



# Identity Negotiation: Cultural Assimilation in Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns

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This paper examines the impact of cultural assimilation on personal identity among Afghan women in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. A qualitative analysis of the novel is conducted and it reveals that Hosseini's characters often experience a hybrid identity. The paper, in order to understand the interplay between culture and identity, analyses the development of character and narrative structure. This study indicates that the principal women characters experience tensions that arise due to conflict between tradition and modernity, and their resilience, that helps them to overcome these struggles. The challenges faced by women clearly demonstrate a conflicting identity, which is neither fully assimilated nor entirely disconnected from their roots. This identity highlights the complexities of navigating between cultures.

Keywords: *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, identity, cultural assimilation, hybridity

## Introduction

The concept of Cultural assimilation has been constantly explored in postcolonial literature. This topic provides us with a clear understanding of the predicament of the immigrants. It reflects the ways in which characters navigate the process of assimilation. The characters neither fully assimilate nor do they entirely reject it. This leads to formation of a new identity which Bhabha calls as the "hybrid identity". This paper is an attempt to understand this "hybrid identity", which is formed as a result of amalgamation of two cultures. The novel written by Khaled Hosseini *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, serves itself as one of the best books to analyse his portrayal of characters who always struggle with their hybrid identity in a unique way. They grapple with the identities that are formed as a result of assimilation.

## Literature Review

This literature review seeks to provide an overview of the existing research on cultural assimilation and identity in the context of postcolonial literature. This would be attained by examining theoretical frameworks and it would also identify how Hosseini's work fits into existing discussions of cultural assimilation.

The concept of cultural identity and the challenges faced by Afghan women in a patriarchal and religiously conservative society is discussed in length by Himatus Sya'adah. He explores how the novel reflects five dimensions of women's cultural identity, such as, modes of expression, individual, relational, and communal roles, evolving and enduring traits, affective, cognitive, and behavioral elements, and content versus relational communication. This study presents how these identities influence women's responses to hegemony in Afghan society.

In another paper the quest for identity in the novel is explored through the lens of gender inequality, and it focuses on the character dynamics of Rasheed with his two wives, Mariam and Laila. It also portrays how both women assert their identities by confronting and resisting oppression meted out to them by the patriarchal Afghan society.

In another study, Sindhu examines how characters adopt strategies like assimilation, marginalization and separation in response to displacement. It also finds how characters maintain cultural roots while adapting to new contexts leading to mental well-being and those facing separation struggle with identity and belonging.

## Methodology

The approach that this paper makes use of is a qualitative one which focuses on textual analysis of the novel. In order to find the ways in which characters negotiate their identity a close reading of the text is important. Thematic analysis, a technique to identify and understand recurring themes in a text, is employed for research. The novel selected for analysis is *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Passages from the novels were analysed to understand representations of hybrid identities, and focused on internal struggles and external pressures experienced by the characters.

## Discussion

In the novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam and Laila's identities are shaped by their respective social background that they were born and brought up into. Mariam, who belongs to, lives an underprivileged life and is constantly suppressed by the patriarchal society. She bears the identity of a "harami", a child born out of wedlock, as she is often addressed so by her badmouthed, ill-tempered mother, Nana. Since her childhood Nana keeps drilling her with this idea, and the misgiving that she is never entitled to educate herself like the other children of her father's (Jalil) household, though she ardently wishes to witness for herself the unfolding of life with all its grandeur. But, the social stigma paralyses her from enjoying things that she deserved as a child and especially as a girl, she stays with her mother Nana in the outskirts of Herat all by themselves in a desolate place with limited means of sustenance to get them through their ill-fated miserable life. This identity of hers continues to haunt her throughout her life, may it be her small hut where she lived with her mother oblivious to the outside world, or her brief stay in Jalil's house, or the life in Kabul after her early unhappy marriage to a man who was several years elder to her.

Mariam is forced to assimilate into the new culture that she is introduced to in Kabul after her marriage to Rasheed, and to mutely surrender to his will as is expected of every other woman in a patriarchal society. As Beauvoir states, "identity is not a constant, precisely because the biological and sociological factors which define it are in constant change...The sociological factors are more determining than the biological...The social condition is an objective agent arising from economic, political, social and cultural aspects which are characteristic of the growth and history of the society in question" (p. 58-59).

Before her marriage she dreams of a carefree happy life away from the small hut that she lives in with her mother. With a new identity, as the wife of Rasheed, Mariam is expected to conform to the standards of the society by following the rules laid out by her husband. As instructed by her husband Mariam covers herself before stepping out of the house and always stays at his side without mingling with other women such as Fariba, a free spirited woman, for the fear of not only being railed out but also of getting physically assaulted by him. Her identity keeps changing from being a child to a woman in no time and this shift in identity confirms Bhabha's statement that "Identity is fluid".

Throughout the novel we come across instances of identity shifts that take place as a result of circumstances which forces the characters to either adopt or negotiate it. Laila's teacher at school Shanzai, who is called Khala Rangmaal, negotiates her identity as Afghanistan keeps moving from one rule to the other. Under the communists rule she never covered herself up with a cloth and she would forbid the students too, as is obvious from these lines, "She did not cover and forbade the female students from doing it. She said women and men are equal in

every way and there was no reason women should cover if men didn't" (Hosseini 111). But, under the Talibans she is forced to cover herself from head to toe and to keep her identity protected at all times. She negotiates her identity in this manner in order to survive in the ever changing world quietly enduring and hoping for a better future.

Laila, a free spirited woman, undergoes identity change throughout the novel, from being a free spirited woman with progressive views about women's education and freedom to a subdued heartbroken woman in the hands of her tyrannous husband, Rasheed. She is forced to shed her identity and to accept the rules and regulations laid out for her by her husband. She is constantly beaten for expressing her views openly and for not complying with his wishes and she endures this inhumane treatment quietly as Mariam tries to console her in such difficult situations.

From all the instances stated above, it's clear that characters assimilate in a new culture and try hard to navigate their identity. A hybrid identity is formed as a result of the assimilation that takes place. Identities are created as individuals move between different cultures that are both tangible and intangible aspects of the space they inhabit.

## Conclusion

Thus the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* provides us with vivid examples where characters reflect traits of identity formation that are shaped due to cultural assimilation. It is quite obvious from the study that the struggle between two different cultures forces a few characters to consider it as a loss of identity while others take it in their stride, face the odds and form a hybrid identity. The novel represents the struggles and conflicts in a way that makes us understand the complex nature of cultural assimilation and also makes us realize that identity is always fluid.

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