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**Trauma, Dependency, And Intimate Partner Violence in Khaled Hosseini's A
Thousand Splendid Suns: An Ecological Literary Analysis**

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Abstract

Gender-based violence is seldom the result of a simple personal, cultural or relational event. It is formed by the interplay of interpersonal inequalities, economic marginalization, expectations about women and lack of protection. Through a qualitative literary discussion, this paper explores the portrayal of trauma, dependency, coercive control and intimate partner violence in A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini. It specifically uses the individual and relationship levels of Lori Heise's Integrated Ecological Framework to describe the experiences of Mariam and Laila. The study uses the technique of interpretive textual analysis and close reading of selected characters, events, narrative patterns and interpersonal conflicts. The analysis also indicates that at the personal level, the protagonists' vulnerability to abuse is heightened by factors such as illegitimacy, childhood rejection, bereavement, interrupted education, poverty, displacement, internalized inferiority and psychological trauma. On the relationship level, forced marriage, age and 'power' differences, polygamy, economic control, reproductive pressure, surveillance, isolation, intimidation and repeated physical violence help Rasheed to exert coercive authority over both women. The results, however, also reveal that Mariam and Laila do not have to be completely helpless victims. As they become more connected with each other there is emotional protection, a challenge to feelings of isolation, and resistance to the abusive family hierarchy. The study suggests that it is not advisable to think of intimate partner violence in the novel as a chain of separate attacks. It is a persistent cycle of entrapment that the personal vulnerability and unequal relationship in marriage further strengthen each other. The paper is part of current literary debates on gender violence because of its incorporation of trauma, domestic violence, and coercive control in an ecological approach. It finds that addressing gender-based violence requires psychological support and education, social protection, interventions in coercive and unequal intimate relationships, and economic empowerment.

Keywords: gender-based violence, intimate partner violence, trauma, coercive control, economic dependency, ecological framework, Khaled Hosseini, A Thousand Splendid Suns

1. Introduction

Gender-based violence is a complex social issue that encompasses physical violence, sexual violence, psychological intimidation, economic exploitation, forced marriage, reproductive exploitation, restriction of movement and other forms of violence in which power is exercised against a person based on his or her gender. Women can be victims of violence in other contexts, but the family and intimate relationship are often significant contexts of victimization. Domestic violence can be hidden in private as it may be presented as a domestic conflict between husband and wife rather than a pattern of systematic violence. The contemporary studies therefore focus on the issue of IPV as an ongoing process, which includes coercion, surveillance, restriction, intimidation and social entrapment, rather than merely an occurrence of physical assaults (Tolmie et al., 2024).

Literature offers an important medium for the psychological and relational aspects of violence to be explored. An experience that the numerical cannot adequately describe can be presented in a novel, as can fear, humiliation, silence, emotional dependency, internalized shame, and the slow erosion of personal autonomy. Literary narratives also allow the reader to see how a victim's past experiences influence the way that they feel about future abuse. Fiction does not supplant empirical proof, but it can render social issues more emotional, more moral - humanize them in a way. In the last few years, women's writing, as well as narratives on South Asia, has been acknowledged as a device for revealing women's oppression, depicting marginalized voices, and exploring women's resilience and resistance (Karmakar, 2022).

A Thousand Splendid Suns by the Afghan-born writer Khaled Hosseini is a strong literary portrayal of the experiences of Afghan women over several decades of political turmoil, armed conflict and patriarchy. The novel unites two women, Mariam and Laila, of different family and educational backgrounds who will go on to become wives of Rasheed. Mariam is raised by her father in his household, but has no social standing, and is considered an outsider. She faces rejection, emotional manipulation, the suicide of her mother, forced marriage, multiple miscarriages and long-term domestic violence. Laila, on the other hand, is raised in a relatively well-educated and loving family. But her rights are now taken away by war, loss of loved ones, injury, displacement, and deception. Her plight forces her into marriage with Rasheed, and then she suffers coercive control, physical violence, reproductive pressure and isolation.

For the ecological analysis, Mariam and Laila are very appropriate because of their different backgrounds. Mariam is married into her own sense of shame and inadequacy; Laila enters marriage as a tangible result of unanticipated trauma, bereavement and physical frailty. Their routes to violence differ, but Rasheed's family makes their weaknesses their tools of control. The novel thus shows women don't have to have the same experiences to fall into the same abusive situation. They are influenced by their relationship with their abusing husband and how the relationship is formed.

Patriarchy, oppression of women, domestic abuse, resilience, subaltern identity and resistance has been studied in the context of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. For instance, the novel is read by Yasin (2021) in relation to women's endurance, and by Austen and Aslinia (2021) in terms of the psychological victimization of its female characters. Sreevidhya and Sridevi (2022) discuss how women are treated in the works of Hosseini in relation to extremist political rule, and how Naymat et al. (2023) study the interconnection of patriarchal and political ideologies. These approaches have broadened the overall perception of the novel dealing with the gender inequality. Many analysts, however, focus

on patriarchy, violence, trauma or resistance, rather than women's personal vulnerabilities in the context of the power dynamics of private relationships.

An interesting recent study by Fadhilah and Handayani gives attention to the physical, psychological, and sexual form of domestic violence that occurs in the novel, and suggests that the novel ultimately counters Rasheed's violence, rather than allowing the characters to remain silent (Fadhilah & Handayani, 2022). This interpretation is helpful, but further examination is required to understand how and why the women stay in the abusive household, how Rasheed's power extends beyond physical violence, and how their past traumas, dependency, forced marriage, isolation and economic control restrict the options that are available to them. Recent coercive-control research has suggested those victims' actions and seemingly voluntary decisions must be looked at with an eye to the social and systemic factors that create entrapment (Tolmie et al., 2024). This is much of the reason that this insight is so applicable to Hosseini's novel, in which neither of the two main characters, Laila and Mariam, can leave. It's about their intentional limitation of economic, social, emotional and physical choices.

