

This is an absorbing read, skillfully crafted by an accomplished author. Along the way, one gains valuable insight into Afghanistan's modern history and culture.

### **About the Author**

Khaled Hosseini, now a California resident, is an Afghani who serves as a US envoy to UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency.

### **The Title**

The book's title comes from a poem written about Kabul by seventeenth century poet, Saib-e-Tabrizi, speaking of the glory of this city:

One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs,  
Or the thousand splendid suns that hide behind her walls. (172, 347)

### **The Longing for Life in Kabul**

As the title indicates the book centres on life in Kabul, especially as seen through the eyes of two Afghani women, Mariam and Laila, whose lives are thrown together through tragedy. Eventually, Laila is able to escape from Afghanistan with her childhood lover, Tariq. For a time they live in Murree, Pakistan, a place where I have stayed myself on a number of occasions. For Laila and Tariq life in Murree is characterized by comfort and tranquility. But now her heart aches to return to Kabul:

A year ago, she would have gladly given an arm to get out of Kabul. But in the last few months, she has found herself missing the city of her childhood. She misses the bustle of Shor Bazaar, the Gardens of Babur, the call of the water carriers lugging their goatskin bags. She misses the garment hagglers at Chicken Street and the melon hawkers in Karteh-Parwan.

But it isn't mere homesickness or nostalgia that has Laila thinking of Kabul so much these days. She has become plagued by restlessness. She hears of schools built in Kabul, roads repaved, women returning to work, and her life here, pleasant as it is, grateful as she is for it, seems... Insufficient to her. Inconsequential. Worse yet, wasteful. Of late, she has started hearing Babi's [her deceased father's] voice in her head. *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.* (344-5)

Laila grew up in an educated family in which she was encouraged to strive for academic excellence, which she achieved at school. The book ends with Laila involved in an orphanage school in Kabul, loved by the kids, an honoured teacher.

### **The Political Background**

In his *Afterword* Hosseini speaks of the three decade long Afghan refugee crisis. During this period of war, hunger, anarchy and oppression, millions of Afghans have been forced to abandon their homes and flee Afghanistan to seek new lives in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. Hosseini notes that at one time around eight million Afghans were living abroad as refugees, with currently over two million still in Pakistan.

Mariam, the other central character in the book, was born in 1959, the twenty-sixth year of King Zahir Shah's "mostly uneventful forty-year reign" (11), when the king's cousin, Daoud Khan was Prime Minister. When Mariam was fourteen, in 1973, she is told by her father, Jalil, that King Zahir Shah was overthrown in a bloodless coup by

Daoud Khan with, it is rumoured, the help of the socialists.<sup>1</sup> Afghanistan then ceased to be a monarchy and became a republic, with Daoud Khan as President. This is a time when Jalil is free to enjoy life as a wealthy businessman.

Though not mentioned in the novel it is worth noting Daoud Khan's heavy reliance on modern weaponry from the Soviet Union. As the novel progresses, Hosseini notes how the Kremlin was offended when the President sent another group of Soviet consultants back to Moscow. Blame for the murder of a prominent communist named Mir Akbar Khyber is laid at the door of the President by communist supporters and the PDPA, the Afghan communist party, seeks to stir up demonstrations.

On April 27, 1978 a communist coup overthrew Daoud Khan. Hosseini describes how Air Force Colonel Abdul Qader made a radio broadcast, reporting that Kabul was now in the hands of the people and that Afghanistan was now to be known as the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. The aftermath was appalling:

Days later, when the communists began the summary executions of those connected with Daoud Khan's regime, when rumors began floating about Kabul of eyes gouged and genitals electrocuted in the Pol-e-Charkhi Prison, Mariam would hear of the slaughter that had taken place at the Presidential Palace. Daoud Khan *had* been killed, but not before the communist rebels had killed some twenty members of his family, including women and grandchildren. There would be rumors that he had taken his own life, that he'd been gunned down in the heat of battle; rumors that he'd been saved for last, made to watch the massacre of his family, then shot. (91-92)

The standard propaganda is mouthed by Abdul Qader:

