

The Portrayal and Position of Women in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Deborah Ellis's *The Breadwinner*: A Comparative Study

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Abstract: This article comparatively examines the portrayal and position of women in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Deborah Ellis's *The Breadwinner*. Although both works depict female characters living within restrictive social and political environments, they approach Afghan women through different genres and narrative positions. Hosseini constructs the experiences of Mariam and Laila through a narrative deeply connected with Afghan history, marriage, motherhood, domestic violence, and female solidarity, whereas Ellis presents Afghanistan primarily through Parvana, a young girl who assumes traditionally male responsibilities in order to support her family. Using a qualitative comparative approach informed by feminist literary criticism, the study investigates gender inequality, patriarchal authority, resistance, identity, family responsibility, and female agency. The study proposes a distinction between relational agency, foregrounded in Hosseini's novel, and adaptive agency, emphasized in Ellis's narrative. Hosseini foregrounds intergenerational solidarity, caregiving, sacrifice, and resistance within domestic relationships, while Ellis emphasizes mobility, economic responsibility, and the disruption of prescribed gender roles. The comparison demonstrates that these literary representations of Afghan women cannot be reduced to a single narrative of victimhood; instead, they reveal complex relationships among gender, family, political circumstances, survival, resistance, and individual choice.

Keywords: Afghan women; gender; *A Thousand Splendid Suns*; *The Breadwinner*; feminist literary criticism; female agency

1. Introduction

Afghanistan has frequently been represented in international discourse through war, political instability, displacement, poverty, and conflict. Literature, however, provides a different means of approaching Afghan society because fictional narratives can illuminate the experiences of individuals and families living within larger historical and political circumstances. In particular, literary representations of Afghan women offer opportunities to examine the relationship between gender, family structures, political authority, social expectations, and individual agency. Rather than treating women merely as abstract subjects within

discussions of conflict, literary narratives can foreground their everyday experiences, relationships, choices, suffering, and strategies of survival.

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, published by Riverhead Books in 2007, follows the lives of Mariam and Laila against several decades of Afghan political and social upheaval (Hosseini, 2007). Although the protagonists belong to different generations and initially experience markedly different family circumstances, their lives eventually intersect through marriage to Rasheed. Their developing relationship transforms the domestic environment from a site characterized by rivalry and patriarchal domination into one in which solidarity, affection, protection, and resistance become possible.

Deborah Ellis's *The Breadwinner*, first published by Groundwood Books in 2000, approaches the experiences of Afghan women and girls principally through Parvana, an eleven-year-old protagonist whose circumstances require her to challenge conventional gender boundaries (Ellis, 2000). After her father is arrested, Parvana disguises herself as a boy so that she can work, move through public space, and help support her family. The novel therefore places economic survival, gender performance, mobility, and family responsibility at the centre of its representation of female agency.

Although the novels differ in genre, intended readership, characterization, and narrative perspective, they share an important concern: both examine how female characters negotiate restrictive circumstances. This similarity makes them valuable for comparative analysis. The comparison is also significant because Hosseini and Ellis occupy different positionalities in relation to Afghanistan. Rather than assuming that either perspective automatically provides an objective representation of Afghan women, this study considers how differing narrative positions, genres, and audiences shape characterization and emphasis.

Existing scholarship has examined gender inequality, patriarchy, resistance, and female agency in both texts. Ratnasari's feminist study of children's literature, for example, identifies Parvana's disguise, breadwinning, family support, and assistance to other women as forms of struggle against gender inequality (Ratnasari, 2015). More recently, Zhang et al. (2026) read *A Thousand Splendid Suns* through postcolonial feminism, emphasizing the intersection of gender with class, ethnicity, marriage, and political power. The present article develops this scholarship through a direct comparison focused on the different forms through which female agency is constructed.

The central argument of this study is that both novels portray Afghan women and girls as constrained by patriarchal and political structures while simultaneously constructing them as active agents of survival and resistance. Hosseini primarily develops relational agency through solidarity, sacrifice, caregiving, and resistance within domestic relationships, whereas Ellis emphasizes adaptive agency through economic responsibility, mobility, and the crossing of prescribed gender boundaries.

1.1 Research Questions

1. How are Afghan women and girls portrayed in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Deborah Ellis's *The Breadwinner*?
2. How do the selected works represent gender-based restrictions, patriarchy, resistance, survival, and female agency?
3. What significant similarities and differences emerge between Hosseini's and Ellis's representations of Afghan women?

2. Literature Review

The representation of Afghan women in contemporary literature has attracted scholarly attention particularly in relation to patriarchy, political conflict, gender inequality, domestic violence, and resistance. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has become a frequent object of feminist and postcolonial feminist analysis because Mariam and Laila experience overlapping forms of familial, social, and political restriction while gradually developing strategies of survival and resistance.