This interaction can be analyzed using an appropriate theoretical approach, Integrated Ecological Framework presented by Lori Heise. The model is based on a multi-level approach to gender violence, occurring at individual, relationship, community and societal levels. The ecological approach looks at the interplay of various factors rather than ascribing abuse solely to a victim's weakness and/or the personality of the perpetrator. The first two levels (individual and relationship) are reviewed in the present paper. This concentration enables an in-depth examination into the intersections between childhood trauma, illegitimacy, bereavement, lack of education, poverty, emotional insecurity and forced marriage, marital inequality, coercive control, isolation, reproductive pressure and physical violence.

The study suggests that the abuse committed by Rasheed is not just a series of violent responses. It's a relationship based system used to create subservient behavior and opposition to that behavior. While physical violence is one component of that system, so are humiliation, financial control, threats, limited movement, manipulation, reproductive expectations and social isolation. The paper also suggests that the friendship between Mariam and Laila challenges the abuser's tactic of isolation. Their solidarity turns into a protective relational factor and they are able to rebuild damaged self-worth and build collective resistance. Relationships in the novel are then not simply causes of violence, but protective and enabling and survivors' as well.

2. Problem Statement

The research problem is the theme of gender-based violence (GBV) as shown in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, by Khaled Hosseini. The issue is especially critical in Afghanistan, where an entrenched culture and social norms fuel violence against women. This study seeks to examine gender-based violence using the lens of Heise's ecological model that views the dynamics of multiple factors working together to cause violence and the effects of violence on individuals and communities. The study aims to highlight the interconnection of the personal history and the microsystem, also the ecosystem and microsystem, in the storyline of the novel in order to understand the complexities of gender violence in Afghanistan.

Gender-based violence is a problem in all parts of the world, and one of the highest rates of gender-based violence is in Afghanistan. It is reported that nearly 87% of all Afghan women face some type of violence in their lifetime, and in many cases, perpetrated by family and social dynamics. The study's results are expected to help in the existing literary works by offering a detailed analysis of the presence of these factors in the literary

representations and real-life issues of Afghan women. This research uses qualitative method and analysis of the text is *Thousands of Splendid Suns*. The thesis treats these aspects and examines the issue of gender-based violence in Afghanistan as depicted in literature and thereby part of the wider debates on women's rights and social justice in Afghanistan.

3. Research Objectives

The study has the following objectives:

1. To identify the individual-level factors that increase Mariam's and Laila's vulnerability to gender-based violence in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.
2. To examine how childhood trauma, social stigma, bereavement, interrupted education, and economic dependence influence the protagonists' experiences of abuse.
3. To analyse how forced marriage, unequal marital power, coercive control, reproductive pressure, and social isolation sustain intimate partner violence.
4. To investigate the interaction between individual vulnerability and relationship-level domination.
5. To examine how female solidarity functions as a protective relationship and enables resistance within an abusive household.

4. Research Questions

1. Which individual factors make Mariam and Laila vulnerable to gender-based violence?
2. How do trauma, illegitimacy, bereavement, limited education, and economic dependence shape their responses to abuse?
3. How do unequal marital relationships enable Rasheed to establish coercive control?
4. How do individual and relationship-level factors interact to perpetuate intimate partner violence?
5. How does the relationship between Mariam and Laila transform their capacity for resistance?

5. Significance of the Study

This study is important because it presents a comprehensive literary account of IPPV. It goes beyond counting individual acts of physical, psychological or sexual abuse, and looks at how physical, psychological or sexual violence can occur. The study shows that the application of Heise's framework can be used to show that individuals do not inevitably become victims. They become risk factors when the needs of grief, dependence, isolation, social stigma, and resource are exploited in an abusive relationship.

The research also makes a contribution to the scholarship concerning Hosseini in comparison to the various ways in which Mariam and Laila find themselves in the same house of abuse. As a result, the vulnerability of Mariam grows over time as she experiences rejection during her childhood and experiences internalized shame. Laila's vulnerability, on the other hand, is manifested as a sudden loss of family, home, security and social support. This comparison demonstrates that intimate partner violence is possible in women who have varying educational, family and psychological statuses, and where options are limited.

The study also has relevance to modern conceptions of 'coercive control'. In Rasheed's house, the pattern of domination may be apparent in the way he treats everyone, and not just in the way he treats his wife. He has control over money, being able to move, clothing, communication, sexuality, reproduction and family relationships; all of this is about power. This reading lends weight to ongoing debates about the victim's

choice and how it should be understood in relation to their situation of entrapment (Tolmie et al. 2024).

Finally, it is solidarity that is emphasized. Initially, at first sight, Mariam and Laila are seen by one another in relation to the competitive framework set up by polygamous marriage, but over time, their relationship starts to become a place for emotional recognition and collective protection. The study is thus not a vision of women merely as sufferers. It gives examples of how supportive relationships can break the cycle of isolation and give back power even in the face of extreme circumstances.

6. Literature Review

6.1 Gender-Based Violence and Literary Representation

Violence is often not just a physical happening, but also an experience which alters social relations, identity, memory, and language in literary texts. In fiction, abuse can be subtle, the victim may grow accustomed to its nature and learn to expect anger from the abuser; they rearrange their behavior to prevent them from being punished; they start to suppress their feelings and begin to lower their expectations. These processes can be challenging to see if violence is viewed as just an event to be counted. Literary analysis thus provides a means to the emotional logic of fear and survival.

This is not to say that there is no criticism of South Asian women's stories lately, as recent scholars have pointed out that depictions of violence frequently relate domestic oppression to broader patterns of gender inequality. Violent and resistance narratives are significant ways of comprehending how women deal with the oppressive cultural circumstances they face, as discussed by Karmakar (2022). These literary depictions do not just list the agonies. They also reveal coping strategies, moral decisions, interpersonal alliances, and modes of resistance that might not be apparent in official descriptions.

The theme of domestic violence has been woven throughout the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, which delves into the themes of childhood, marriage, war, motherhood, and friendship. The reader will meet Mariam before she gets married to Rasheed so as to have an understanding into how her emotional wounds from childhood impact her expectations of adulthood. Political violence takes away that security, in contrast to Laila's comparatively secure childhood. It is therefore the novel can be used to make comparisons on how diverse life trajectories come together in the phenomenon of intimate partner violence.

