where the novel exceeds reductive victim narratives. As Mohanty argues, it is necessary to resist frameworks that collapse women in non-Western contexts into a singular figure of powerlessness. Mariam's subjectivity is certainly constrained, but it is not empty; it is the ground from which later action becomes thinkable.

Laila's relation to domestic space initially differs from Mariam's because she grows up in a comparatively affectionate and intellectually open home. Babi encourages her education and imagines a future in which she has access to learning and self-development. This early domestic environment represents an alternative model of family life, one organized less by coercion than by care and possibility. Mary Wollstonecraft's classic argument that women must have access to education and rational self-development offers a useful frame for understanding Babi's role in Laila's formation (Wollstonecraft, 45-56). When war destroys this home and forces Laila into Rasheed's household, the novel dramatizes the collapse of emancipatory domesticity into patriarchal confinement. The importance of education in Laila's upbringing reflects what Efrilia and Setiawan identify as one of the novel's central social concerns: unequal educational opportunities for Afghan women and the restrictions placed on their intellectual development (Efrilia and Setiawan, 35).

Inside Rasheed's home, Laila's intelligence does not spare her from violence, but it affects how she interprets and resists it. Her memory of another kind of household enables her to see more clearly that Rasheed's authority is neither natural nor morally legitimate. Laila's domestic life becomes a negotiation between survival and defiance, especially in relation to Aziza. Hosseini thereby shows that motherhood does not simply socialize women into submission; it may also radicalize resistance by making care politically urgent.

Mariam and Laila's Domestic Interiority:

The emotional and psychological lives of Mariam and Laila are central to the novel's politics of space. Hosseini does not describe the home only in architectural terms; he renders it through sensation, routine, fear, memory, and shifting relations between women. When Laila enters Rasheed's household as a second wife, Mariam initially experiences her as another injury. The younger, fertile wife threatens to displace Mariam further in a house where value is already unequally distributed. Domestic interiority thus begins in antagonism, with the household structured to produce rivalry rather than solidarity.

This rivalry is not accidental; it is one of patriarchy's methods. Rasheed's power depends on the fragmentation of female relations. The house becomes a site in which comparison, humiliation, and differential treatment keep the women from recognizing their shared condition. Feminist criticism has long shown that patriarchal systems sustain themselves by privatizing women's pain and preventing collective identification. Hosseini dramatizes this mechanism through everyday domestic arrangements: separate resentments, selective affection, and the manipulative use of age and fertility to divide women.

The turning point occurs when Laila intervenes to protect Mariam from Rasheed's violence. Hosseini writes: “Rasheed raised the belt again and this time came at Mariam. Then an astonishing thing happened: the girl lunged at him” (Hosseini, 235). The sentence is brief, but its implications are profound. Laila's action punctures the household order that Rasheed has tried to maintain. For

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the first time, one woman reads another not as competitor but as fellow sufferer. Jayakar argues that one of the novel's most significant feminist interventions lies in its representation of female solidarity, through which women create emotional support systems capable of challenging patriarchal oppression (Jayakar, 1-9). Laila's intervention marks the beginning of precisely such a relationship.

From this point onward, Hosseini rebuilds the emotional meaning of the house through ordinary domestic practices. Shared meals, quiet conversations, child care, and mutual protection gradually generate an alternative household inside Rasheed's oppressive one. Bell hooks's notion that home may become a place of care, repair, and political nurturance is especially useful in reading this transition (Hooks, 41-49). The house remains materially dangerous, yet Mariam and Laila create within it a counter-space of affection and reciprocity. Domesticity is thus re-signified from within. Rather than presenting Afghan women solely as victims, Hosseini emphasizes their capacity to create supportive relationships and forms of resistance even within highly restrictive environments (Alqaryouti, 491-492).

Mariam's internal transformation is especially important. She has long accepted Nana's fatalistic lesson that a woman must endure. Laila's presence unsettles that belief. Through caring for Laila and Aziza, Mariam begins to experience domestic attachment as chosen responsibility rather than imposed servitude. This change matters because it gives her an ethical identity that does not depend on Rasheed's recognition.

Laila's interiority is shaped by memory, strategic endurance, and maternal commitment. She enters marriage under coercive circumstances and must constantly calculate how to protect her children without provoking further violence. Hosseini does not romanticize this condition. Laila's agency is partial, compromised, and often painful. Mohanty's insistence on historically situated agency is useful here because Laila's resistance is not a free, unconstrained assertion of selfhood but a contingent practice formed within war, patriarchy, and domestic captivity (Mohanty,17-19).

