

## Focalization of Afghan Women's Repression and Resistance in "A Thousand Splendid Suns" and "My Forbidden Face"

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Received: 30/8/2022

Revised: 24/2/2023

Accepted: 14/6/2023

Published: 30/6/2024

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Citation: Agustina, H. N., & Budiman, M. . (2024). Focalization of Afghan Women's Repression and Resistance in "A Thousand Splendid Suns" and "My Forbidden Face". *Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences*, 51(3), 234–241. <https://doi.org/10.35516/hum.v51i3.2126>



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### Abstract

**Objectives:** This study aims to portray the Afghan women's repression and resistance in two novels written by Khaled Hosseini and Latifa, "A Thousand Splendid Suns" and "My Forbidden Face". These two diaspora writers' works show the ways in which Afghan women are trapped by the repression and dominance of local traditions, unequal gender relations, and masculine interpretation of the Qur'an and the Hadist.

**Methods:** This study utilizes the narrative theory which is focalization and narrator to reveal how these women keep struggling to be free from various conflicts in the two novels.

**Results:** The result of this study shows the authors' works in telling the women who experienced repression and did the resistance both in two novels. The type of focalizer and narrator in both texts are different. In "A Thousand Splendid Suns" is the external focalizer and the heterodiegetic narrator, meanwhile in "My Forbidden Face" is internal focalizer and homodiegetic narrator.

**Conclusions:** This study concludes the strength of the words, phrases, and sentences used by the two authors are able to show male domination and oppression of female characters in the two texts. The women are internalized by Afghan patriarchal local culture. They could not get their freedom to determine their life.

**Keywords:** Afghan women, female voices, focalization, patriarchal repression, women's resistance, interpretation of Islamic texts.

### تركيز قمع ومقاومة المرأة الأفغانية في ألف شمس رائعة ووجهي المحظور

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#### ملخص

الأهداف: تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى وصف قمع ومقاومة المرأة الأفغانية في روايتين من تأليف خالد حسيني ولطيفة بعنوان "ألف شمس رائعة ووجهي المحظور". تظهر أعمال هاتين الكاتبتين المغتربتين الطرق التي تقع بها النساء الأفغانيات في شرك قمع وهيمنة التقاليد المحلية، والعلاقات غير المتكافئة بين الجنسين، والتفسير الذكوري للقرآن والحديث. المنهجية: تستخدم هذه الدراسة نظرية السرد وهي التركيز والراوي لتكشف كيف تكافح هؤلاء النساء من أجل التحرر من الصراعات المختلفة في الروايتين.

النتائج: تظهر نتيجة هذه الدراسة أعمال المؤلفين في إخبار النساء اللاتي تعرضن للقمع وقمن بالمقاومة في روايتين. يختلف نوع focalizer والراوي في كلا النصين في "A Thousand Splendid Suns" هو البؤري الخارجي والراوي المغاير، وفي الوقت نفسه في "وجهي المحظور" هو بؤري داخلي وراوي متماثل.

الخلاصة: توصلت هذه الدراسة إلى أن قوة الكلمات والعبارات والجمال التي استخدمها المؤلفان قادرة على إظهار هيمنة الذكور واضطهاد الشخصيات النسائية في النصين. يتم استيعاب النساء في الثقافة الأبوية المحلية الأفغانية. لم يتمكنوا من الحصول على حريتهم لتقرير حياتهم.

الكلمات الدالة: المرأة الأفغانية، أصوات أنثوية، تنسيق، القمع الأبوي، مقاومة المرأة، تفسير النصوص الإسلامية.

## 1. Introduction

Repression of women in Afghanistan has frequently become the main headlines of international media. There is a large number of obscure facts regarding the Afghan women, who face repression brought about by numerous factors, from inter-ethnic conflicts, patriarchal culture, one-sided interpretation of the Hadist and the Qur'an, to the supremacy of the Taliban regime in the country. Research on the repression of Afghan women, who experience massive violence and brutality in their lives, often sets off discrimination and intimidation in various sectors (Emadi, 2002; Povey, 2003, 2007; Agustina, 2015, 2016).