Modern critical studies of the novel have focused on it as an expression of home violence and resistance. Fadhillah and Handayani (2022) point to physical, psychological and sexual violence that happens in Rasheed's marriages and argue that Mariam and Laila refuse to be expected to take this on passively. The importance of their study is that they take a view that acknowledges victimisation and agency. An understanding of categorization of the forms of abuse does not however, fully explain how Rasheed builds control and why escaping becomes so difficult.

Feminist and postcolonial theory has also recently drawn attention to the importance of women solidarity as an opponent to patriarchal domination. The relationship between Mariam and Laila is seen as an example of how collective female resistance can be realised, as well as how agency can be recovered under certain limitations, by Qazi et al. (2025). In the present study this insight is developed and grounded in an ecological model of solidarity. The relationship between the women is interpreted as a protective relationship-related factor that offsets Rasheed's use of competition and isolation.

6.2 Trauma and Female Vulnerability

Both of the protagonists have a first-hand account of trauma in their past. Trauma can be physical injury or it can be loss, abandonment, humiliation, displacement, fear and fear extended over a period of time. It isn't the same for all people. Available support, social meaning, economic resources, and subsequent relationships are determinants of individual response. Trauma in the novel is not a determinant of victimisation, it alters the way in which Mariam and Laila experience danger, security and choice.

Austen and Aslinia (2021) call attention to psychological victimization in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Growing up, the contradictory messages from Nana and Jalil form the basis of Mariam's childhood. Nana teaches her that she is socially disgraced, because she is born out of wed. Jalil offers love, but is not ready to accept Jalinda into his respectable family. Mariam then discovers that love does not only come hand-in-hand with rejection and that her wish to be accepted might end up in humiliation. This sense of insecurity is significant to her future relationship with Rasheed since she has not learned to understand that she is worthy of protection and respect.

Laila's trauma is not of its origin. She has an education, loves and has dreams when she was still a child. Her father nurtures her intellectual growth and envisions a world for her where women are involved in the national life. However, war brings these safeguards to an end. Her brothers are killed, her mother is emotionally unavailable, Tariq leaves Kabul and her parents are killed by a rocket attack. Laila is injured and lonely, and her life hangs in the balance of the hands of Rasheed's family. It is not about her internalized illegitimacy, but catastrophic loss.

The contrast calls into question dominant ideas that suggest that only uneducated or subservient women are victims of abuse. Laila has education, intelligence and a prior sense of value but when her support system is destroyed, her options are significantly cut down. Structural and situational factors are now acknowledged to be key drivers of entrapment of women in intimate partner violence, irrespective of their personal confidence or education (Brown et al., 2022). While individual power can be a tool for resistance, it is not enough to change economic hardship, risk, isolation, and lack of alternatives.

Decision making is also impacted by trauma. A victim may have to focus on survival rather than the ability to live independently, especially if he or she is caring for children. Laila's pregnancy is not exposed to society because of her marriage to Rasheed and she also gets immediate food and shelter. This does not render the marriage "coercive". Instead, it shows how violence and insecurity can leave people with limited options which may seem a choice at the formal level but are actually a result of a lack of realistic options.

6.3 Intimate Partner Violence and Coercive Control

Intimate partner violence encompasses physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse, in an existing or previous intimate relationship. Recent research has focused on a pattern of coercive control as the definition of abuse rather than an incident based approach. With an incident based approach, focus is on specific incidents, the level of severity and what is visible. Coercive-control questions the means by which the aggressor takes away the victim's freedom, reshapes their daily activities and establishes a situation in which the victim is expected to resist, but at great cost.

Tolmie et al. (2024) suggests that coercive control should be considered in the context of social and systemic entrapment. This is a useful one to consider when analysing Rasheed. His power isn't limited to when he slaps Mariam or Laila. It applies to dress, walking, talking, housework, finances, childbirth, sexuality and relationships. The women have to always be ready to his response. But his voice pervades the ordinary affairs of life.

In their review of coercive-control literature, the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS, 2023) notes that coercive control can also include intimidation, isolation, monitoring, financial abuse, humiliation and restriction of autonomy, all of which are repeated patterns. All these elements can be found throughout the novel. Rasheed claims his limitations are for protection, morality, or marital control, but the net effect of his restrictions is to inhibit independent action.

Economic abuse is significant. Access to income, property, transportation and safe housing may be a physical possibility for a person that is not a physical reality. Rasheed is in charge of the family's finances and leaves both women in a financially dependent position. Mariam has no learning or work experience to fall back on and Laila is increasingly cut off from the education that her father had hoped to provide her. They are economically tied to the target, which makes it risky to try and escape a potential target.

Coercive control also happens as a result of unpredictable punishment. The abuser's response to his victim may vary from time to time, and the victim may spend a large amount of time watching the abuser to see how he reacts. This fear leads to self-regulation: They change their speech, they try to not express disagreement, they try to not express plans, they try not to get angry. Rasheed's brutality thus prevails even if he doesn't assault the women. The fear of violence is used as a mechanism of control.

6.4 Forced Marriage, Polygamy, and Unequal Marital Power

In the novel marriage is not depicted as an equal partnership. After the death of Nana, Jalil, his relatives, and Mariam marry Rasheed. She is a young widow with no real power of influence over the choice. The marriage gets rid of a socially awkward daughter in Jalil's house, and it moves the burden of care for her to a man older than him. Its organization is based on a society where the choices that are made for a young woman are made by the male guardians.

Forced marriage and child marriage may result in a heightened risk of exposure to violence through lack of education, peer companionship and a lack of natal-family protection. It often creates a huge gap in terms of age, experience, money and decision making power. In the beginning of Mariam's marriage, these inequalities exist. Rasheed has a house and a job and is an adult and familiar with the city; Mariam comes as a young rural person who needs her security, both emotional and material, to be provided by him.