The maternal dimension of the relationship between the two women deepens the novel's treatment of interiority. Mariam becomes, in effect, a mother to Aziza and a protective elder to Laila, while Laila gives Mariam a form of familial intimacy that had long been denied to her. This chosen kinship subverts a patriarchal family model that values women mainly as biological reproducers.

Several key quotations from the novel crystallize this change. When Mariam realizes that Rasheed intends to kill Laila, the narration records her recognition in stark terms: “He'd taken so much from her in twenty-seven years of marriage. She wouldn't watch him take Laila too” (Hosseini, 311). Later, when Laila begs Mariam to flee with her, Mariam replies, “Think like a mother. I am” (Hosseini 329). These lines show that Mariam's resistance grows out of domestic feeling itself. Heroism in the novel is not coded as public acclaim or abstract rebellion; it emerges through care, attachment, and ethical resolve formed inside the household.

From Confinement to Agency:

One of the novel's central achievements is its transformation of home from a site of imprisonment into one of agency. This transformation is neither easy nor complete. Rasheed's house never ceases to be a dangerous environment, and the social world beyond it continues to reinforce male control. Even so, the house gradually becomes a place from which resistance is imagined and enacted. The attempted escape by Mariam and Laila marks an early stage in this change. Even the failed attempts are crucial as they demonstrate that the home is no longer accepted as Mariam’s destiny.

The failed escape also reveals that domestic confinement is institutionally protected. When the women are intercepted, the authorities do not interpret their flight as an effort to survive abuse;

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instead, they return them to Rasheed in accordance with patriarchal assumptions about household sovereignty. In this sense, the public sphere does not correct domestic violence but secures it.

After the failed escape, the house becomes even more punitive. Yet this intensification of violence also sharpens the women's consciousness of one another and of Rasheed's vulnerability. They begin sharing labor, preserving one another's dignity, and coordinating their efforts for survival. Agency here should not be confused with unrestricted freedom. It appears instead as a relational practice of endurance, planning, and mutual defense inside coercive space. As Alqaryouti notes, the women in the novel are subjected to forced marriage, domestic abuse, and severe social restrictions, yet they continue to assert forms of agency through acts of resistance and self-determination (Alqaryouti, 491). Hosseini's depiction of agency is therefore rooted in persistence rather than absolute freedom.

The climax of this transformation occurs when Mariam kills Rasheed to save Laila's life. This act is not framed as private revenge alone. It is an ethical and spatial rupture. Rasheed attempts to murder Laila inside the home, converting the house into the ultimate expression of patriarchal ownership. Mariam's intervention interrupts that logic. By killing him, she breaks the principle that male power is unchallengeable within domestic walls. Mariam's final act embodies what several feminist readings of the novel identify as a transition from endurance to empowerment, where resistance becomes possible through the emotional bonds women form with one another (Jayakar, 1; Alqaryouti, 492).

Spivak's account of subalternity is instructive here. When social structures refuse women authoritative speech, action may become the medium through which they enter history at all. Mariam is not given legal remedy, public recognition, or meaningful institutional recourse. Her act emerges because every sanctioned avenue of protection has failed. The novel does not romanticize the necessity of violence, but it renders Mariam's action morally intelligible. She acts from accumulated witnessing, domestic suffering, and relational responsibility, not from impulsive lawlessness.

At the same time, agency in the novel does not end with Rasheed's death. Mariam's sacrifice opens the possibility of another domestic future for Laila, Tariq, Aziza, and Zalmai. Laila's later return to Kabul broadens the meaning of home beyond the mere idea of home as a shelter. The rebuilt home is associated with nurture, and community rather than coercion.

This transformation also has symbolic force. Rasheed's house is closed, authoritarian, and surveilled; the later home Laila inhabits is associated with openness, children, memory, and future-making. Space changes meaning when power relations change. Hosseini thus suggests that agency is not only psychological or moral but spatial. To reconstruct the home is to reconstruct the social relations that give it meaning.

