

**A JOURNEY FROM RESILIENCE TO RESISTANCE:  
THE WOMEN STRUGGLE IN TONI MORRISON'S  
PARADISE AND KHALED HOSSEINI'S  
A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS**

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**Abstract**

*This study explores the journey of women from resilience to resistance in combating hard times in Toni Morrison's Paradise and Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns through the theory of resilience by Ponomarov and Holcomb (2009), and theory of resistance via counter theory by Solorzano and Yosso (2002). The common troublesome experience of the women in both of these novels makes them resilient for living in problematic circumstances and fight against the oppression caused by hierarchies of gender and class. Resilience provides women strength for combatting the challenges of patriarchal domination and becomes a driving force to have a life of one's own choice. However, these novels expose the ubiquitous power of patriarchy and relevant dangers. Khaled Hosseini concludes his novel on an optimistic note by showing a surviving woman achieving independence and successfully building a home for abandoned women in A Thousand Splendid Suns. Morrison ends her novel with the death of freedom seeker women but their death sends a message of resistance in the path of freedom. It highlights Morrison's concern not only with African Women in America and Hosseini's concern with resilient women in war ridden Afghanistan but their concern with voices of all deprived women in the world. The women exhibit resilience in difficult times proving them to be strong and brave. This study paves a way for further research in resilience studies in association with various dimensions of women resistance in these novelists.*

**Keywords:** *Resilience, resistance, Afro-American women, comparative literature, Afghan culture.*

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## Introduction

Toni Morrison (1931-2019) has been a renowned Afro-American fiction writer who wrote many famous novels such as *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Jazz* (1992) and *Home* (2012). She has been considered a writer of the black people; however, the universal concerns of her works are also well known. Critical studies on her work include studies based on Critical Race Theory, feminism, psychoanalytical criticism, comparative literature and postcolonial outlook of her works. The present study comes under comparative literary framework which brings into analysis her novel *Paradise* published in 1998 along with a novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) by Khaled Hosseini (born in 1965), who is an Afghan-American author of contemporary fiction. His three novels are: *The Kite Runner* (2003), *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), and *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013). His novels expose the patriarchal foundation of Afghan society, religious extremism of Taliban and effects of war on people of Afghanistan and their lives. The present study is the critical discussion of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* in which he brings to fore the women in struggle with patriarchal norms and prolonged war milieu of the country. This study explores various facets of resilience shown by women while facing the opposition of various sorts during their life span in both of these novels.

Resilience is the ability to recover from or adjust well in response to adversity. It demands that a situation must be understood, the adaptation ways be identified, and then resilience be practiced. Resilience is an inner strength in an individual to fight against various sorts of pressures such as discriminatory societal norms. It is a practice to elevate oneself in struggling against oppressive forces and suffering to combat the negative impact of any kind of discriminatory outer forces in operation. According to Hamel & Valkanas, resilience refers to the capacity to continuous reconstruction (2003). In the novels under discussion, both the writers bring into focus the negative working of patriarchal values on women that

make them resilient as well as resistant against oppression. Thus, first it is resilience and then resistance which comes into action when social pressures make individuals to have life as objects without their own will. The writers have brought to fore those women characters that pass through a process of struggle to become self-aware and somewhat in control over their world first through resilience and then resistance.

A lot of studies have already been done on both of the novels under study here. Widdowson's work on *Paradise* deals with the attack of males on "women because they were women" (2001). This work brings to fore the evil side of patriarchy that the men cannot view the women standing before them as independent identities. Krumholz looks at "cultural hybridity" in this novel (2002) as the women of different backgrounds come together in their struggle against patriarchy. Jamil et al. (2021) explore the concept of sisterhood in the discussion of women issues in *Paradise* that the women join together as sisters in this novel for achieving freedom. Ahmad et al. (2022) have discussed ethnicity and power relations in Khaled Hosseini's works. Afreen Zubair (2021) explores history and culture of Afghanistan, thus giving a comprehensive detail of Afghan people where the tradition has been to keep women on the back foot while men on the front. Pondelíková (2021) discusses not only violence, fear, the unjust treatment of women but also the identity issue of women.