The marriage between Laila and her husband is different, but unequal. Rasheed takes advantage of her wound, the loss of her loved one, her loneliness, her pregnancy and her wrongful assumption that her lover, Tariq, is dead. He is deceiving her about Tariq, the information upon which Laila makes her decision. Her implied consent is thus a result of both intentional misrepresentation and the lack of a safe alternative. The relationship is not equal because it is not just Rasheed's older, it is a relationship where Rasheed has information at his disposal and has resources at his disposal.

In the beginning, Polygamy puts Mariam and Laila in competition. Rasheed's choice of the younger Laila embarrasses and fosters resentment between the women, Mariam and Laila. An abuser's tactic to stop victims from working together is to divide them. As long as Mariam considers Laila an enemy and Laila considers Mariam an enemy, Rasheed continues to be the source of materials security and power for Laila. This is undermined by their later friendship, which enables them to share their experiences and see that there is a pattern of victimisation.

This novel is interpreted by Narota and his colleagues (2023) in Marxist feminist perspective, paying attention to the relationship between patriarchy power and material power. This perspective is relevant as Rasheed's family authority is dependent on his control of economic resources. Patriarchy is not only reflected in beliefs of male

superiority, but also in material arrangements in which the movement of people, food, money and property is determined.

6.5 Research Gap

Recent scholarship has made important contributions to the study of domestic violence, patriarchy, trauma, and women's resistance in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. However, there are three gaps. First, personal trauma and domestic violence between intimate partners are often explored separately. Secondly, there is an insufficient analysis of the ongoing relational system between the types of violence that may be categorized. Third, the concept of female solidarity is often seen as a broad symbol of empowerment instead of as a specific protective factor of breaking down the coercive isolation.

The present study aimed towards this gap and used the individual and relationship level of the ecological framework developed by Heise. It explores the ways in which the experiences of different personal histories become linked together in the same system of marital oppression, and the impact of the relationship between Mariam and Laila on the ecology of Rasheed's home.

7. Theoretical Framework

7.1 Heise's Integrated Ecological Framework

Heise's Integrated Ecological Framework sees violence towards women arising from the interaction of various factors across a range of levels. Personal level: personal history, childhood, psychological state, education, economic status, religion. The relationship level is related to family structures, close relationships, power relations between people, dependency, conflict and support networks. Community level comprises neighborhoods, workplaces, institutions, norms; and societal level refers to broader cultural, legal, economic and political systems.

The framework does not imply that all risk factors will result in violence. Poverty, trauma or poor education should not be considered "direct causes" of victimisation, and no person is responsible for their own victimisation because of their own personal difficulties. Instead, the model depicts the distribution of risk and protection. Someone who has friends and family to help support them, safe home and legal protection may have more opportunities to escape an abusive relationship than someone who has been cut off and isolated. The ecological framework is useful when analysing literature, as novels describe characters in environments instead of as psychological beings. Hosseini recounts the stories of both Mariam and Laila before he introduces them to Rasheed's home. This is a narrative sequence where they can be able to see the individual conditions they bring into marriage and how the marriage changes those conditions.

7.2 Individual-Level Factors

The individual level of the present analysis includes:

- Childhood rejection and abandonment
- Social stigma associated with illegitimacy
- Internalized shame and low self-worth
- Bereavement and traumatic loss
- Interrupted education
- Poverty and economic dependency
- Physical injury and displacement
- Maternal responsibilities
- Hope, resilience, and capacity for attachment

Individual factors include both vulnerability and protection. Mariam's empathy, endurance, and capacity for love eventually support her relationship with Laila. Laila's education, earlier family affection, and memory of Tariq provide psychological resources

that prevent complete submission. The ecological model therefore avoids treating the individual level only as a catalogue of deficiencies.

7.3 Relationship-Level Factors

The relationship level includes:

- Forced and unequal marriage
- Large differences in age and power
- Economic control
- Social isolation
- Threats and intimidation
- Physical and psychological violence
- Reproductive coercion
- Polygamous competition
- Manipulation and deception
- Female friendship and solidarity

This level explains how intimate relationships may produce either danger or protection. Rasheed's relationships with Mariam and Laila are structured through domination. By contrast, the relationship between the women develops through shared labour, childcare, emotional disclosure, and mutual defence. The same ecological level therefore contains both risk and resistance.

8. Research Methodology

8.1 Research Approach

The study is interpretive research with a qualitative approach. Qualitative literary research is suitable because there is no attempt to determine the numerical frequency of violence but rather to interpret it in terms of its meaning, context, consequences, and relationships. The study considers how events in the narrative create vulnerability, power, fear, dependency and resistance.

8.2 Research Design

An analytical close-reading design was used. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini was the main book. The birth of this work was the process of documenting instances of Mariam's childhood, Laila's family life, both marriages to Rasheed, domestic rules, reproductive experiences, physical assaults, and attempts at escape, female solidarity, and resistance.

The analysis was organized according to two predetermined theoretical categories:

1. Individual-level ecological factors
2. Relationship-level ecological factors

Within these categories, additional themes emerged through repeated reading, including internalized shame, traumatic loss, constrained choice, financial dependency, coercive control, reproductive pressure, isolation, maternal responsibility, and solidarity.

8.3 Data Source

The novel is the main source of textual information. The analysis was contextualized and linked to existing secondary sources of research focusing on gender violence, coercive control, trauma, women's agency, and the fiction of Hosseini since primarily 2021 to 2025. Two of the textbooks that do not overlap with the 2021–2025 range, Heise's original framework and Hosseini's novel, were included as foundational sources as they offer a theoretical framework and primary literary source.

8.4 Data-Analysis Procedure

There were four phases in the analysis. In the first step, the novel was read to look for vulnerable scenes and intimate relationships. Second, relevant events were classified on the basis of the two levels: the individual and the relationship. Thirdly, repetitions were

noted, including Rasheed's repeated tactics of humiliation, economic control, intimidation, and violence. Fourth, the findings were elaborated in terms of recent scholarship.

Special attention was paid not only to the actions of the characters but also to the situation in which they make their actions. Laila's consent to marry Rasheed was explained in terms of injury, bereavement, pregnancy, deception and homelessness, for example. This contextual approach will avoid the misrepresentation of constrained survival decisions as fully voluntary.