As Emadi asserts in his research, "Women are also murdered by their fathers or husbands, often with the support of the community for reasons such as infidelity, whether proven or only suspected" (2002: 35). This assertion demonstrates the weak position of Afghan women, who are merely regarded as second-class citizens in their society, eventually causing them to receive vicious treatment beyond the limit of humanity. Previous studies discussing the repressive experience of Afghan women are intriguing to carry on, particularly by analyzing the narrative strategies employed by two different authors to reveal various gender inequalities, violence, and atrocities. This is especially significant considering that prior studies have not extensively analyzed the issue from the perspective of narrative strategies, which encompass the use of focalization, focalizator analysis, examination of narrators, and perspectives of Islamic and postcolonial feminists. In the two selected texts that serve as the primary data of this study, i.e. *A Thousand Splendid Sun* (ATSS) and *My Forbidden Face* (MFF), issues of repression and violence faced by Afghan women are dismantled through the female characters.

The primary research problem of this study revolves around the utilization of narrative strategies, particularly concepts derived from Gerard Genette, such as focalization, focalizator, and narrator. These strategies aim to provide a detailed portrayal of the various forms of repression and violence against women. This research holds significance as an attempt to understand the experiences of Afghan women from 1978 to 2003, contextualized within the framework of class and gender constructions influenced by the local culture of patriarchy.

Based on the descriptions of repression, violence, and atrocities endured by Afghan women, this research addresses two primary questions: How do the two authors employ narrative strategies to articulate the repression experienced by female characters in the texts? And how do these female characters resist within the cultural and religious contexts? These two questions become the foreground of this research. The study also aims to reveal how power, domination, and gender inequality are practiced, reproduced, or opposed by the texts.

## 2. Focalization Analysis of Repression in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *My Forbidden Face*

Narrative strategies reveal the repression and violence experienced by the female characters in ATSS and MFF. Given that both research corpora take the form of a fiction novel and a journal, narrative analysis is considered suitable for uncovering the authors' strategies. Narrative studies often employ chronological approaches, gradually unfolding events in the story plot (Septian, 2007: 82). Narrative research involves collecting and analyzing stories from people, and in this study, the aim is to extract these narratives from the texts.

Gerard Genette (1980) sought to understand the circumstances of Afghan women during 1978-2003 as a result of class and gender constructions influenced by patriarchal culture. Focalization analysis reveals the point of view from which a narrator tells a story. In ATSS, the pervasive atmosphere of repression is frequently conveyed through the focalization of the female characters. Mariam and Laila, the two female protagonists, consistently endure violence and repression from their husband, Rasheed. The focalization effectively portrays the violence and illustrates its impact, instilling Mariam with profound fear and terror. Various sounds, such as keys clattering, doors squeaking, footsteps accompanied by the click of heels, chairs dragging, and the clinking of spoons and plates, depict Rasheed's dominance over Mariam (Hosseini, 2007: 90). Rasheed's treatment of Mariam mirrors discrimination and intimidation. The excerpt above illustrates Mariam's extreme fear triggered by sounds associated with Rasheed's presence. Afghanistan's patriarchal culture prioritizes men's roles over women's and significantly intimidates the two female characters in the text.

Focalizator refers to someone who directs the orientation of the point of view within narrative texts, or in other words, acts as the subject of focalization, viewing events or characters inside the story (Luxemburg et al., 1991: 125). The external focalizator skillfully and carefully portrays the patriarchal local culture of Afghanistan by consistently positioning women as guilty and worthy of blame. Since violence is the primary issue under examination in this study, the presence of the focalizator can be inferred from the text by examining the narrator's perspective in ATSS. The external focalizator keenly observes and conveys these observations to the readers, particularly by elaborating on the acts of violence endured by Mariam, rendering her unable to stand up. She is so overwhelmed by fear that her hands shake uncontrollably. Through Mariam, Afghan women are depicted as powerless against their husbands' dominance. Mariam experiences both physical and verbal repression, leaving her hopeless and constantly fearful. Her suffering is described as enduring violence from her husband every day.