The list of critical works, as referred above, is not complete on these writers, however, it shows the major issues evaluated critically by researchers. These works show that in the already done critical studies on these authors, there is a lot written on culture, patriarchal oppression, ethnic confrontations, war, regional conflicts but the idea of resilience is mostly unexplored, especially in comparative literary framework and then linking it further with resistance. This is the research gap that needs to be fulfilled and the current study is going to explore. Women are shown exhibiting resilience against patriarchal pressures. First they are shown

showing high level of resilience but when the circumstances make them totally fed up of the cruelties and injustice then they become strongly resistant even taking the risk of their lives. In the current work, the resistance in real life situations of women in Afghanistan is being discussed through the women characters in the mentioned novels.

### **Research Questions:**

1. How do Morrison and Hosseini present resilience as a weapon against unjust societal forces?
2. How do exploitation and discrimination provoke resistance in women to fight against patriarchal oppression as depicted in *Paradise* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Resilience signifies that the resilient individuals know the harsh realities of the real world around as it is useless to close eyes in the face of hardships. They believe that life is to be taken as a challenge but with an optimistic outlook. Thus they keep on improvising themselves to adjust in an environment along with struggle to bring positive changes in attitudes and social scenario.

It is important to understand various steps and constituents of resilience. Three aspects of resilience are pointed out by Ponomarov and Holcomb:

- . readiness and preparedness
- . response and adaptation
- . recovery or adjustment (2009, p.5380)

It shows that an important requirement for resilience is that the characters must have a strong will power, and then they can be ready and prepared for

combatting harsh circumstances. The next requirement is to have an ability of adaptation so that a better strategic response can be planned for adjustment in a problematic situation. Then the next stage is to get recovered from a negative situation or adjust well with a certain course of action and code of conduct. These steps are well exhibited by the women in the novels selected for the present study. However, the women move from resilience to the next level of response: rebellion and resistance when the oppression crosses a certain bearable limit.

Resistance is not only a response against oppression but also an important aspect of the formation of identity of an individual who belongs to an oppressed and marginalized community or group in a discriminatory society. Another related thing is the use of counter-story as an important tool to theorize resistance. Solorzano and Yosso suggest that counter-stories discover new possibilities beyond the existing reality” (2002, p.36). The aim of the counter-stories is to subvert the dominant ideology and expose the hierarchical and patriarchal order in a society” (Montoya, 2006). Counter-stories re-form the past, and, in that way, reconstruct the present and help to reimagine the future. Counter-stories are the foundational weapons of the resistance, so the women, in the selected novels by Hosseini and Morrison, are found developing counter stories as tools of resistance against patriarchal suppression

The women in both of these novels adopt ways to combat their marginalization and oppression by cooperating with each other for a powerful resistance against unjust discriminatory demands because “A man’s heart is a wretched thing” (Hosseini, 2003, p.27) and believing on men is of no use. So, they need to be resilient with bravery for surviving in a male dominated society. A women character Laila rightly believes that “Marriage can wait Education cannot” (p.114), however, the conditions make her to go for an early marriage with a married patriarch. She has to undergo many troubles after this marriage like many other women of

Afghan society as Mariam speaks, “How quietly we endure” (p.91). It confirms the presence of resilience in Afghan women for enduring all the adversities and to live with a brave heart. The writer’s own words point out the presence of resilience in Afghan women: “people find a way to survive” (p.395). Similarly, the women are shown in struggle in Morrison’s *Paradise* as is mentioned by the writer “But why were there no stories to tell of themselves? (p.4). The women have to suffer a lot in the hands of the patriarchs of their own colour other than the sufferings at the hands of the white people in American context. Resultantly the women start thinking and working for “A Room of One’s Own” (Woolf, 1929) where “no one to bother or insult them” (Morriossn, 1998, p.8). However this all is not so easy for the men to see and bear so the men label those women as “Bodacious black Eves” (p.18) and murder them with a unified cruel plan. The women, who struggle for independence, are killed by men with the mindset that women would not ever raise their voice in future against men. However, their death becomes a symbol of resistance for future where the women would have freedom from male suppression under the so called patriarchal superiority over women.

