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Abstract

In his novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, author Khaled Hosseini provides a vivid portrait of a country shattered by a series of ideological leaders and wars imposed on it by foreign and internal forces. The narrative, which spans several decades, is driven by the stories of two women, Laila and Mariam, who, despite starkly different beginnings, find themselves intimately connected and dependent upon one another. Hosseini's women, much like the country of Afghanistan itself, appear to be propelled by the whims of outside forces, familial and societal, with little chance of influencing their own lives and futures. Yet Laila and Mariam are neither passive nor helpless as they make choices and accept consequences to affect desired ends, both hopeful and tragic. In interviews and talks, Hosseini claims to write simple love stories, but his portrayal of Laila and Mariam and their dreams, trials, and challenges presents a complex view of women in Afghanistan that goes beyond oppression and the stereotype of the veil. This chapter looks at Hosseini's second novel as a novel of resistance.

Keywords

postcolonialism, Khaled Hosseini, women, Afghanistan, Taliban, fiction, resistance in fiction

Disciplines

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Comments

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***A Thousand Splendid Suns:* Sanctuary and Resistance**

Rebecca Stuhr

In his novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, author Khaled Hosseini provides a vivid portrait of a country shattered by a series of ideological leaders and wars imposed on it by foreign and internal forces. The narrative, which spans several decades, is driven by the stories of two women, Laila and Mariam, who, despite starkly different beginnings, find themselves intimately connected and dependent upon one another. Hosseini's women, much like the country of Afghanistan itself, appear to be propelled by the whims of outside forces, familial and societal, with little chance of influencing their own lives and futures. Yet Laila and Mariam are neither passive nor helpless as they make choices and accept consequences to affect desired ends, both hopeful and tragic. In interviews and talks, Hosseini claims to write simple love stories, but his portrayal of Laila and Mariam and their dreams, trials, and challenges presents a complex view of women in Afghanistan that goes beyond oppression and the stereotype of the veil.

If it was set in an Afghanistan at peace, it would perhaps have been a novel of contrasts: an urban life with educational and professional opportunities for Laila in Kabul, and a rural life of strict mores and stark deprivation for Mariam growing up outside the city of Herat. Because it is a novel of Afghanistan at war and in upheaval, however, it is a story of shared experiences. The women's lives come together and intertwine with a shared desire for their family's survival. The differences in their upbringing and circumstances become inconsequential as personal survival becomes less important than caring for each other and their children. The story of their lives runs parallel to the story of Afghanistan as the novel stretches over four decades.

Resistance and Sanctuary: Afghanistan

Through his characters, Hosseini introduces the reader to an Afghanistan that existed before the war and beyond the media's twenty-first-century coverage of the country. He paints a picture for his readers of a land of culture and abundance. As the novel opens, Jalil, Mariam's father, tells her as she sits on his lap that Herat, Mariam's birthplace, "had once been the cradle of Persian culture, the home of writers, painters, and Sufis" (Hosseini 4). He evokes the glory of the city through its ancient architecture and history. He impresses Mariam as he describes its current lushness, "the green wheat fields of Herat, the orchards, the vines pregnant with plump grapes, the city's crowded, vaulted bazaars" (Hosseini 4). Jalil attests to an Afghanistan with its own tradition of literature and a history of autonomous rule that precedes the era of the Great Game and the wars yet to come. Laila's father continues these idyllic history lessons as he relates the story of Afghanistan as a country of poetry and architecture, but from the perspective of Kabul. Finally, as the novel draws to a close, Laila returns to Herat to visit Mariam's birthplace. At this sad and reflective moment, despite the evidence that Soviet soldiers made use of Mariam's house, her *kolba*, Laila experiences only the peace and quiet beauty of the spot. As the tragedy of this novel plays out within the devastation of wars, civil chaos, mindless cruelty, and rampant injustice, Hosseini never abandons the thread of the narrative of Afghanistan's rich heritage and its capacity for beauty.