The era of aristocracy, nepotism, and inequality is over, fellow hamwatans. We have ended decades of tyranny. Power is now in the hands of the masses and freedom-loving people. A glorious new era in the history of our country is afoot. A new Afghanistan is born. We assure you that you have nothing to fear, fellow Afghans. The new regime will maintain the utmost respect for principles, both Islamic and democratic. This is a time of rejoicing and celebration. (92)

It is on the night of the April communist coup that Laila is born. Her father (Babi), a highly educated man, can "speak at length about the struggle between Britain and czarist Russia over Afghanistan" (99). In 1980 both of Laila's brothers, Ahmad and Noor, left home to join the *jihad* against the Soviets.

One result of the communist takeover is illustrated at the school which nine-year-old Laila attends. Her teacher, Khala Rangmaal, does not wear makeup or jewelry, does not cover and forbids any of her female students to do so. She declares that women and men are equal in every way and "there was no reason women should cover if men didn't" (101). She too is a mouthpiece of Soviet propaganda, teaching that the Soviet Union was the best nation in the world, along with Afghanistan. It was kind to its workers, and its people were equal. Everyone in the Soviet Union was happy and friendly, unlike America, where crime made people afraid to leave their homes. And everyone in Afghanistan would be happy too, she said, once the antiprogressives, the backward bandits, were defeated.

She encourages the children to put their country first and inform even on relatives if they know anything about the rebels "who want our country to be a backward, primitive nation" (101). Khala Rangmaal is angry if anyone refers to the communist

takeover as a *coup*, insisting it was rather an *inqilab*, a revolution, an uprising of the working people against inequality. She also refused to accept any idea of a jihad:

According to her, there wasn't even a war out there in the provinces, just skirmishes against troublemakers stirred by people she called foreign provocateurs. And certainly no one, *no one*, dared repeat in her presence the rising rumors that, after eight years of fighting, the Soviets were losing this war. Particularly now that the American president, Reagan, had started shipping the Mujahideen Stinger Missiles to down the Soviet helicopters, now that Muslims from all over the world were joining the cause: Egyptians, Pakistanis, even wealthy Saudis, who left their millions behind and came to Afghanistan to fight the jihad. (102)

The book also incorporates tensions between the minority Tajiks, to which Laila's family belong, and the largest ethnic group, the Pashtuns. Tajiks feel slighted, Laila is taught by her father, because the Pashtun kings ruled Afghanistan for around 250 years, while Tajiks only controlled it for nine months in 1929. However, the rivalry in Afghanistan is not merely between Tajiks and Pashtuns but extends to other main groupings as well, to the Hazaras and the Uzbeks.

In 1989, when Laila is but ten-years-old the last Soviet convoys exit Kabul. The president installed during communist rule, Najibullah, had once been head of the dreaded KHAD, the Afghan secret police. Now, with the Soviet departure, it was still rumoured that the Soviets would continue to send him weapons.

By 1992 the Soviet Union was crumbling fast. Now Najibullah was trying to portray himself as a devout Muslim. Babi comments,

Too little and far too late. You can't be chief of KHAD one day and the next day pray in a mosque with people whose relatives you tortured and killed.

Najibullah was in a desperate condition because the Mujahideen refused his attempts to reach a settlement with them. Najibullah is forced to surrender and receives sanctuary in the UN compound. The Mujahideen now come to Kabul - Dostum, the Uzbek commander, leader of the Junbish-i-Milli faction; Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the Pashtun leader of the Hezb-e-Islami faction; Rabbani, Tajik leader of the Jamiat-e-Islami faction; Sayyaf, the Pashtun leader of the Ittehad-i-Islami faction; Abdul Ali Mazari, Hazara leader of the Hizb-e-Wahdat faction; and Tajik commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, the so-called "Lion of Panjshir", Laila's mother's hero.