**Discussion: The Women Struggle in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* and Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns***

**A Journey from Resilience to Resistance in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise***

This novel is a story of those African Americans who establish an isolated black people’s town. The novel takes place in the fictional town called Ruby. It was written to highlight historical issue of American society such as violence on women. However, the resilience of women against unjust and discriminatory social practices is commendable. The difficulties of African-American women are highlighted who are in struggle for a free life with self-identity and control. More importantly, the element of hope is made prominent as the women do all what they can do to survive with bravery in baffling surroundings. The writer has continuously showed that

“Black Lives Matter” (Jamil et al., 2021), however, it is not only black men who are significant but black women’s lives also matter. Thus she advocates the idea of “redefining Americanism” (Ahmad et al., 2021) where women have full control over their lives without any regulations by the patriarchs.

The focus of Morrison in her novel *Paradise* is that she goes on to tell her readers the dangers of one sided imposition of will on someone as men against women. In *Paradise*, the women develop an isolated place the Convent to resist patriarchal oppression. However, their efforts suffer a setback and give way to new tensions and conflicts. The female develop a mutual harmony in face of outside pressures, and then this harmony is challenged. Critically evaluating, it is significant as it brings into focus the prominent features of patriarchy and the idea of us and them. In many articles on Morrison, the power of patriarchy is linked with poverty (Ahmad et al., 2021), however, here, the patriarchy is associated with their general understanding of superiority as a birth right of men.

The death of the women characters in this novel is in fact symbolic which hints at their struggle to survive and their failure to do so. The disappearance of the women bodies is a counter story shown by the writer to highlight the women struggle against wrongly applied hierarchies. It is a story not of loss or defeat but of a longing for survival and independence in future. Richard Delgado believes such counter stories can tell “when it is time to reallocate power”. (2013). In the novel *Paradise* it is brought to focus that women are not free even in the convent and there is continuous interruption of Ruby’s males. They are in a place where they have no autonomy and are forced to do what others tell them. This is why she chose to kill off all of the female characters in the book. The death of females in the novel is not just an event but it is also a message. The author makes it clear that the women are often marginalized and this has been going on for centuries.

Thus *Paradise* is a story of protest against the identity thrust upon the women. It explores that women consume all their efforts to assimilate and accommodate in the mainstream culture to be recognized as independent citizens but the devastating environment of discrimination makes them as outsiders. This rejection and hostility make them to rethink their identity in order to resist the dominant patriarchal discriminatory social norms and practices. Margaret Montoya declares “counter stories” as “an important cite of resistance” (2006). The disappearance of females in the end of Morrison’s *Paradise* is a brilliant message to the agents of oppression in oppressive societies. The writer conveys the message of resistance by the women against oppression and objectification in patriarchal societies.

#### ***A Journey from Resilience to Resistance in Khaled Hosseini’s A Thousand Splendid Suns***

The setting of this novel is Afghanistan of 1960s to 1990s and highlights the problems of female characters who are living in a patriarchal oppressive society. It highlights women experiences with love, family and expectations; how they have to go through a long struggle as a female to deal with harsh realities in a patriarchal social setup. It exhibits three generations of women whose lives have been badly damaged by war and male oppression in a narrow minded patriarchal society.

The first generation woman is represented by the character of Nana. Nana’s life reflects how women are treated unfairly in Afghan society and how they are discriminated against men in various fields of social life. Her life highlights the unfair treatment of women and gender inequality (Safdar, Hashim, & Alzuhri, 2022) which sows seeds of resistance in women against wrongly imposed societal norms. She lives with her daughter in a small cottage on the outskirts of the main city. She has given birth to a girl Maryam from Jalil who has not declared his marriage with Nana in public. She has been living with her daughter in a small cottage as Maryam’s father is not ready to own her as his daughter publically. Jalil is ashamed

on Mariam's birth and so he hates Nana as he was expecting a male child from her. Due to hatred by Jalil and his family, Nana tells her daughter that Jalil's family will not own them as they consider Maryam as an illegitimate child. She advises her to trust only on her own mother as source of all comforts and to "never trust a male" in her life. She explains to her daughter that why do her father and his family consider them as weeds. She becomes bitter and reacts aggressively over her oppression even while talking to Maryam. It explains how male dominance makes a female bitter even for her daughter. Nana has been called "JIN" in the novel due to her mental agony over troubles of her life which are mainly the result of patriarchal discriminations. Nana was already mentally shattered over her insignificant position in life and when Maryam goes to find her father Jalil, in spite of her advice of not to go to find him to his house, she kills herself.