In the background of the main narrative, Afghanistan is buffeted from power to power. It becomes clear that no one can successfully rule or dominate the country. Its people, willing to sacrifice everything to fight for their political and religious autonomy, as well as the country's geography, eventually defeat each invading power. As Babi travels with Laila and Tariq to Bamiyan to see the famous (and now destroyed) Buddhas, Babi points out *Shahr-e-Zohak*, the Red City. The Red City was built as a fortress to defend its surrounding valley. Babi explains that it withstood the invasion of Genghis Khan's grandson but

was then destroyed by Genghis Khan himself. The taxi cab driver comments on this story, saying,

And that, my young friends, is the story of our country, one invader after another. . . . Macedonians. Sassanians. Arabs. Mongols. Now the Soviets. But we're like those walls up there. Battered, and nothing pretty to look at, but still standing. (Hosseini 132)

Babi concludes that the “only enemy an Afghan cannot defeat is himself.” During the lifetimes of Tariq and Laila, the Soviet invasion will be followed by the warring rebels seeking to gain control of Kabul, the Taliban takeover, the American bombing campaign to take Kabul from the Taliban, and the ensuing partisan conflict that follows the American intervention. Just as Laila and Mariam experience abuse from Rasheed in their home and from random men as they venture out on the streets of Kabul, the country has been abused and traumatized by outside forces. When freedom seems to be within its grasp, as with the signing of the peace treaty with the Soviet Union, events and circumstances lead to continued conflict and violence. Even the Taliban forces bring with them many foreigners. When Rasheed and Mariam go to the hotel to use a telephone to call Mariam’s father, Mariam hears “bits of Pashto and Farsi,” the two major languages of Afghanistan, “but Urdu and Arabic too.” As Rasheed notices this, he tells Mariam, “Meet our *real* masters . . . Pakistani and Arab Islamists. The Taliban are puppets. *These* are the big players and Afghanistan is their playground” (Hosseini 274).

The history of Afghanistan’s wars and conflicts is morally complex. Despite the horrifying nature of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, it also brings constructive elements in its train. Although Laila’s father loses his teaching job to the Soviets, he can see positive aspects of their control as well, especially in Soviet policy toward women. The Soviet-backed government raised the status of women by providing them with educational and professional opportunities. At the same time,

this interference with entrenched tribal practices (Rasheed's sense of *nang* and *namoos*: honor and reputation) leads to the fierce resistance against the regime. "It is a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan," Babi tells Laila, but he also points out that the freedoms women have now are "also one of the reasons [Afghans in the tribal areas] took up arms in the first place" (Hosseini 121). This complexity is further highlighted later when, after the Taliban have taken control and begun their decimation of Afghan culture and the eradication of what remains of the rights of women to work, be educated, or to move freely outside the home, Laila declares that the Taliban are savages. Rasheed laughs at Laila's declaration, "Compared to what? The Soviets killed a million people. Do you know how many people the Mujahideen killed in Kabul alone these last four years? Fifty Thousand. *Fifty thousand!*" (Hosseini 251).

Despite its fluctuating fortunes, Kabul serves as a kind of sanctuary for Laila and her family. During the Soviet occupation, war raged beyond the boundaries of Kabul. Tariq's lost leg and the death of Laila's brothers serve to symbolize the devastation that is taking place in the areas beyond the city; the prevalence of land mines, tanks, and raging battles can be seen when Babi takes Laila and Tariq beyond the city's borders. Life in Kabul is not without difficulties for Laila, but she goes to school, has friends, the warmth of a home, a father's love, plus her special friendship with Tariq and the affection of Tariq's parents. This sanctuary is violated completely as the battle of the warring Mujahideen take over the streets of Kabul. The Mujahideen, having sacrificed everything for the sake of Afghanistan's independence, come out of the mountains and into Kabul having spent all of their adult years fighting. Just as the celebratory party Laila's mother hosts in honor of the fall of Najibullah turns into a scuffle of differing opinions originating out of ethnic loyalties, so does the brief period of harmony among the different rebel parties end in war. Hosseini writes, "The Mujahideen, armed to the teeth but now lacking a common enemy, had found the enemy in each other" (155).

Later, as the Taliban establish themselves as the rulers of Kabul, they root out what remains of the Kabul so beloved by Babi: the elements that contributed to Kabul as sanctuary. The Taliban smash the remnants of the Kabul museum and do away with any aspects of Afghan culture that predate or conflict with Islam.

The university was shut down and its students sent home. Paintings were ripped from walls, shredded with blades. Television screens were kicked in. Books, except the Koran, were burned in heaps, the stores that sold them closed down. The poems of Khalili, Pajwak, Ansari, Haji Dehqan, Ashraqi, Beytaab, Hafez, Jami, Nizami, Rumi, Khayyam, Beydel, and more went up in smoke. (Hosseini 250)

Many years later, after leaving Kabul, Laila returns to the new post-2001 Kabul. But even as Laila, once again pregnant, finds purpose and healing in her work with the children at Zalman's orphanage, outside forces are once again threatening to destroy the promise of sanctuary.

