

From Text to Screen: English Language in Arts and Media

Edited by
Dr. Saran S.

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Chapter: 22

Gendered Biopolitics of Trauma in Afghan Women's Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Afghan fiction in English is attracting global attention for its portrayal of Afghanistan's social and political realities. This article examines gendered trauma in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Kite Runner*, and Nadia Hashimi's *When the Moon is Low* through the lens of biopolitics. Biopolitics explains how modern power systems

regulate human life, bodies, and behaviour using institutions and cultural norms. Afghanistan's wars, entrenched patriarchal traditions, and ongoing forced migration have shaped individual lives, especially those of women. Through the experiences of Mariam, Laila, and Fereiba, these novels show how women become subjects of social control and political authority. They also depict resilience, solidarity, and survival. This paper argues that trauma in these novels goes beyond personal experience; it reflects broader power structures that govern life. Examining these works together reveals how Afghan fiction provides a space to understand suffering, resistance, and endurance in conflict-marked societies.

Keywords: Afghan literature, Society, Power, Revolt, Gender

Gender is not simply an identity but a repeated performance under constraint. In societies structured by violence and surveillance, this performance becomes a survival strategy, where conformity and resistance are constantly negotiated.

— Judith Butler

Introduction

In recent decades, Afghan literature in English has gained international recognition. Writers of Afghan origin use fiction to depict lives shaped by political turmoil, war, and displacement. Khaled Hosseini and Nadia Hashimi are prominent authors. Their novels explore conflict, migration, gender inequality, and identity. They reveal the effects of political violence. Afghanistan's modern history has been marked by several major political transformations: the Soviet invasion of 1979, a subsequent civil war, and the rise of the Taliban. Each event significantly changed the country's social structure. Widespread instability deeply affected everyday life. For Afghan women, especially during strict political rule, severe restrictions became part of daily existence. Laws and customs limited access to

education and employment. In many cases, women's mobility in public spaces was strictly regulated. Within this environment, women's lives were shaped by political authority and deeply rooted patriarchal norms. Social expectations often defined women's roles in relation to family and domestic responsibilities. This further limited opportunities for independence or self-expression. As a result, many women faced restrictions that affected both their movement and emotional well-being.

Because of these realities, literature has become an important space for representing and examining women's experiences in Afghanistan. Fictional narratives allow writers to offer insights into the emotional and psychological consequences of war, violence, and displacement. By reading such works, audiences are invited to engage with the human dimensions of historical events. In this way, readers better understand how individuals struggle to survive difficult circumstances. One theoretical approach is bio-politics, a useful framework for analysing these conditions. By examining how power regulates life, movement, and behaviour, bio-politics helps explain systems of control in Afghan fiction. This paper analyses the gendered dimensions of trauma in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, *When the Moon is Low*, and *The Kite Runner*. Through this approach, the study explores how Afghan fiction reveals relationships among political power, social control, trauma, and resilience.

Michel Foucault's concept of bio-politics explains how modern power regulates human life. Instead of relying on force, power works through institutions, policies, and social practices. These shape daily behaviour. Governments influence populations by controlling health, mobility, reproduction, and conduct. Power becomes part of social structures. In patriarchal societies, these controls often affect women more strongly. Cultural expectations assign women roles, restrict opportunities, and dictate behaviour. Limited access to education, employment,

and public space turns women's bodies into sites of social and political power. These restrictions show that bio-political control occurs through laws and cultural practices. Trauma theory is another lens for understanding Afghan fiction. Trauma is the psychological response to overwhelming events like war or displacement. It disrupts memory, identity, and stability. Literature helps process these experiences, offering readers insight into trauma's effects. Together, bio-politics and trauma theory show how systems of power create lasting suffering. Conflict, restrictions, and instability challenge dignity and security. In Afghan narratives, women face trauma from personal and broader political forces. Yet, literature often stresses resilience and survival. Characters endure hardship but find hope, solidarity, and strength. By showing both suffering and endurance, Afghan fiction captures the complexities of living within systems of power.

Patriarchal Control and Gendered Trauma in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini depicts Afghan women under patriarchal authority. The novel follows Mariam and Laila, two women whose lives reveal hardships in a society shaped by war and strict gender norms. Mariam is born outside marriage and grows up feeling unwanted and inferior. Her life begins with marginalisation and isolation. Later, her forced marriage to Rasheed places her in a house where obedience is expected. Rasheed's strict control shows how power regulates daily life. Laila's early life is more hopeful; her family values education and supports her. But civil war soon destroys her world. After losing her parents, Laila marries Rasheed and faces the same violence and oppression as Mariam. Over time, she and Mariam develop a deep bond. They draw on emotional strength to resist Rasheed's authority. The novel highlights female solidarity as key to confronting oppression.

Refugee Trauma in *When the Moon is Low*

Nadia Hashimi's *When the Moon is Low* shifts focus from domestic oppression to the experiences of Afghan refugees. Fereiba and her children flee Kabul after her husband's death and begin a dangerous journey to Europe. The novel shows how the refugee journey is full of uncertainty and danger. Fereiba must protect her children from exploitation and violence. They face smugglers, border guards, and crowded camps. These experiences show the harsh reality for many displaced families. From a bio-political view, governments regulate populations' movements with borders, policies, and camps as mechanisms of control. Refugees live in uncertainty, with futures dependent on political or bureaucratic decisions. Yet, the novel also highlights resilience. Fereiba's determination shows the strength of maternal love. *The Kite Runner*, although centred on male characters, also shows how war reshapes Afghan society. The shift from peace to violence is central. Amir's memories and return to Afghanistan show how conflict affects identity and memory. War and extremism create a climate dominated by trauma. Women, though less central, experience restrictions on education, mobility, and public life. These are examples of power regulating existence. The novel complements *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *When the Moon is Low* by showing how war alters lives throughout Afghan society.

Comparative Representation of Trauma

These three novels focus on different experiences but share common themes: trauma, power, and survival. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, trauma emerges in the domestic sphere where patriarchal authority controls daily life. In *When the Moon is Low*, trauma is tied to displacement and migration. *The Kite Runner* portrays trauma in the context of war and political change. Despite these differences, the novels show how Afghan society is shaped by conflict and restriction. Women and families must navigate systems of authority that regulate movement,

relationships, and opportunities. These stories reveal the complex link between power and suffering. Yet, the novels also emphasise resilience. Characters seek hope and solidarity even against overwhelming challenges. Through these portrayals, Afghan fiction shows how people fight to keep dignity within systems of power.

Conclusion

The novels of Khaled Hosseini and Nadia Hashimi offer significant insight into the experiences of Afghans living in a society shaped by war, patriarchy, and displacement. By depicting characters who endure violence, migration, and social restrictions, these narratives reveal how systems of power shape everyday life. Through the theoretical framework of biopolitics, this study has explored how political authority and cultural traditions regulate women's bodies, mobility, and opportunities. At the same time, the novels highlight resilience, solidarity, and survival. Despite the trauma they experience, the characters continue to seek hope and dignity. Ultimately, contemporary Afghan fiction demonstrates literature's ability to represent complex social realities. By giving voice to the experiences of Afghan women and families, these narratives invite readers to reflect on the human consequences of political conflict and the enduring strength of those who struggle to survive within oppressive systems.

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