Afghanistan was now renamed the Islamic State of Afghanistan. For two months oversight was provided by the Islamic Jihad Council, led by Sibghatullah Mojadidi, followed by four months of oversight under a leadership council led by Rabbani. The plan was to form a *loya jirga*, a grand council of leaders and elders, to form an interim government which would hold power for two years, followed by democratic elections. However, things went very wrong very quickly. When the leadership council elected Rabbani its president there were cries of nepotism from the other factions. The excluded Hekmatyar and the Hazaras were furious. Rockets begin to rain down on Kabul as these factions now fight against each other. Kabul is now divided into sectors, each belonging to a different warlord. The forces of Sayyaf were fighting with those of the Hazaras, while Hekmatyar was launching his rockets at Massoud. It is in this context that Laila's own family is destroyed when a rocket hits the home.

As the in-fighting continues Sayyaf and Massoud become allies against Hekmatyar and the Hazaras, with Dostum providing temporary support for Massoud, though later he too joined Hekmatyar. Meanwhile:

In Kabul, particularly in western Kabul, fires raged, and black palls of smoke mushroomed over snow-clad buildings. Embassies closed down. Schools collapsed. In hospital waiting rooms... the wounded were bleeding to death. In operating rooms, limbs were being amputated without anesthesia. (207)

Near the close of the book Tariq informs Laila that Massoud has been assassinated by a pair of journalists claiming they were Belgians originally from Morocco. Then, while living in Murree, Pakistan, they see the destruction of the Twin Towers, hear of the refusal of the Taliban to give up bin Laden because he is their guest. By July 2002, the coalition forces have driven the Taliban out of every major city and Hamid Karzai is installed as president.

### Education for Women

This novel, through Laila, stresses the importance for the future of Afghanistan of its women being educated. So Laila's father tells her that "a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated" (103). Her father was a model teacher who, unlike other teachers, did not beat children with rulers. Rather, the kids respected him because he respected *them*.

The novel also highlights the enormous hurdles against the education of women that exist in Afghan culture and society. Knowing his wife's intolerance for the communists, Laila's father lowers his voice in admitting that under communist rule women were more free and had more rights than they'd ever had before. He also has to concede that outside Kabul, in the tribal areas, especially the Pashtun regions in the south or in the east near the Pakistan border, one of the main reasons Afghans were fighting against the Soviets was precisely to take away freedom from women. Here is where the repression of Islam and tribal culture surfaces, for Babi explains that in those Pashtun areas "women were rarely seen on the streets and only then in burqa and accompanied by men". There men lived by ancient tribal laws and were horrified by communist abolition of forced marriage, the attempt to raise the minimum marriage age to sixteen for girls, to require girls to attend school and have the freedom to work alongside men. Kabul, by contrast, "had always been relatively liberal and progressive.... women taught at the university, ran schools, held office in the government" (121). Rasheed insists that "the *real* Afghanistan" is that found outside Laila's "precious little shell in Kabul" (249). It seems hard to disagree and it is difficult to escape the sense that Laila's experience of relative freedom as a child living in Kabul is the exception that proves the rule.

For Mariam, an *harami*, the illegitimate child resulting from Jalil's sexual liaison with his maid, is deprived of all educational opportunity. The only education she receives is tutorship in the Koran by kindly Mullah Faizullah. He would visit Mariam once or twice a week to teach Mariam to read, the five daily *namaz* prayers, and the recitation of the Koran.

On one occasion Mariam tells Mullah Faizullah that she would like to go to school, like Jalil's other daughters who were attending the Mehri School for girls in Herat. When the Mullah suggests Mariam be allowed to go to school her mother, Nana, asks, "What for?"

The Mullah replies, "If the girl wants to learn, let her, my dear. Let the girl have an education."

"Learn? Learn what, Mullah sahib?" Nana said sharply. "What is there to learn?" She snapped her eyes toward Mariam.

Mariam looked down at her hands.

"What's the sense of schooling a girl like you? It's like shining a spittoon. And you'll learn nothing of value in those schools. There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don't teach it in school. Look at me."

"You should not speak like this to her, my child," Mullah Faizullah said.

"Look at me."

Mariam did.

"Only one skill. And it's this: *tahamul*. Endure."