8.5 Trustworthiness and Interpretive Rigour

Maintaining a clear connection between the research questions, theoretical concepts, selected events and conclusions contributed to the interpretative credibility. The analysis did not make an assumption of a single model of female victimization but compared the experiences of the two women, Mariam and Laila. Other possibilities were given some thought as well. Acts of endurance were not deemed to be equal to passivity, but rather could be seen as one of the possible strategies for survival if direct resistance could be dangerous.

8.6 Ethical Considerations

The study looks at fictional characters, but gender violence is a delicate topic. This discussion does not focus on the victim being responsible for the abuse. It helps differentiate vulnerability from responsibility and to understand that leaving an abusive partner can make things worse. The study is also not meant to paint Afghan society as a monolithic nation. There are supporting and abusive men, restrictive and educated families, and changing political situations in the novel. Rasheed's actions cannot be attributed to all Afghan men.

9. Analysis and Findings

9.1 Mariam's Illegitimacy and Internalized Inferiority

The fragility of Mariam starts with birth. She is consistently described as a harami, which diminishes her person to the level of illegitimacy and puts the responsibility of adult behavior into a child's shoulders. Nana advises Mariam that the wider world will reject her, and Jalil's actions prove she is a lesser than his legitimate children. He visits and entertains her, but refuses to give her equal public recognition.

This paradox is of psychological significance. Mariam gets a certain amount of love and affection but not enough recognition to feel secure. Although Jalil refuses to accept her, he hurts her sense of self that she is worthy of respect. Nana's subsequent suicide adds to Mariam's sense of guilt and emotional isolation. Mariam starts to see adults around her as responsible, and she begins to believe that she is responsible for their suffering. Mariam begins to perceive the adults around her as responsible, and begins to perceive her as the cause of their suffering.

Internally, her own sense of shame lessens her capacity to consider Rasheed's behavior in a state of self-value. That acceptance is situational, and that she makes things hard for people. Marriage is then offered to her as something more than a social obligation—it seems to be the only other way to belong. Her aspiration of belonging to a family gives her the hope that she will be accepted as Rasheed's wife.

The ecological interpretation does not mean that Rasheed is abusing because of his low self-esteem. All the responsibility lies with the perpetrator. Instead, internalized inferiority has an impact on the way that Mariam sees what is available as a response. A woman who has consistently heard from others that she is not worth it could be more susceptible to thinking that she should just deal with mistreatment. Similarly, Austen and

Aslinia (2021) link the gender violence in the novel to the psychological victimization of female characters.

Mariam's personal story is, thus, a resource for Rasheed's relationship. He didn't cause her childhood shame, he just brings it up again. He denigrates her looks, her cooking, her fertility and her intelligence, further cementing the negative identity given her when she was a child. The abusive marriage, in other words, does not only inflict more wounds, it also brings about past ones into a system of control that lasts on.

9.2 Childhood Trauma and Emotional Vulnerability

When Mariam's beloved Nana dies and her beloved Jalil rejects her, she has no reliable attachment figure. She marries in the midst of an unhealed grieving. Instead, she is transported from Herat to Kabul, and handed over to an older stranger. This swift change makes it impossible for her to deal with a sense of loss and leaves her totally reliant on Rasheed.

At first, Rasheed seems to be able to be kind. He introduces her to the city, purchases her gifts and expresses his interest in starting a family. It is important because bad relationships sometimes have good elements but these are early experiences. Kindness and cruelty are found side by side which will generate confusion. If Mariam carries out her tasks properly, she can still hope that the old Rasheed will return.

Her answer indicates that emotional dependence is not the same as romantic attachment. Rasheed is the one who decides where to live, who to eat, what to do, and who one is. When love ends, dependence persists. Mariam is isolated, so that there is no trusted person who she can compare the experiences with or develop an alternative understanding of their abuse.

Multiple miscarriages worsen the impact of trauma on the individual. Motherhood is something of an accepted and stable thing for Mariam to associate with at first. With every pregnancy, she has the opportunity to fill a desirable role, and every miscarriage is a new setback. Rasheed thinks that the problem is her own failure. His withdrawal, hostility turns grief to blame.

The process reveals the gendering of a common reproductive loss. For Rasheed, the miscarriage isn't a tragedy suffered by both husband and wife. He does instead use it to determine the value of Mariam. Relational rejection is thus a further source of emotional pain for her. What starts as a personal trauma and loss is turned into a tool of marital dominance.

9.3 Laila's Bereavement, Injury, and Constrained Choice

Laila has a number of protective individual factors in her early life. She is educated, intellectually stimulated and loved. Her father tells her that she is not supposed to die young and childless, like a common housewife. Her friendship with Tariq also provides her emotional support. These experiences build up a better sense of self for them than what Mariam has.

Protective factors can be undermined, however. As Laila's brothers die, her mother is emotionally unavailable because of her loss. Then, the war makes Tariq's family leave Kabul. Lastly, Laila's parents are killed by a rocket attack, her house is destroyed, and she is physically injured. She soon loses her family, her home, her safety and even her future. Rasheed exploits this downfall. While Laila is recuperating at his home, he is told of Tariq's death, which is false. The deception takes away her hopes for a reunion, and influences her choice of husband, Rasheed. She is also worried about the outcome of a child born out of wedlock since she is carrying Tariq's child. Her choice is, then, a grief-ridden, misinformed, pregnant, and materialistic one.

This marriage is not a common decision to make. In form, Laila agrees, but the factors conducive to meaningful autonomy are missing. There's no home, no family protection, no independent income or reliable information for her. In apparently individual choices under conditions of abuse, we need to look at social and systemic entrapment (Tolmie et al., 2024). It is true of Laila's marriage: there are a lot of things one can do that are technically possible, but not really survivable.

Educational opportunities continue to be a positive resource for Laila. She's able to visualize a different life and gradually makes plans to get out. However, it is not going to be education that can instantly break Rasheed's domination. How she has explained the lack of material power is reflected on her ability to act and her mental capacity, which shows that an explanation of gender violence cannot put too much emphasis on the individual's power to act. While personal confidence is important, resources, relationships and social opportunities are also necessary to the safety of the personal.