Resistance and Sanctuary: Mariam and Laila

A Thousand Splendid Suns is divided into four parts. Part One tells the story of Mariam and Part Two tells that of Laila. Part Three centers on the shared lives of Mariam and Laila living under the same roof, and Part Four serves as an epilogue relating Laila's life with Tariq and her children in the aftermath of Rasheed's and Mariam's deaths. Mariam's story begins in 1964 when she is five years old. Ten years later, at the age of fifteen, she is walking away from her one-room home or kolba on the outskirts of the village of Gul Daman into the big city of Herat to find her father. Laila's story begins in 1987 when she is nine years old. She is born the same spring as the Communist takeover of Kabul in 1978. Mariam is nineteen at that time. Their stories come together in 1992, as Laila turns fourteen and the Mujahideen battle for control of Kabul. Laila is separated from her family and married to Rasheed at almost the same time that this happens to Mariam. Their circumstances are different, but the results are virtually identical. Eventually, Laila

will provide sanctuary for Mariam through the love that she and her children share with her—giving her a family, a sense of belonging, and a purpose. Mariam provides Laila and the children with the prospect of sanctuary through her decisive actions at the climax of the novel. Not only does she save Laila from death, but she also provides the chance and the inspiration for Laila to realize her full potential.

The novel begins with Mariam as a child living in near solitude with her mother, Nana, and anxiously awaiting the arrival of her father. It is a harsh, uncompromising existence. Her mother's stern manner is in contrast to her father's cheerfulness, gifts, and affection. Mariam impatiently anticipates her father's visits and does not recognize the stable if spare life she has with her mother and their few but trustworthy friends. Mariam also enjoys a fair amount of independence with her mother. Her mother will not let her attend school, but she has regular visits from the village Mullah who teaches her to read and write and to recite the Koran. Nana's bitterness stems from her experience with rejection time after time throughout her life. After suffering an epileptic fit, she is rejected by her fiancé, and when she becomes pregnant with Jalil's child, she is rejected both by him and then by her own father. She has little ability to reassure Mariam or to raise her with a sense of security and family having experienced little or none of these comforts herself.

When Nana believes that Mariam has left her to live with Jalil, her love for Mariam and her fear of one more rejection induce her to commit suicide. Her feelings for Mariam are deep, but she has not been able to express any such feeling to Mariam. The remote kolba beyond the borders of Gul Damen could have been a refuge for Mariam, but it is, in her mind, a place to escape. And yet Nana has cared for Mariam, providing her with the skills she needs to know to support and care for herself. In Hosseini's description of Nana's teaching of Mariam, it appears that they indeed do have sufficient resources to live on and, however emotionally inadequate, Jalil makes sure they have their physical needs met.

Mariam and Nana milked the goats, fed the hens, and collected eggs. They made bread together. Nana showed her how to knead dough, how to kindle the tandoor and slap the flattened dough onto its inner walls. Nana taught her to sew too, and to cook rice and all the different toppings: shalqam stew with turnip, spinach sabzi, cauliflower with ginger. (Hosseini 15)

In addition to Nana, there is Mullah Faizullah who teaches Mariam and the family friend Bibi jo who is a regular visitor to the kolba. In contrast with what Mariam experiences later under Rasheed, the Mujahideen who take control of Kabul, and finally the Taliban, this little plot of land is an Eden from which Mariam is expelled. In fact, later in the novel, when Laila returns to visit Mariam's birthplace, Laila sees a peaceful, idyllic setting and imagines Mariam as a happy child playing on the dirt floor of the kolba.

The city of Herat, her father, his nine children, his wives, and his cinema are temptations for Mariam. They form a mirage that lures her out of her home, away from her mother, away from the people and things that belong to her. She doesn't realize this until much later in her life. "She gave herself over to the new life that awaited her in this city, a life with a father, with sisters and brothers, a life in which she would love and be loved back, without reservation or agenda, without shame" (Hosseini 29). The idealization of this much-dreamed-of life disintegrates as Mariam approaches closer to what she believes to be its realization. After Mariam sees her father's face disappear behind a window curtain and she sleeps all night on his doorstep, the dream is gone. As Mariam leaves her father's house, she loses everything, including her mother and her childhood. She is expelled from her childhood home and Herat altogether, and she is forced into a marriage with an unknown man from Kabul.