"Endure what, Nana?" (17)

### Oppression of Women

Much of the book is taken up with the abominable treatment dished out by Rasheed to his two wives, Mariam and Laila. Rasheed represents the worst features of Afghan male-dominated society. Mariam, when only aged fifteen, is forced to marry this cruel man in his late 40's. Many years later, when Rasheed is at least 60, he manipulates Laila's tragic loss of her family to force her to marry him while she is but a fourteen-year-old girl. He now sees Laila as the key to producing a son for him and stages an elaborate con to persuade her that her childhood lover, Tariq, is dead.

Although Jalil is responsible for Mariam's birth her presence brings shame and dishonour to him. When she unexpectedly comes to visit him in Herat, because he fails to honour a promise he made to her, his honour will not allow him to admit her into his home. It is also for the sake of his honour that he arranges for his fifteen-year-old daughter to be married to Rasheed, a vicious misogynist nearing his 50s. Jalil effects this, knowing that this will mean Mariam will be removed to Kabul, over 600 kilometres away, where she can no longer threaten his honour.

The marriage ceremony itself is a despicable act of manipulation on the part of Jalil, taking advantage of a vulnerable child just after her mother had hanged herself at the thought of losing Mariam. As they travel towards Kabul Rasheed will soon make it clear he has not an ounce of compassion for Mariam's grief and misery, taking expressions of this to be a personal insult. The only thing that initially tempers his behaviour towards her is the prospect that she might bear him a son to replace his son from a previous marriage, who drowned while Rasheed was in a drunken stupor. However, when Mariam proves incapable of bearing children, let alone a son, Rasheed's treatment of her descends into a constant pattern of verbal and physical abuse. Hosseini paints the picture powerfully:

Rasheed had grown more remote and resentful. Now nothing she did pleased him. She cleaned the house, made sure he always had a supply of clean shirts, cooked him his favorite dishes. Once, disastrously, she even bought makeup and put it on for him. But when he came home, he took one look at her and winced with such distaste that she rushed to the bathroom and washed it all off, tears of shame mixing with soapy water, rouge, and mascara.

Now Mariam dreaded the sound of him coming home in the evening. The key rattling, the creak of the door - these were sounds that set her heart racing. From her bed, she listened to the *click-clack* of his heels, to the muffled shuffling of his feet after he'd shed his shoes. With her ears, she took inventory of his doings: chair legs dragged across the floor, the plaintive squeak of the cane seat when he sat, the clinking of spoon against plate, the flutter of newspaper pages flipped, the slurping of water. And

as her heart pounded, her mind wondered what excuse he would use that night to pounce on her. There was always something, some minor thing that would infuriate him, because no matter what she did to please him, no matter how thoroughly she submitted to his wants and demands, it wasn't enough. She could not give him his son back. In this most essential way, she had failed him - seven times she had failed him - and now she was nothing but a burden to him. She could see it in the way he looked at her, *when* he looked at her. She was a burden to him. (90)

Early in the marriage he forces her to wear the burqa, which takes away her peripheral vision and is initially suffocating. Mariam's reason for finding the burqa comforting to wear is actually very disturbing: "She no longer worried that people knew, with a single glance, all the shameful secrets of her past" (66).

Rasheed makes it clear why Mariam has no choice but to wear burqa:

I have customers, Mariam, men, who bring their wives to my shop. The women come uncovered, they talk to me directly, look me in the eye without shame. They wear makeup and skirts that show their knees. Sometimes they even put their feet in front of me, the women do, for measurements, and their husbands stand there and watch. They allow it. They think nothing of a stranger touching their wives' bare feet! They think they're being modern men, intellectuals, on account of their education, I suppose. They don't see that they're spoiling their own *nang* and *namoos*, their honor and pride. (63)

He continues, shaking his head:

Mostly, they live in the richer parts of Kabul. I'll take you there. You'll see. But they're here too, Mariam, in this very neighbourhood, these soft men. There's a teacher living down the street, Hakim is his name [Laila's father, Babi], and I see his wife Fariba all the time walking the streets alone with nothing on her head but a scarf. It embarrasses me, frankly, to see a man who's lost control of his wife. (63)

Fixing Mariam with a hard glare he says:

But I'm a different breed of man, Mariam. 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. Do you understand? (63)

A key aspect of much of Islamic patriarchal culture is exposed in the behaviour of Jalil and Rasheed. Whatever rationalizations might be used regarding the need to protect the honour of women, the core issue is that of male honour, expressed through male domination. So we read: "This man's will felt to Mariam as imposing and immovable as the Safid-koh mountains looming over Gul Daman" (64).