Nana's suicide changes the character of Maryam and she considers her own self responsible for her mother's death. Now, Maryam is suffering from parental hunger which makes her alienated (Ahmad et al., 2020) and this alienation makes her sad as well brave. She is an individual who has to face many challenges in her life and overcome many obstacles and she endures this all by her resilience. She learns to live in an environment of hatred and discrimination. After her mother's death she has no one to care and so she is married to an already married man Rasheed who proves to be a cruel husband and she has to live in a traditional cultural setup which restricts women. Mariam does understand that, as Nana has endured the discrimination of society, she has to live her life with resilience under the same societal constraints. Maryam shows resilience but develops a mindset for resistance if she is crushed more and made victim of extreme level of brutality. The inexcusably unfair treatment at home, in the workplace and other social settings leaves no place for her except resistance. Not for herself, however, but to save another girl Laila from the cruelties of

Rasheed ,she becomes resistant to patriarchal dominance. She doesn't want that Laila's life must be ruined like hers.

Laila is a strong woman with a brave heart who refuses to accept her fate as determined by the traditions. She has grown up where her father has taught her to live with freedom. She wants to have her own identity and does not want to be confined to unjust societal norms. She is not afraid of the consequences and she doesn't care about what other people think about her. She continues her struggle of living bravely with resilience. However, after the death of her parents, she is married to Rasheed and she has to undergo a tough struggle against gender norms that are imposed on her by her husband. She wants to protect herself and her baby from unfavorable societal pressures. She tries to deal with all situations wisely and learns to live with brutal behavior of Rasheed. With the passage of time, brutality of Rasheed increases and it makes Laila resist and rebel against his male hegemonic actions. Once, Laila argues with Rasheed about the women position in society and her arguments make him angry. He starts beating her with belt and during this fight, Rasheed comes into a position where he could strangle her. Maryam, who has endured all this brutality throughout her married life, becomes resistant gathers courage and kills Rasheed.

Maryam has no regret because Rasheed's constant brutality has forced Maryam to kill him. Taliban capture her and stone her to death. Thus Maryam ends her life on her journey from resilience to resistance. However, the ending of the story is a happy one, with Laila and her lost husband Tariq reunited. Thus the message conveyed by the author is that the cruel system will give way to female freedom one day. The life stories of these women brought fore by Hosseini are not a waste and not mere the stories of the resilience but are source of resistance in future. These women no longer want to remain alienated from the world around but want to end their alienation and move from periphery to centre (Farid et al., 2023). Although the path of resistance and freedom is long as Morrison

pronounces in *Beloved*: “claiming ownership of that freed self,” is a long and painstaking journey (Morrison, 1987). They want to claim the ownership of their freed selves through resistance if and when needed.

### **Conclusion**

Both of the novels portray the resilience of women and their rebellion against male-dominated societal practices. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Laila and Mariam rebel against their husband Rasheed and in *Paradise*, women of convent rebel against males. These novels bring fore the injustice of the society with the women and the social constraints that women face in a male dominated society. Women are restricted by their families, culture, and religion. They are seen as less valuable than men and they have to live under the constant fear of being sexually assaulted especially when they venture out into public spaces. Women have very little power in such societies as they cannot make decisions on their own and have to obey what is told to them by their fathers or husbands. The exploitation, discrimination and subordination of women provoke resistance in them. The state of objectification fuels them up with anger and transforms them into violent individuals. This implies that hostility to cultural norms is instigated by the society. They are not given the same opportunities as are available to men and resultantly they become rebellious while exhibiting a desire to change their fate.

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