In Kabul, Mariam seeks for ways to feel part of a unit, however it might be formed. In the early days of her marriage she quickly responds to the attention and praise Rasheed gives her. "It surprised her, this thrill she felt over his small compliment" (Hosseini 63). She is taken aback

when he makes clear the extent of his will and his possessive nature, “Where I come from, one wrong look, one improper word, and blood is spilled. Where I come from, a woman’s face is her husband’s business only. I want you to remember that” (Hosseini 63). But later, she finds that Rasheed’s insistence that while out in public she wear a *burqa*, a garment that covers her from head to foot with just a small mesh opening to see through, is, though at first shocking, a source of comfort. The burqa provides “a refuge from the scrutinizing eyes of strangers. She no longer worried that people knew, with a single glance, all the shameful secrets of her past” (Hosseini 66). Similarly, when Rasheed holds a celebration in recognition of Mariam’s first pregnancy, Mariam does all the preparation and then is confined to her room until it is time for her to clean up. But, just as the burqa gives her a sense of sanctuary from prying eyes, Mariam convinces herself that Rasheed’s protective nature is flattering, “Rasheed saw sanctity in what they had together. Her honor, her *namoos*, was something worth guarding to him. She felt prized by his protectiveness. Treasured and significant” (Hosseini 74).

She continues to look for signs of a bond between Rasheed and herself. She comes across his gun and tells herself that he has it for “their safety. Her safety” (Hosseini 74). Years later, ironically it is her awareness of this same gun and her now diametrically changed conviction that Rasheed will use it against her and Laila that motivates her to kill him. But early on, when Mariam finds a picture of Rasheed’s son and first wife, Mariam feels a “kinship with her husband . . . she [tells] herself that they would make good companions after all” (Hosseini 77). As time passes and Mariam is unsuccessful in bearing children, she finds that Rasheed’s affection turns to indifference and then animosity. There is no refuge, no sanctuary in her life with Rasheed because of

his scorn, his ridicule, his insults, his walking past her like she was nothing but a house cat. . . . Mariam saw clearly how much a woman could tolerate when she was afraid. . . . She lived in fear of his . . . volatile temperament, his . . . punches, slaps, [and] kicks. (Hosseini 89)

Despite Mariam's anger and humiliation as she realizes that Rasheed will take Laila as a second wife, this second marriage turns out to be Mariam's salvation. When Aziza, Laila's first child is born, she becomes no less than a miracle in Mariam's life. Everything changes for her. Aziza becomes attached to Mariam, responding to her as though she is a second mother.

Mariam had never before been wanted like this. Love had never been declared to her so guilelessly, so unreservedly. . . . She marveled at how, after all these years . . . she had found in this little creature the first true connection in her life of false, failed connections. (Hosseini 226)

At the novel's climax, when Mariam makes a calculated decision to kill Rasheed as he is in the act of murdering Laila, she makes sure that he sees her so that he can acknowledge her action. At this crucial juncture, Mariam, who has done all she can to appease and accommodate Rasheed, who has lived in fear throughout her marriage, is able to resist not only his brutal force but her own revulsion of violent action to save Laila. "*He's going to kill her. . . . He really means to. And Mariam could not . . . allow that to happen. He'd taken so much from her. . . . She would not watch him take Laila too*" (Hosseini 310). In these remaining seconds, she remains clearheaded enough to assure her results. "*Mariam raised the shovel high. . . . She turned it so the sharp edge was vertical, and, as she did, it occurred to her that this was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life*" (Hosseini 311).

In the aftermath of her decisive action, Mariam comforts Laila by sharing with Laila her vision of a future sanctuary that very much resembles the simplicity and isolation of her childhood home, "a remote village where the road was narrow and unpaved but lined with all manner of plants and shrubs" (Hosseini 315). In this place, children play, there is abundance and tranquility. "They would make new lives for themselves—peaceful, solitary lives—and there the weight of all that

they'd endured would lift from them . . .” (Hosseini 315). Thoughts of her loved ones are in her mind as Mariam goes to her death. She is aware of what she will miss: her companionship with Laila and seeing Aziza grow, marry, and have children of her own. “She would have liked that very much, to be old and play with Aziza’s children” (Hosseini 329). Despite this, she is at peace with her actions and is cognizant that although she came into the world unwanted, she leaves it “as a woman who had loved and been loved back. . . . This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings” (Hosseini 329).