During Eid-ul-Fitr male visitors come to Rasheed's home and Mariam knows she must seclude herself in her room until the visitors have left. At this early stage in the marriage she misinterprets this as meaning that Rasheed "saw sanctity in what they had together." We read:

Her honor, her *namoos*, was something worth guarding to him. She felt prized by his protectiveness. Treasured and significant. (74)

All too soon she realizes that her only value to him consists in whether she can bear him a son or not. Rasheed is only interested in guarding Mariam's honour to the extent it impacts on his own honour. This is made all the more apparent when he uses this same specious rationalization, of guarding Laila's honour, to force her to live in *purdah* (200).

Laila too is only valued insofar as she might produce a son for Rasheed. When her first child, actually Tariq's, turns out to be a girl, Rasheed shows contempt for "the baby" or "that thing". Initially, Mariam resents Laila as a rival, but they soon become friends as the common victims of Rasheed's cruelty.

Under Taliban rule when the time comes for Laila to have her second child, she is not admitted to the main hospitals which are for men only. She is forced to go to Rabia Balkhi, a hospital for women only, where she is told, they "had no clean water... no oxygen, no medications, no electricity" (255). Laila gives birth by caesarean without any anesthetic. There is also, the doctor reports, "no X-ray..., no suction, no oxygen, not even simple antibiotics. When NGOs offer money, the Taliban turn them away. Or they funnel the money to the places that cater to men" (258).

When Rasheed is about to kill Laila in a fit of rage, Mariam, defending Laila, kills Rasheed. Mariam persuades Laila to escape to Pakistan and stays behind to accept the inevitable punishment that will be meted out to her. As she faces the end of her life she remembers words her mother had told her:

Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam. (323)

Mariam's trial lasts less than fifteen minutes since she declined her right to witnesses and admits she killed her husband. "There was no legal council, no public hearing, no cross-examining of evidence, no appeals" (323). One of her Taliban judges comments, God has made us differently, you women and us men. Our brains are different. You are not able to think like we can. Western doctors and their science have proven this. This is why we require only one male witness but two female ones. (324)

Another of her judges claims he is not afraid to die, but farcically adds:

What frightens me, *hamshira*, is the day God summons me before Him and asks, *Why did you not do as I said, Mullah? Why did you not obey my laws?...* The clearer I see my end, *hamshira*, the nearer I am to my day of reckoning, the more determined I grow to carry out His word. However painful it may prove...  
I am tired and dying, and I want to be merciful. I want to forgive you. But when God summons me and says, *But it wasn't for you to forgive, Mullah*, what shall I say?  
...you have done a wicked thing. And you must pay for this thing you have done. *Shari'a* is not vague on this matter. It says I must send you where I will soon join you myself. (325)

### Islam

Rasheed is by no means a devout Muslim. He does not observe Ramadan properly. His son drowned while he was sitting nearby unable to save him because he was drunk. He has pornographic material in his bedroom. But Rasheed will appeal to Islamic tradition when it suits him. So when this middle-aged man forces himself on the fifteen-year-old girl he has married merely to provide him with a son he says, after their first act of sexual intercourse:

There is no shame in this, Mariam. It's what married people do. It's what the Prophet himself and his wives did. There is no shame. (70)

Yet it would be wrong to say that this book presents a uniformly black picture of Islam. Mariam's childhood teacher was the kindly Mullah Faizullah and she values what she learnt from him about the Koran. In 1974, the fifteen-year-old married Mariam

tastes “for the first time... the sweetness of sharing in a communal experience”, that is, participation in Ramadan, a fast not observed by Rasheed, except for a few days. Mariam fondly remembers the joy she experienced as a child during Eid-ul-Fitr celebrations.