In addition to Mariam's character, Laila represents another female character subjected to similar acts of violence. The narrator portrays instances of violence including whiplashes, belt beatings, and being violently pushed against walls repeatedly, resulting in multiple injuries (Hosseini, 2007: 308-309). This quote illustrates that Laila also faces violence and oppression from Rasheed. As a second wife, Laila, being younger, also endures torture when her husband faces problems, especially during Afghanistan's challenging times due to the war with the Soviet Union and internal tribal conflicts.

In the second novel, *My Forbidden Face* (MFF), internal focalization is employed, where the viewpoint occurs within the narrative and one of the characters becomes the viewer. Specifically, the internal focalization takes a fixed form, meaning the entire storytelling is viewed from the perspective of one character: Latifa. The internal focalizator of MFF is quite successful in presenting a perspective that shapes the readers' thinking, particularly by providing indications of impending violence. Thus, the direction of the readers' opinions aligns with the focalization from the beginning of the story. This is evident in the betrayal of reality in Afghanistan following the rise of the Taliban regime. As a woman, Latifa struggles to accept the reality that her life will no longer be normal (Latifa, 2001: 5). Her inability to continue her studies at the university level, a long-held dream, becomes her nightmare and leads to depression.

Meanwhile, in ATSS, the narrator is not a character in the story. Instead, the unnamed narrator exists outside of the story but her presence is keenly felt as the storyteller. This is known as the heterodiegetic narrator. The mention of Mariam's name or the use of third-person perspective in the textual quotes indicates the heterodiegetic nature of the narrator. This is a strength of ATSS in portraying the acts of violence perpetrated by male characters against females. The third-person omniscient narrator can express the thoughts of the characters from an external viewpoint. The narrator in ATSS is distinct in that it is not confined by time and place.

The narrative strategy that is particularly effective in the ATSS text is the use of words, phrases, and sentences that convey the repression experienced by female characters. Some of these words include: rattling, creaking, listening, click-clack, dragging, plaintive squeaking, clinking, fluttering, and slurping (Hosseini, 2007: 90). The various sounds presented by the omniscient narrators create a tense atmosphere that draws the reader into experiencing Mariam's fear.

On the other hand, the type of narrator in MFF is homodiegetic, meaning the narrator appears as a character within the story. Specifically, this text utilizes a homodiegetic narrator who serves as the central character and recounts the story from her own perspective, as well as the perspectives of other characters. This type of narrator typically tells the story from their own point of view. This is possible because, as a homodiegetic narrator, she is limited in her ability to describe other aspects freely, especially considering that MFF is presented as a diary, which focuses more on her own life and experiences.

The narrator plays a crucial role in expressing ideas of repression and resistance through the words, phrases, and sentences that reference the dominant themes in the texts. In the novel, the narrator's portrayal of repression and resistance is evident in her depiction of the experiences of Mariam and Laila. The repression described by the narrator includes verbal abuse by Rasheed and instances of physical and verbal violence. The resistance displayed by the two female characters is depicted by the narrator through their collaboration against Rasheed.

In MFF, the narrator, who is also the internal focalizer, adopts the "I" storytelling mode and incorporates a third person to convey the ideas of various individuals outside the main character. This narrative shift demonstrates the flexibility of this storytelling strategy in depicting the routines of female characters, which undergo significant transformation, from engaging in activities outside their homes to being confined largely to domestic spaces such as the kitchen window and the apartment door. The narrator portrays repression by illustrating the internal pressure that Latifa begins to experience. The violence perpetrated by the Taliban against Afghan women instills fear and tension in Latifa whenever she ventures outside the house. According to Freud, Latifa's fear can be interpreted as reality anxiety (Bertens, 2006). Furthermore, Freud describes Latifa's situation as catharsis, reflecting her fear of being unable to pursue her dream of studying journalism after completing high school (Hall, 1978).

Quotations that depict the oppression experienced by the narrator and the main character, Latifa, in the text *My Forbidden Face*, are conveyed through words, phrases, and sentences. For instance, Latifa uses the word "imprisoned," the phrase "no more lives," and the sentences "they prevent them from working, from going to school" (Latifa, 2001: 5). These expressions represent Latifa and other Afghan women being oppressed by the Taliban. The violence inflicted by the Taliban against Afghan women has left enduring wounds that continue to affect them today. The Taliban regime imposed restrictions preventing Afghan women from participating in public activities, depriving them of opportunities to pursue education, employment, and public engagement (Agustina, 2018).