In contrast to Mariam’s marriage, where the semblance of choice is part of the wedding ceremony, there is no evidence of choice in Mariam’s execution, yet she is forced into marriage and she makes her own decision to take the actions that she knows and accepts will lead to her death. When she is married in her father’s living room, the mullah asks Mariam three times if she accepts the marriage. She acquiesces only after her father urges her. In contrast, from the moment Mariam makes her decision to kill Rasheed, she fully accepts the consequence of each step that leads to her execution, even as Laila begs her to change her mind. In response to Laila’s pleading, Mariam is assured and succinct, “Think like a mother Laila jo. Think like a mother. I am” (Hosseini 319).

Mariam’s death, significantly, does not end the book. Rather than focusing on her action as sacrifice and martyrdom, the narrative continues and by doing so emphasizes the practicality of Mariam’s act. It is one of many actions taken in the novel, including Laila’s own failed attempt to effect their escape from Rasheed. Laila and the children must go on despite the loss of their mother, aunt, and friend. Their future gives meaning to Mariam’s sacrifice, making it more than a glorious gesture. Mariam’s action is heroic, but, as the narrative suggests, she is doing what mothers have always done and continue to do for the sake of their families and children. She has chosen death so that Laila and the children, together with Tariq, can find a sanctuary where they will thrive in peace and security.

Laila follows Mariam's instructions, and she and Tariq, with her two children, go to Murree in Pakistan, a small tourist town where Tariq lived and worked previous to finding Laila. Murree was Tariq's sanctuary, and he describes it as "worlds removed from the wretchedness he'd known but one that made even the notion of hardship and sorrow somehow obscene, unimaginable" (Hosseini 302). Murree does offer all of them the sanctuary imagined by Mariam with its natural setting; its isolation from the troubles of war, violence, and abuse; and in the loving nature of the community.

Ultimately, Laila chooses to leave this safe haven to return to Kabul. This is just one of many choices Laila makes throughout the novel as she strategizes for her survival. Although Laila's mother has neglected her as she mourns the absence and then the deaths of her two sons who fought in the battle against the Soviet Union, Laila has found a refuge in her father, who dotes on her. He is a teacher who has been removed from his post by the Soviets. Now, working in a bread factory, Babi teaches Laila about poetry and Afghan history while giving her parental love that her mother cannot. Babi and Laila are a supportive team. She protects him from the anger of her mother almost as much as he protects her from her mother's indifference. Her father's expectations for her to be educated and to pursue a profession set Laila aside from her friends who plan to marry and raise children. "Babi had made it clear to Laila from a young age that the most important thing in his life, after her safety, was her schooling" (Hosseini 103). Laila accepts her father's expectations for her and is proud of them.

When she loses her mother and father during the Mujahideen shelling of Kabul following the fall of Najibullah and the failed attempt at a shared government, Laila, who miraculously survives the blast, is left to her own wits and resources to survive. Initially it appears that Rasheed has acted generously and selflessly when he pulls Laila from the rubble. On the surface, it seems as though Rasheed is offering Laila refuge, and in a way he is, but strictly according to his terms. He has plans for Laila. Rasheed points out to Mariam when she protests

his desire to marry Laila that Laila has little choice in the matter. It is sanctuary with him or exile into an even more unforgiving world with

no food, no water, not a rupiah in her pockets, bullets and rockets flying everywhere. How many days do you suppose she'll last before she's abducted, raped, or tossed into some roadside ditch with her throat slit? Or all three? (Hosseini 192).

Laila, although demonstrating signs of childishness as Mariam nurses her to health, devises her own agenda as she realizes that she is pregnant with Tariq's child. For her, time is of the essence, and she quickly agrees to Rasheed's offer of marriage. Laila believes that she has hidden the truth from Rasheed, but he realizes before too long that this child, who has already disappointed him by being a girl, is not his. Despite this knowledge, he does not expel Laila, but he can use this knowledge to threaten her and her child and it justifies his violent anger against her. Laila, having been raised with a strong sense of self by her father, is not as willing to submit to her circumstances as is Mariam. When she does, it is because she has something to gain by doing so.

Although her first attempt to deceive Rasheed about Aziza's real father fails, Laila, undeterred, schemes once again to deceive him and, through deception, escape him and his superficial refuge. She gradually steals money from Rasheed, saving it to escape to Peshawar. As she and Mariam bond after the birth of Aziza, she includes Mariam in her escape plans. This attempt also fails, not because Rasheed discovers the plot, but because the women are too dependent on strangers to make their plan succeed. They place their trust in a man who takes their money and turns them in to the police. The policeman returns them to Rasheed whose reception of Mariam, Laila, and Aziza serves to demonstrate that Rasheed is capable of murder. He locks Laila and Aziza in a hot, airless room, where they nearly die of heat and dehydration. Mariam is locked in a shed.