9.4 Forced Marriage and the Loss of Autonomy

There is unequal consent in both marriages. Mariam is transferred to Rasheed by familial authority while Laila is given consent in a state of deception and emergency. In every instance marriage provides Rasheed with socially acknowledged access to the women's labour, sexuality, mobility and reproductive lives.

The large age and power difference between Mariam and Rasheed is particularly significant. Rasheed has adult authority, urban familiarity, income and ownership of the home. Mariam is socially- impoverished and lacks knowledge of the city. She is supposed to make the few necessary changes, whereas he makes few, if any, of the kind. The relationship starts off structurally unequal and then becomes regular in terms of overt violence.

Laila arrives into the house with more assurance, but Rasheed tries to bring her down to the same level. He treats her preferentially to begin with because she is young and pretty and to make her feel less than herself at the same time, he compares her to Mariam. His favor is a conditional one. When Laila challenges him or protects Aziza, or when she does not meet his requirements, the supposed love turns into force. It is therefore clear from the two marriages that forced marriage can manifest itself in various ways. One is set up against the will of the young woman; the other is created by manipulation and lack of other options. Both limit autonomy inasmuch as neither woman enters into an equal partnership, based on informed and ongoing consent.

9.5 Economic Dependency as a Mechanism of Control

The most significant factors linking the individual and relationship levels are economic dependency. Mariam is poorly educated and not self-supporting. War and marriage put an end to Laila's education. Rasheed has control over the finances of the house, and thus over access to food, transportation, shelter and social life.

Economic abuse can be more than just financial exploitation from the victim. It comprises of withholding education, hiding resources, limiting daily spending, and making survival dependent upon obedience. In the novel, both women undertake a lot of domestic work, but have limited authority over the resources of the home. They work and they keep the house running, but they don't earn their own living.

With the economic power vested in Rasheed, other types of abuse are possible. If he is forced to lose his job and the household is deprived of income, he turns his frustration on Laila and Mariam. However, the women lack the means to react, either by securing housing of their own or giving support to the children on their own. Household tension, in turn, contributes to poverty, as do the costs of leaving.

Naymat et al. (2023) rightly align the patriarchy system of control in the novel with material inequality. Rasheed's gender authority is reinforced, as he is a provider. He doesn't use provision as a joint effort, he uses provision as proof that women are indebted to him. This renders economic dependency into moral indebtedness.

This dependency is further heightened by Laila's maternal duties. She has to assess risk for herself, for Aziza and Zalmi. A plan which may be physically feasible for one adult is more complex when children are involved and need food, shelter, transportation and protection. Maternal love is a resistance too but Rasheed also leverages the children to enhance control.

9.6 Coercive Masculinity and the Pattern of Abuse

Rasheed's actions are grounded in an idea of manhood that is characterized by control, ownership, and punishment. His wife(s) have to do what he says, otherwise she is being disobedient. His violence is not merely caused by a possible "temporary anger" as it always works to re-establish hierarchy.

The most salient example of this trend is physical assault. Rasheed's superior physical strength is used to establish fear as he beats the women, and threatens to cause severe harm. But there is a larger picture – that of verbal degradation, forced dress, movement restrictions, monitoring, financial control and punishment through deprivation. This combination of behaviours leads to a decrease in autonomy.

Rasheed claims that the wearing of the burqa is for the protection of honour. But in the relationship it also serves as a means of control over her body and her public image. He sets the standards for modesty one-sided and makes the compliance an evidence of obedience. It is not just the garment itself, but the lack of choice and the accompanying threat.

Humiliation is a tactic Rasheed employs as well. His jibe at Mariam's cooking, look and fertility conveys that she is always a failure as a wife. In addition to physical abuse, humiliation can be just as significant as it undermines self-confidence and can make her feel the need to seek approval from the person inflicting the abuse. When he wants to get Laila's obedience by insult and threats, she coquets and does what he tells her to do. If he prefers and persuades no longer work, he resorts to insults and threats and she coquets and does what he says.

Coercive-control literature describes how the long-term impact of coercive behaviors is to contract a victim's "space for action"—that is, their ability to make independent decisions, both practically and psychologically (AIFS, 2023). This is how Rasheed works. The women are not only afraid of being hit, but need to schedule their everyday existence around his needs.

9.7 Reproductive Control and the Preference for Sons

Marriage is another arena of reproduction of power. Rasheed's lust for a son is what makes him rate both women. As the miscarriages happen, Maria's interest in him turns to resentment and even cruelty. He considers her duty to conceive and her lack of fertility as a failure, without taking her grief or her pain into account.

Laila's situation is also influenced by her pregnancy and motherhood. Her pregnancy with Tariq's child leads her to marry Rasheed, and when Aziza is born, she is faced with disappointment and suspicion at Rasheed's hands. The preference for a male child is due to the economic and symbolic significance accorded to sons in a patriarchy system of family organization.

When Zalmi is born, Rasheed's affection for Zalmi is in direct contrast to how he treats Aziza. This unequal treatment shows that the control over reproduction is linked to gender valuation. Laila's value is measured by her capability of giving birth to the child

that Rasheed wants. Children are also included in the power dynamic: Rasheed's connection with Zalmai entrenches his power position and Laila's concern for Aziza makes her more vulnerable.

In the novel reproductive coercion is not limited to pregnancy. It encompasses the right to control sexual access, motherhood, childcare and the interpretation of the meaning given to children. According to Fadhilah and Handayani (2022), one of the major types of domestic violence in the text is sexual violence. An ecological reading expands to sexual and reproductive abuse and economic dependency and marital authority.

9.8 Isolation and the Continuation of Abuse

Rasheed must be isolated to maintain his control. Mariam is physically distant from Herat, as well as from Jalil's family. She has not many friends or supportive relatives. They have been displaced by the war and Laila's family is gone, and it is believed that Tariq is dead. Both women, thus, have weak support networks when they join the household. Rasheed's actions reinforce this separation, which is built into the design of his use of space and his public displays. He has a tendency to try to dictate to the women where and when they go out. Isolation allows no external witnesses to see abuse, and limits opportunities to access information about alternatives. It also invites victims to consider the home as the universe they have.