In ATSS, the focalization and the narrator provide depictions of the characters' points of view. Various types of violence and atrocities, both physical and psychological, are experienced by the female characters, revealing hegemony and domination. One aspect that contributes to the repression of Afghan women is the construction of patriarchal culture, which legitimizes violence against women. Afghan women's lives are heavily influenced by patriarchal values, confining their work to household chores and child-rearing, and forbidding them from participating in the public sphere.

The manifestation of patriarchal culture's construction is evident in ATSS, particularly through Mariam, who lacks the right to determine her freedom and independence. Laila observes her mother prioritizing her elder brother over herself, demonstrating the patriarchal culture within the family. In MFF, Latifa witnesses the patriarchal culture's connection to the Taliban regime, where women's rights are violated. Both authors of ATSS and MFF criticize patriarchal culture, considering it a tool that restricts women's thoughts and actions.

In Islam, as postulated by Mernissi (1991), the spatial design created by the Prophet in the early days of Islam established a democratic climate for men and women. Mernissi also asserts that this spatial design conditioned women to be active in public areas. The space created by the Prophet, his wives, and closest friends fostered unity. The simplicity of their settlement, along with their proximity to each other and to the mosque, provided a democratic dimension to the Muslim community. During that time, the mosque served as the center for political and religious activities, where women's voices and aspirations were accommodated and became part of public opinion.

The next analysis pertains to the interpretation of the Hadith and the Qur'an. The repression depicted in these two novels contradicts the spirit of reform in Islam. Islamic history demonstrates how the Prophet initiated radical changes in the Arab world, particularly concerning women's position and role (Musdah in Hasyim, 2010: 19). Therefore, the efforts of both authors in exposing the challenges faced by oppressed and violated Afghan women can be interpreted as their expressions of concern for women's rights.

### 3. Female Voices

ATSS and MFF depict the voices of women subjected to verbal and non-verbal violence from male characters, including fathers and husbands. Both authors strive to highlight the various injustices, repression, and atrocities experienced by Afghan women. This concern resonates with Islamic feminists like Asma Barlas (2002) and Fatima Mernissi (1996), as well as postcolonial feminists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991) and Gayatri Spivak (1993). Both strands of feminism advocate for awareness and efforts to dismantle the local culture in Afghanistan, reinterpretation of the Hadith, examination of social class and ethnic relations, and the Taliban's implementation of

Sharia Law. Islamic feminism and postcolonial feminism collaborate in the struggle for gender equality.

The focalization in *ATSS* strongly reflects the author's advocacy for Afghan women's rights to education and university studies. These voices demanding equality align with the values and perspectives championed by postcolonial feminism, which seeks to redefine equality for "third world" women. The severe limitations on Afghan women's participation in the public sphere and the barriers to pursuing education are manifestations of inequality. This also corresponds to the focus of Islamic feminists' advocacy for gender equality (Bororoh in Wiyatmi, 2002: 201). Unequal power dynamics between men and women, dogmatic interpretations of religious texts, and male dominance driven by ego contribute to the vulnerability of Afghan women to violence.

In *ATSS*, both female and male characters attempt to voice resistance against various forms of oppression. They struggle to break free from the confines of patriarchal Afghan culture, the stigma of women as second-class citizens, the constraints of early marriage, and degrading class relations. However, the narrator often portrays Mariam's doubts and self-blame for her inability to bear a child in her marriage, reinforcing a bias against resistance efforts. The tendency to perceive herself as guilty reinforces gender constructions that are detrimental to women.

In addition to female characters echoing resistance, the male character Babi, as Laila's father, is presented as voicing resistance to the injustices faced by Afghan women. The author conveys a strong message of equality through Babi's character, evident in several sentences in the text: "Marriage can wait, education cannot"; "Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, maybe even more"; and "Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated" (Hosseini, 2007: 103). These sentences represent the author's efforts to depict resistance within the narrative.