The Novel's Critique of Afghan Patriarchy:

Although Rasheed is the novel's most visible agent of brutality, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* does not reduce patriarchy to one monstrous man. The narrative consistently shows that his authority is embedded within a wider network of customs, laws, kinship expectations, and historical pressures. Mariam's illegitimacy, Nana's social exclusion, child marriage, the preference for male children, restrictions on women's mobility, and the normalization of domestic violence demonstrate that patriarchal oppression in the novel is institutional and cultural rather than merely the product of Rasheed's individual cruelty. The novel's critique is therefore systemic rather than merely personal. This broader understanding of patriarchy is consistent with Ahmed's observation that gender inequality is sustained through social, legal, and cultural structures rather than through the actions of individual men alone (Ahmed, 1-7).

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This systemic quality becomes especially visible in the relationship between domestic life and political upheaval. War, invasion, and Taliban rule intensify women's vulnerability, but Hosseini makes clear that gender oppression is not produced by the Taliban alone. Rather, political extremism magnifies preexisting patriarchal structures. Efrilia and Setiawan likewise argue that Hosseini's portrayal of Afghan society links domestic violence, educational inequality, and marriage practices to wider social conditions rather than treating them as isolated personal experiences (Efrilia and Setiawan, 34-35).

At the same time, the novel avoids presenting Afghan culture as monolithically oppressive. Babi's commitment to Laila's education, Tariq's respectful companionship, and the later possibility of family renewal all complicate any simplistic cultural condemnation. This distinction matters in light of Mohanty's critique of Western discourses that flatten non-Western women into uniform victims of a uniformly backward culture (Mohanty, 17-19). Hosseini's novel criticizes patriarchy within Afghan society while preserving internal complexity, contradiction, and the possibility of ethical relation.

Language itself becomes one of the novel's tools for critiquing patriarchy. Terms such as *harami*, wife, mother, and honor carry heavy social consequences. Mariam's life is shaped by a word that predetermines her social worth. Rasheed repeatedly uses language to convert women into functions—sexual, domestic, and reproductive. Yet the novel gradually reclaims relational language through chosen kinship. Mariam becomes a mother not through biology alone but through care and sacrifice. Laila becomes Mariam's companion in a way that exceeds patriarchal household categories. The semantic world of the novel is therefore contested alongside its physical spaces.

The novel also critiques patriarchy by showing how suffering accumulates across generations. Nana's bitterness is not innate; it is the result of abandonment, humiliation, and exclusion. Mariam initially inherits Nana's fatalism, but she does not transmit only fatalism onward. Her final sacrifice enables Laila and Aziza to inherit a different possibility. This intergenerational dimension matters because it reveals how the domestic sphere reproduces ideology over time, while also suggesting that such reproduction can be interrupted. In this respect, Hosseini's fiction aligns with hooks's insistence that home can become a site where alternative ways of being are nurtured despite structural violence (Hooks. 41-49).

Conclusion:

A Thousand Splendid Suns presents domestic space as one of the novel's most politically charged terrains. Through Mariam and Laila, Hosseini demonstrates that the home is not naturally private, safe, or apolitical; it is a contested arena in which patriarchy is enacted through discipline, reproductive expectation, surveillance, and violence. Yet the same domestic setting becomes the ground for solidarity, ethical awakening, and resistant agency. The transformation of the house from prison to fragile refuge is made possible not by escaping history but by confronting the way history has entered domestic life itself.

Mariam and Laila's domestic interiority reveals how deeply gendered power shapes consciousness, but it also shows that inwardness can preserve the moral resources needed for resistance. Their bond redefines family beyond patriarchal ownership and turns care into a radical practice. As Jayakar observes, the novel's emphasis on female solidarity gives voice to women whose experiences are often marginalized within patriarchal societies, transforming interpersonal care into a form of resistance (Jayakar, 9). In literary terms, Hosseini's use of close narration, spatial symbolism, and relational contrast allows domestic space to carry the full force of the novel's feminist critique.

Ultimately, Hosseini's wider critique of Afghan patriarchy lies in his insistence that misogyny is sustained by more than individual brutality. It is reproduced through custom, law, war,

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e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
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kinship, and the social meanings attached to womanhood. By making the house the central arena of these struggles, the novel uncovers the cultural power embedded in domestic life and shows how resistance can emerge from within the very spaces designed to suppress it. The result is a deeply affective political narrative in which the intimate architecture of survival becomes the ground of historical and ethical transformation.

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Article Received:07/06/2026
Article Accepted:14/06/2026
Published Online:30/06/2026

To Cite the Article: Pathak, Sakshi. "*Domestic Space as a Site of Cultural Power and Female Resistance in Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns*." *Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed/Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism*, Vol.-VII, Issue-1, June, 2026, 160-166. www.literarycog nizance.com