It is the women's animosity towards each other that further serves Rasheed's interests. They are segregated within the same house in polygamous competition. Mariam fears that she will be replaced, and at first Laila is in a privileged position. Rasheed makes comparisons that bring about resentment. There is no one to give substantiating testimony to the other's experience because they are separated.

Ultimately, their friendship constitutes a significant shift in the relationship ecology. As Mariam and Laila start to share the household duties, childcare, talk and emotional support there is no longer only one interpretation of reality. Each woman can know that the other woman is not responsible for the violence. This acknowledgment helps minimize internalized blame.

9.9 Female Solidarity as a Protective Relationship

What is one of the most important protective factors in the novel? The developing bond between Mariam and Laila. They fall in love despite being lovers in a system that is supposed to make them enemies, but they learn from each other's experience of being the same victim of Rasheed's abuse. Through Laila's love, Mariam is able to have a family she never had, and in return, she cares, is loyal and protects Laila and her children.

They have psychological impacts of their solidarity. Mariam's identity shifts from unwanted illegitimate daughter, to a woman who is not just valued, but a mother. Laila does not see Mariam as a problem, rather as a human being who suffers just like her. With this collective recognition, women feel able to defy Rasheed's demeaning definitions.

The connection also has tangible ramifications. They are able to work together to look after the children and organize their escape. Their first attempt to escape goes awry, but the concept of escape is itself a sign of an extension of imagined possibility. The sense of isolation has turned it into an impossible departure, but their sense of solidarity puts them in a position to think about collective action.

Qazi et al. (2025) understand women's solidarity in the novel as a way of finding agency. Environmentally speaking, solidarity alters the risk/protection relationship at the level of the relationship. It does not eliminate structural barriers, but rather offers emotional validation, commonality of understanding and collaborative capacity.

The turning point of the protective relationship is when the daughter, Mariam, tries to protect Laila from the possibility of Rasheed's fatal blow. Her act of retaliation needs

to be interpreted in the context of immediate defense and not just an act of revenge. As Rasheed's violence grows, there is no safe way of negotiating. Mariam steps in to save Laila's life.

Laila and the children are allowed to go when Mariam sacrifices herself. Her last choice is a sad one as she is making it in a context that is not providing her with a safe future. At the same time, it is a sign of a changed agency. The woman learns that she has little value in life and decides to save a family that knows her value. Her resistance doesn't negate her victimization but it doesn't make her victim story her whole story.

9.10 Interaction Between Individual and Relationship Factors

The main result of the study is that there is a recursive relationship between individual and relationship factors. Mariam's sense of shame grows and makes her more in need of acceptance, which Rasheed gives her in a conditional manner, and in humiliating her. This abuse then makes her more and more prone to feeling worthless, making it harder for her to resist. Relational control enhances individual vulnerability and individual vulnerability enhances relational control.

The same cycle also happens in Laila's. Bereavement and displacement leads to dependence on Rasheed. He is the part who relies on that dependence to set up marital authority. Then, violence and isolation limit her ability to connect with the relationships and resources that could allow her to escape. Responsibility for children leads to greater determination and exposure to control.

The following cycles are examples of how intimate partner violence can not be solely attributed to personality. Although the behavior of Rasheed is his own responsibility, his ability to do so is a function of unequal conditions. The age difference, the home ownership, the income, his physical strength, and his social authority and the isolation of the women are the factors that reinforce his control.

Meanwhile, ecological conditions can vary. Protection is brought into the house by the relationship between Mariam and Laila. They are united and that unity lessens psychological isolation and ultimately helps them to resist. The ecological model thus shows the reproduction and disruption of violence.

10. Major Findings

Five key findings emerged from the study. First, the vulnerability of Mariam is tightly related to being stigmatized as a child, rejected, grieving unhealed, having low education, and feeling inferior. These conditions don't make Rasheed violent, but they make her less confident that she's entitled to not be mistreated.

Second, Laila's experience shows that education and early family support isn't a complete shield against IPV. Changes in protective resources and limited options can occur quickly due to war, loss of loved ones, and unwanted pregnancies, physical trauma, homelessness, or deception.

Third, that Rasheed's abuse is not an isolated act of violence, but rather a collection of incidents of coercive control. Financial control, isolation, intimidation, humiliation, reproductive pressure, surveillance and restriction of movement support physical assault. His intent is to be in charge of the household.

Fourth, there is a strong connection between dependence in the economy and dependence in the relationship. Fourth, economic dependency is a crucial connection between individual vulnerability and relationship domination. Women may be more likely to be exposed to and less able to do the things that make it easier to leave relationships, such as having a place to stay and safe transportation when they want to leave. Females have added responsibilities to escape.

Fifth, the bond of love between Mariam and Laila becomes a protective ecological factor. Their unity helps them to break the cycle of isolation, regain their sense of worth, build strength through joint actions, and resist Rasheed. The novel thus depicts relationships as potentially violent and liberating.

11. Discussion

The results help to substantiate Heise's argument that gender violence arises from interactions amongst various ecological levels. By looking at the person instead of the relationship, a victim-blaming explanation may be developed. Mariam's insecurity and Laila's grief are no cause for violence—Rasheed decides to use them. But, if you just look at Rasheed's violent nature, you can't really understand how difficult it is for him to be controlled. Relying on the abuser, isolation, maternal responsibility and lack of alternatives maintain the abusive relationship.

The findings are in line with the findings of Fadhilah and Handayani (2022) in their study about the type of domestic violence found in the novel, namely physical, psychological, and sexual domestic violence. The present analysis, however, indicates that the categories are interwoven with coercive control. Humiliation makes people more vulnerable, economic coercions reduce options, isolation makes it harder to get help and physical violence makes threats credible. The strength of each form is reinforced by the other.