Resistance against the practice of early marriage in Afghanistan is also depicted in *ATSS*. However, the focalization of early marriage is biased. The narrator portrays the stories of two early marriages experienced by Mariam and Rasheed. Furthermore, Rasheed marries Laila when she is only fourteen years old. The male dominance reflected in Rasheed's treatment of his wives illustrates a power imbalance. The binary opposition between male and female characters reveals the entrenched patriarchal culture, where males are considered superior to females. In this context, the efforts of postcolonial feminists to challenge this binary opposition align with the goals of Islamic feminists striving for equal relationships between men and women.

In *MFF*, the male arrogance depicted through the restrictions and rules imposed by the Taliban regime highlights the powerlessness of women against patriarchal culture. This contradicts the message of Islam, which promotes equal space and opportunity for both men and women. Thus, Latifa's efforts as a writer to expose the injustices leading to massive and brutal violence against Afghan women align with the goals of Islamic feminists. This represents a form of resistance against the interpretation of the Hadith through the application of Taliban decrees. However, the internal focalizer's reflection of the narrative strategy also presents ambiguity when Mariam does not question the presence of a mahram in Afghan women's lives. The narrator highlights Latifa's inconsistency in voicing resistance to the Taliban's restrictions, suggesting that she is still influenced by patriarchal Afghan culture. Consequently, the intensity of the resistance she attempts to convey diminishes. The narrative strategy, from both the narrative and focalizer perspectives, further describes the restrictions experienced by female characters.

Emadi (2002: 35) portrays the repression and domination often observed in Afghanistan, whether perpetrated by fathers or husbands. The reality depicted by Emadi serves as justification within the narratives of the two authors, negatively impacting Afghan women. Therefore, Islamic feminist Asma Barlas (2002) emphasizes the importance of reinterpreting sacred texts to explore various Islamic repertoires that are supportive of women.

This viewpoint aligns with perspectives proposed by Islamic feminists Nawal and Hibah (2002), who view unjust cultural practices as imprisoning and trapping women. For instance, in *ATSS*, the Afghan local culture does not afford Mariam the opportunity to pursue education (Hosseini, 2007: 17). Patriarchal constraints deprive Afghan women of equal rights in education, making them victims of violence perpetuated by local culture and interpretations of sacred texts divergent from Islamic practices during the Prophet's era. This victimization stems from society's perception of the

female body as a public tool for imposing behavioral norms on women (Baso in Sugihastuti, 2005: 8).

Gender equality emerges as a crucial theme addressed by both authors, Hosseini and Latifa. Several scenes illustrate their efforts to depict gender equality in the thoughts, attitudes, and ideas of the characters. For instance, in *ATSS*, Laila's father, Babi, supports her pursuit of higher education (Hosseini, 2007: 103) and advocates for women's freedom to reject early marriage (Hosseini, 2007: 44). Similarly, in *MFF*, Latifa consistently shares knowledge with both girls and boys in the underground school she establishes with her friends (Latifa, 2001: 165-170). Additionally, characters like Dr. Sima and Latifa's mother open an underground medical practice to aid Afghan women who suffer from severe injuries due to the violent abuse inflicted by the Taliban regime (Latifa, 2001: 94-95). These acts in *ATSS* and *MFF*, related to the expression of gender equality, significantly influence the portrayal of opposition to unequal gender relations and resistance against gender inequality, patriarchal repression, and the misinterpretation of Islamic texts.

In *ATSS*, the author portrays Laila enduring physical torture whenever her husband discovers she has welcomed a male guest (Hosseini, 2007: 307-308). Rasheed assumes Laila has been disobedient and therefore deserves punishment, reflecting patriarchal ideology. The acts of violence committed by Rasheed are exacerbated by a one-sided interpretation of religion, leading him to believe Laila's actions constitute *nusyuz* (disobedience to her husband), justifying punishment. Despite fulfilling her obligations to her husband, Laila still faces punishment.