Recent postcolonial feminist scholarship argues that the women in Hosseini's novel should not be treated as a homogeneous group detached from other structures of power. Zhang et al. (2026) examine the intersection of gender, class, ethnicity, marriage, and political power and emphasize women's movement from marginalization toward forms of agency. This intersectional emphasis is useful for the present article because Mariam's and Laila's possibilities are shaped not only by gender but also by family position, education, economic dependence, war, and marital power.

Female solidarity is another important interpretive dimension of Hosseini's novel. Mariam and Laila initially enter a household structured by Rasheed's authority and by the possibility of competition between co-wives. Their eventual alliance, however, creates a counter-structure based on trust, caregiving, and mutual protection. Such solidarity is crucial to understanding how resistance develops in a context where neither woman initially possesses conventional social or economic power.

The Breadwinner has also been examined through feminist approaches, especially in relation to gender inequality and children's empowerment. Ratnasari (2015) identifies harms experienced by girls as a result of gender inequality and analyzes Parvana's struggles, including disguising herself as a boy to become a breadwinner, supporting her family, and helping other women survive. This scholarship demonstrates that Parvana's gender disguise is not merely an adventure device but a means of exposing unequal access to mobility, work, and public space.

Taken together, existing studies establish patriarchy, gender inequality, solidarity, and resistance as productive areas of analysis. The present article does not claim that these themes have been ignored. Its contribution lies

instead in placing the two novels in direct dialogue and distinguishing the narrative forms of agency that become prominent in each text.

Munir et al. (2020) examine misogyny and the status of women in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* through a feminist perspective, with particular attention to domestic and physical violence. Their study supports the view that the restrictions experienced by Mariam and Laila are connected to patriarchal structures that shape women's identities and positions within the household and wider society.

Mastour et al. (2024) similarly analyze gender discrimination experienced by the female protagonists of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Using feminist theory and qualitative content analysis, they emphasize the social, cultural, and political structures that contribute to the devaluation, violence, and loss of voice experienced by Mariam and Laila. Their findings strengthen the present study's analysis of patriarchal restriction while providing a recent Afghan scholarly perspective.

Arshad and Azam (2024) analyze *The Breadwinner* through Islamic feminism and examine the restrictions imposed on Afghan women and girls in relation to education, mobility, public participation, and patriarchal interpretations of religion. Their study is useful for the present comparison because it demonstrates how Parvana's experiences expose the relationship between gender-based restrictions, public space, and female agency.

2.1 Research Gap

Previous scholarship has examined oppression and resistance in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and gender inequality and empowerment in *The Breadwinner*. However, single-text studies do not fully reveal the insights that emerge from a direct comparison between Hosseini's adult historical-family narrative and Ellis's children's/young-adult narrative.

The present study therefore asks not simply whether Afghan women are represented as oppressed, but how female characters exercise agency within restrictive environments and how that agency is differently constructed. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, relational agency frequently emerges through emotional solidarity, caregiving, motherhood, protection, sacrifice, and eventually direct resistance. In *The Breadwinner*, adaptive agency is more visibly connected with mobility, economic responsibility, work, and temporary crossing of gender boundaries.

The study also treats the authors' different positionalities in relation to Afghanistan, together with genre and intended readership, as relevant to comparative interpretation. It does not assume that either narrative position guarantees authenticity or objectivity. Instead, it examines how literary choices influence which aspects of female experience are foregrounded.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative literary methodology based primarily on close textual analysis of Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Deborah Ellis's *The Breadwinner*. The two novels constitute the primary texts, while relevant scholarly studies concerning gender, feminism, Afghan women, literary representation, patriarchy, and female agency provide secondary critical support.

The analysis is informed principally by feminist literary criticism, with particular attention to gender relations, patriarchal authority, female agency, resistance, domestic power, access to public space, education, economic participation, and relationships among women. Close reading is used to identify significant patterns in characterization, narrative events, relationships, and representations of gender.

The comparative analysis is organized around patriarchal restriction, access to education and public space, family responsibility, gender roles, female solidarity, survival, resistance, and agency. The novels are treated as literary representations rather than documentary accounts of Afghan society. This distinction is methodologically important because fiction is shaped by characterization, genre, narrative perspective, authorial choices, and intended readership.

The study therefore does not attempt to determine which novel provides a universally correct representation of Afghan women. Instead, it investigates how each text constructs female experience and what becomes visible when these constructions are placed in comparative dialogue.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Mariam: From Marginalization to Agency

Mariam's characterization in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* provides a clear example of the relationship between patriarchal oppression and female agency. From childhood, her identity is shaped by social exclusion and by the stigma attached to her birth. This early marginalization influences the way she initially understands obedience, marriage, and personal worth.