The analysis also supports Tolmie et al.'s (2024) social and systemic entrapment perspective. It is not possible to assess Mariam's and Laila's actions as free. What looks like being passive can be seen in a different light if it is considered in its context; leaving the household can be dangerous. They have tried to escape and failed, which proves that they must be in a process of leaving, not just a single decision, but a multi-faceted journey that involves money, transportation, trustworthy assistance, documents, shelter and protection from retaliation.

The results raise the question of whether the victim-agency distinction is easy. Years of abuse endure for Mariam, but endurance might be a strategy for survival in a context where overt opposition would be risky. Laila will occasionally refuse to cooperate with Rasheed, but she will keep protecting Aziza and hope that she can get away with her. They are not powerless, but their power is limited.

The novel has drawn feminist criticism recently, focusing on the resistance of the women (Qazi et al., 2025). The ecological approach helps to explain the possibility of resistance. It grows out of a new relationship that provides emotional support, cooperation in chores and a common understanding of what abuse is. Mariam and Laila are not unaffected by any external barrier, but it alters their internal domestic context.

The contrast between the women too has other significance. In both cases, the history of people is vulnerable; Mariam's is long-term, while Laila's is triggered to vulnerability by sudden crisis. Different pathways need to be tackled in prevention strategies. Others may be vulnerable following the displacement, loss of loved ones, injury or economic catastrophe; some women may need long-term investment in education, childhood protection, and self-worth.

The study also shows that economic empowerment is not something that can be "punted." The women will have an opportunity to do what they can, but it will depend on Rasheed's resource control. If the household member is not materially supported, then their psychological support alone will not offer a safe way out of the household. Therefore, the interventions effectively need to be integrated in emotional, legal, social and economic supports.

Last but not least, the novel demonstrates the moral worth of literary representation. While statistics can highlight the prevalence of IPV, narrative can provide insight into what it's like to live under the radar of coercive control. The reader witnesses the shift in everyday existence as fear becomes a central part of it. They also learn about the power of friendship to make things possible and meaningful. Literature thus helps in the development of social understanding by relating analysis with the emotional experience.

12. Practical and Social Implications

12.1 Trauma-Informed Support

Earlier experiences of childhood abuse, rejection, bereavement, or displacement may be carried by survivors of intimate partner violence. Immediate safety and long term trauma should therefore be handled through support services. Delayed departure is not a sign of weakness and should not be interpreted by counsellors.

12.2 Women's Education

Education builds awareness, confidence, communication and knowledge of options. But, for Laila, the process of education should be backed by safe institutions and economic opportunities. No education can stop armed conflict or material poverty.

12.3 Economic Empowerment

Women need access to income, property, emergency funds, transportation, access to child care, safe housing. If you don't have these resources, it can be near impossible to leave an abusive relationship.

12.4 Supportive Social Relationships

Community programs should contribute to safe relationships between women, families, educators and service providers. The two girls' friendship proves that there is a way to break the cycle of isolation that fuels abuse.

13. Limitations of the Study

The study is limited to one novel and two levels of Heise's ecological framework. It does not provide a complete analysis of the community and societal dimensions of violence, including political institutions, war, and Taliban governance. These broader factors deserve separate examination. The study is interpretive and qualitative. It does not rely on interviews with survivors or statistical data in its conclusions. Fictional representation is not to be used as a literal account of each Afghan woman's life. The main characters of the study are primarily Mariam, Laila and Rasheed. Other characters are discussed in relation to individual or relational factors, such as Nana, Jalil, Tariq, Fariba and Hakim. Last, some basic sources are not included between 2021 and 2025, as the original novel and Heise's original framework cannot be replaced by more recent secondary sources.

14. Suggestions for Future Research

The community and societal layers of Heise's concept could be explored in future research looking at war, displacement, institutional failure, patriarchal culture and taliban restrictions on the novel. Comparative research can be conducted on *A Thousand Splendid Suns* with other pieces of literature which portray women in conflict situations.

Other studies of the novel might include trauma theory, coercive-control theory, intersectionality, Marxist feminism, post-colonial feminism, or subaltern studies. These works might be specifically on the theme of reproductive violence, motherhood, children's exposure to domestic abuse, or the process of Mariam's transformation of identity.

Themes of the novel can be used to guide interviews, educational interventions or reader-response studies in an empirical investigation. The exploration of the ways in which

literary texts affect students' views on gender violence and victim-survivor agency might be one scope of this research.

15. Conclusion

This research investigated trauma, dependency and intimate partner violence at the individual and relational levels in the framework of Integrated Ecological Framework (IECF) by Lori Heise and in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini. The analysis revealed that the violence that has been faced by Mariam and Laila is not a multi-causation problem. Their individual biographies engage with an inequitable marriage, where Rasheed is in charge of resources, movement, sexuality, reproduction, communication, and family relations.

Mariam's status as a half-caste, as she was rejected by her parents as a child after their wife died, and as she suffered grief, was uneducated and had low self-esteem all make her more vulnerable. War, loss of loved ones, injury, pregnancy, homelessness, and deception take away many of Laila's protective factors, which were initially more plentiful, such as education and family love. They have varying experiences showing that intimate partner violence can manifest in several ways.

Rasheed's actions are a consistent form of coercive control. Physical violence is just a component of a complex pattern of humiliating, controlling, financially dependent, isolating, intimidating, and restricting autonomy. The struggles faced by the women should therefore not be interpreted as consent or passivity. They face limited options due to the lack of safe alternatives and the material threat. Most importantly, the novel demonstrates that conditions can vary at the relationship-level. The bond between two friends, Mariam and Laila, defies the isolation that lies at the heart of Rasheed's power. They create damaged identities through mutual care, they learn to see that their oppression is shared and they gain the ability to resist. They are not in solidarity, but that does not negate tragedy, it means that tragedy is not the ultimate decision in their identities. Finally, the ecological approach shows that solutions to GBV need to be equally multidimensional. Economic resources is not enough for psychological counselling; education is weak without safety; legal protection is weak without available institutions. Prevention and response should include trauma-informed care, economic empowerment, educational opportunity, protection from forced marriage, recognition of coercive control and robust social-support networks. Violence is created through relationships, but dignity, resistance and survival are also possible to be reconstructed through relationships, as Hosseini's novel shows.

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