Also, when hardship strikes Mariam, she is constantly reminded of Mullah Faizullah’s words to her, reminding her of what the Koran teaches about Allah:

Blessed is He in whose hand is the kingdom, and He Who has power over all things, Who created death and life that He may try you. (85, 182)

To Mariam this means Allah is not spiteful and is not a petty God, though, logically, it is difficult to see that this is a legitimate conclusion to draw from this citation. Indeed, since there is no mention of Allah’s love and compassion in this context it seems that at this point the only help this quote gives Mariam is to submit to her miserable fate.

At one point Babi takes Laila and Tariq on an educational day trip to Bamiyan. On the way they see Shahr-e-Zohak, the Red City, where the fortress had once been destroyed by Genghis Khan. At Bamiyan, once a thriving Buddhist centre, they climb the two gigantic Buddhas chiseled into a sun-bleached rock cliff. Later in the book Hosseini describes how the Taliban destroyed these ancient artefacts.

During 1992 Rabbani presided over a Supreme Court, filled with hard-liner mullahs who did away with the communist-era decrees that empowered women and instead passed rulings based on Shari’a, strict Islamic laws that ordered women to cover, forbade their travel without a male relative, punished adultery with stoning. (232)

In 1996 the Taliban entered Kabul. Rasheed explains how the Taliban were a guerrilla force...made up of young Pashtun men whose families had fled to Pakistan during the war against the Soviets. Most of them had been raised - some even born - in refugee camps along the Pakistani border, and in Pakistani madrasas, where they were schooled in *Shari’a* by mullahs. Their leader was a mysterious, illiterate, one-eyed recluse named Mullah Omar, who... called himself *Ameer-ul-Mumineen*, Leader of the Faithful. (244)

Rasheed respects the Taliban as “decent Muslim boys”, “pure and incorruptible”, the bringers of “peace and order”. Mariam and Laila are taken out by Rasheed and see the corpse of Najibullah hanging from a rope tied to a traffic-light post:

[Mariam] would later hear that the Taliban had dragged Najibullah from his sanctuary at the UN headquarters near Darulaman Palace. That they had tortured him for hours, then tied his legs to a truck and dragged his lifeless body through the streets. (247)

A young Talib boasts, “This is what we do with infidels who commit crimes against Islam!” (247). The Taliban now change the name of Afghanistan yet again to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Mariam finds a flier announcing laws the Taliban pledge themselves to enforce. These include (248-249):

- All men must grow beards of a prescribed length or be beaten.
- All boys must wear turbans and Islamic shirts.
- The banning of singing, dancing, playing cards, playing chess, gambling, kite flying, writing books, watching films, painting pictures.



- Cutting off the hand of a thief.
- The beating and imprisonment of any non-Muslim who worships in view of Muslims.
- The execution of any non-Muslim who attempts to convert a Muslim.
- The beating of any woman on the street unaccompanied by a male relative.
- The severe beating of any woman who shows her face.
- The banning for women of cosmetics, jewelry, charming clothes, speaking unless spoken to, making eye contact with men, laughing in public, painting nails (the penalty is loss of a finger), attendance at school, working.
- The stoning of any woman found guilty of adultery.

The Taliban seem to justify the worst fears of critics of Islam as to what would happen if devout Muslims are ever free to impose *Shari'a*:

Men wielding pickaxes swarmed the dilapidated Kabul Museum and smashed pre-Islamic statues to rubble - that is, those that hadn't already been looted by the Mujahideen. 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. (250)

Kharabat, Kabul's ancient music ghetto, was silenced. Musicians were beaten and imprisoned, their rubals, tambouras, and harmoniums trampled upon. The Taliban went to the grave of Tariq's favorite singer, Ahmad Zahir, and fired bullets into it. (251)

Ironically, as Mariam is about to be executed by the merciless *Shari'a*-complying Taliban her last thoughts are a few words from the Koran which emphasise the nature of the sovereign Creator-God as "the Great Forgiver" (329).

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<sup>1</sup> The junior officers used by Daoud Khan in the coup had all been trained in the Soviet Union. At the time, as Hosseini notes, the king was in Italy receiving medical treatment. Actually, it was eye treatment.).