According to Nurmila (2011: 26-27), the patriarchal cultural influence, which is misogynistic, has firmly entrenched itself in the minds of Arab Muslims since the time following the Prophet's passing. Both authors, through their texts, attempt to resist the construction of patriarchal culture, inter-class relations, ethnic dynamics, and varying interpretations of traditions to promote gender equality. However, the stance of Hosseini and Latifa in advocating for gender equality contains ambiguous elements. While they endeavor to resist through focalization, their texts are also intertwined with the local patriarchal Afghan construction.

Moreover, there are instances where both authors display ambivalence in their resistance. Hosseini depicts Mariam as accepting the patriarchal belief that a husband's restrictive rules are sacred and should not be contested. Similarly, Latifa does not perceive the presence of a *mahram* in Afghan women's lives as a significant issue. For her, freedom and independent thinking take precedence. She does not challenge the dominant culture and traditions, as long as she has the opportunity to pursue education and realize herself in the public sphere as a modern woman.

#### **4. Afghanistan: A Space of Repression and Violence**

The depiction of space in both *ATSS* and *MFF* is strongly intertwined with the violence experienced by the female characters. Focalization of this space is believed to enhance the understanding of violence in both texts. Therefore, careful observation of space by the external focalizer in *ATSS* is warranted. Spatial focalization is closely linked to inter-ethnic conflict and violence, shaping the discussion of space by the focalizer (Hosseini, 2007: 159).

The focalization heavily portraying Afghanistan as a country associated with violence, lacking comfort for its citizens, is evident in *ATSS*. Kabul is depicted as rife with murders and large-scale street demonstrations resulting from the Soviet Union's invasion and conflict between the official government and the communist party, leading to numerous bloody tragedies (Hosseini, 2007: 88).

Similarly, the space depicted in *MFF* mirrors that of *ATSS*: a space filled with violence, atrocities, and repression. The focalization of the Ariana field as the setting of a massacre reflects a location frequently witnessing brutalities committed by the Taliban. The focalizer portrays the Ariana field as the site of execution and hanging of the fourth and last president of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, Najibullah, and his relatives (Latifa, 2001: 10). The focalization associating space with violence is further illustrated by mentioning the prison Pol-i-Sharkhi. The narrator extensively provides information about the prison, emphasizing the massive scale of crimes against humanity in Afghanistan (Latifa, 2001: 141).

The object of focalization, revealing destruction and uncertainty, is depicted through the perspective of the internal focalizer in *MFF*. During this time, the number of beggars increases, and job opportunities for women are so scarce that

they resort to home industries, such as baking cakes, creating embroidery, and making tasbih (prayer beads) to survive. Women who previously worked in schools or offices are compelled to change professions, such as washing clothes for others. This focalization vividly portrays the further decline in the existence of women (Latifa, 2001: 95-96).

Another focalization depicts Afghan women frequently becoming victims of violence perpetrated by the Taliban, whether or not they wear burqas. The implementation of fashion rules appears arbitrary, such as the prohibition against women wearing white shoes because the color is similar to that of the Taliban flag (Latifa, 2001: 66-68).

Both texts, whether focalized by an external or internal focalizer, similarly portray space reflecting violence and repression, reinforcing the image of Afghanistan as a country engulfed in tragedy and violence, with little hope for improvement.

## **5. Conclusion**

The various forms of repression are evident through the focalization, focalizer, and narrator in the texts. Afghan women endure suffering in the name of religion and the local culture of Afghanistan, closely intertwined with Patriarchal values. Hosseini and Latifa focus critically on opposing numerous acts of violence experienced by Afghan women.

The authors depict repression and resistance through the use of words, phrases, and sentences. Female characters in both texts accurately reflect the repression, violence, and cruelty they face. Through carefully chosen language, it becomes evident that women are the true victims of male dominance.

The external focalizer in ATSS vocalizes the focalization of resistance. However, some focalizations are ambiguous and have the potential to reinforce gender constructions that disadvantage women. For instance, when Mariam blames herself for her inability to conceive, it reinforces the societal expectation that a woman's worth is tied to her ability to bear children, perpetuating gender inequality. Additionally, the early marriages of Laila and Rasheed highlight a conflict criticized or rejected by Islamic feminists, yet depicted among the characters in the text.

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