Laila partially redeems herself with Rasheed when she gives birth to a son. Rasheed then places all of his focus on this small child and excludes the women from his attentions as much as possible. This fragile situation begins to crumble as drought and disaster exhaust the city's and the family's resources. Aziza is sent to an orphanage, which is a weak refuge for the starving children of Kabul. After one of Mariam and Laila's trips to visit Aziza, they return to find Tariq waiting outside their house. It is this fateful and nearly fatal event that brings about the pivotal moment in the novel leading to Mariam's decisive action against Rasheed and Laila's ultimate escape from him and into a true sanctuary.

This sanctuary could be a simple happy ending to a tragic story. Because of Mariam's sacrifice, Laila is back with her childhood sweetheart and both of her children are alive and thriving. But the narrative of Afghanistan is not so neatly brought to a conclusion, nor does Hosseini choose to end his novel with such an unambiguous and unlikely ending. In this final portion of the narrative, Laila's character evolves out of the remains of her childhood and into a mature woman who is able to make her own sacrifices, this time on behalf of Afghanistan and Kabul. After the events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent American invasion, Laila begins to hear about positive changes in Kabul, the rebuilding of roads and schools and improvements for women, and she wants to be a part of it. She retains the ambition instilled in her by her father. She recalls his words and wants to fulfill them: "*You can be anything you want, Laila, he says. I know this about you. And I also know that when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you*" (Hosseini 343).

She wonders if living her life as a maid in a "foreign land" would be what Mariam wanted for her. "Maybe it wouldn't matter to Mariam what Laila did as long as she and the children were safe and happy. But it matters to Laila. Suddenly, it matters very much" (Hosseini 343). And so Laila chooses to abandon what peace her family has found and returns to Kabul to realize her full potential. When Laila and her

family return to Kabul, they are also choosing to exile themselves from the sanctuary of Murree, much as Mariam did when she left her kolba and mother, but they are more aware of their choices than Mariam was of hers. They consciously choose to live within an insecure world in hopes of bettering it rather than opting for the security and peace of Murree. Just as Mariam did in accepting her fate, they choose to sacrifice their comfort and safety to help others.

The family returns to Kabul by way of Herat. While there, Laila visits Gul Daman and her kolba outside the village. But now, in Laila's eyes, the abandoned remains of Mariam's and her mother's small hut are set in a peaceful and bucolic corner of Afghanistan. At first glance, it seems to be far from the years of Soviet conflict, Mujahideen shelling, and their torturous life with Rasheed. Perhaps, had Mariam stayed there, her life would have been different; it might have been a safe haven with Mullah Faizullah and his family to look after her. And yet, along with the flowers, birds, grasshoppers, and other verdant aspects of the spot, Laila sees graffiti and debris; she sees evidence of the past presence of Soviet soldiers. But Laila's mind is filled with Mariam's stories and imagines her playing on the kolba floor as a small child. She recognizes that this child will grow into a woman who has no expectations for herself or from others. Despite this apparent meekness, she knows in fact Mariam had "something deep in her core, that neither Rasheed nor the Taliban [would] be able to break. Something as hard and unyielding as a block of limestone" (Hosseini 355).

The narrative of Mariam and Laila merges with the narrative of the rebuilding of Afghanistan and of Kabul in particular. As Tariq and Laila set to work at Aziza's old orphanage, Laila feels Mariam's spirit everywhere and senses it as a force behind Kabul's reconstruction.

Laila sees . . . that Mariam is never far. She is here, in these walls they've repainted, in the trees they've planted, in the blankets that keep the children warm, in these pillows and books and pencils. She is in the children's laughter. (Hosseini 366)

Mariam's sacrifice is infused into Laila's purpose and the reconstruction of Kabul. As Laila comes to realize, "every Afghan story is marked by death and loss and unimaginable grief. And yet she sees that people find a way to survive, to go on" (Hosseini 350), as such, Mariam's death is not so unusual and her sacrifice is not so remarkable. It is part of the continuing narrative of Afghanistan. Yet, Laila's knowledge that Mariam not only chose this fate but chose it for Laila's well-being gives Laila a sense of purpose and allows her to grow beyond the tragedies she has experienced and to choose to devote her life to others and to something as seemingly impossible as the reconstruction of Kabul and Afghanistan.

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