Her marriage to Rasheed intensifies these restrictions. Mariam enters the marriage with little control over the decision and gradually encounters a domestic environment in which male authority determines many aspects of her life. Her repeated miscarriages further diminish her position within the household because Rasheed increasingly measures her worth according to her ability to bear a child. The novel thus connects gender oppression with marriage, reproduction, and economic dependency.

Nevertheless, interpreting Mariam exclusively as a passive victim would overlook the development of her character. Her agency develops gradually. Endurance often functions as a survival strategy rather than simple acceptance, and her relationship with Laila transforms her emotional and moral world. Mariam, who has spent

much of her life deprived of stable affection and belonging, develops a powerful attachment to Laila and her children.

Female solidarity consequently becomes a source of resistance. Instead of remaining rivals competing for male approval, Mariam and Laila become allies. Their cooperation creates an alternative emotional structure within the household based on care, trust, and mutual protection.

Mariam's final resistance to Rasheed represents the culmination of this development. Her decisive action emerges after years of subordination and after the formation of relationships that give her someone to protect. Her subsequent acceptance of the consequences enables Laila and the children to escape. Her trajectory can therefore be read as movement from socially imposed marginalization toward moral and personal agency.

4.2 Laila: Education, Choice, and Resistance

Laila represents a different model of Afghan womanhood. Unlike Mariam, she grows up with greater access to education and with a father who encourages her intellectual development. Education becomes important to her characterization because it allows her to imagine a future beyond narrowly defined domestic roles.

Political conflict dramatically changes the possibilities available to her. War destroys the relative security of her childhood and demonstrates that female experience in the novel is shaped not only by patriarchal family structures but also by broader political circumstances. Personal loss and insecurity eventually place Laila in a position where her available choices become severely restricted.

Her marriage to Rasheed illustrates this complexity. Although the marriage occurs under conditions of extreme vulnerability, Laila is not portrayed as entirely without strategic judgment. Her decisions are connected with survival and protection of her child. Agency here does not mean complete freedom; it involves making consequential decisions within a severely restricted range of possibilities.

Laila also differs from Mariam in her sustained ability to imagine an alternative future. Her connection with Tariq, concern for her children, and earlier educational experience preserve a sense that life might exist beyond Rasheed's household. Her attempts to escape demonstrate a more explicit rejection of domestic domination.

The relationship between Laila and Mariam is central to both women's development. Laila gives Mariam an experience of affection and belonging, while Mariam provides Laila and her children with protection and support. Their relationship demonstrates that agency in the novel is relational as well as individual.

4.3 Parvana: Gender Performance and Economic Agency

Deborah Ellis constructs female agency differently in *The Breadwinner*. Parvana is younger than Hosseini's principal female characters, and the novel addresses a younger readership. Nevertheless, her experiences raise important questions about gender, public space, economic participation, and family responsibility.

The central transformation occurs when circumstances require Parvana to present herself as a boy in order to support her family. Her abilities do not fundamentally change when she changes her appearance. What changes is society's perception of her gender and, consequently, her access to public space. Her disguise therefore becomes a literary mechanism for exposing the social construction of gender-based restrictions.

Economic responsibility is particularly important to Parvana's agency. She enters public space and assumes the role of provider because her family's survival depends upon her. The title *The Breadwinner* itself emphasizes this reversal of conventional gender expectations. Ratnasari (2015) similarly identifies Parvana's disguise and breadwinning as central forms of struggle against gender inequality.

Yet Parvana's agency should not be romanticized as complete liberation. She does not enter public life under conditions of genuine equality or unrestricted choice. Her transformation is produced by necessity. The novel therefore presents adaptive agency as a response to constraint: Parvana finds ways to act within a restrictive system without possessing the power to eliminate that system.

Her courage is expressed through this adaptive agency. She learns to negotiate public spaces, earn income, respond to danger, and make decisions affecting the welfare of her family. Ellis thereby constructs a young female protagonist whose resistance is closely connected with everyday survival.

4.4 Female Solidarity in the Two Novels

Female solidarity provides an important connection between the two texts. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, solidarity becomes most visible through Mariam and Laila's transformation from uneasy co-wives into trusted companions. Their relationship demonstrates how shared vulnerability can develop into mutual protection and resistance.

In *The Breadwinner*, relationships among female characters similarly emphasize cooperation and survival, although the structure differs because Parvana is a child operating within a family and community context. Both texts therefore challenge the assumption that resistance must always take the form of individual rebellion. Caregiving, cooperation, protection, sharing resources, and maintaining relationships can themselves function as forms of agency within restrictive environments.

4.5 Comparative Analysis: Relational and Adaptive Agency

The comparison reveals an important similarity: both Hosseini and Ellis depict female characters whose choices are constrained by gendered structures, yet neither novel presents its central female characters solely as passive recipients of oppression.

Hosseini's representation of agency is primarily relational and develops over a long narrative period. Mariam and Laila resist through solidarity, caregiving, motherhood, emotional attachment, attempts at escape,

protection, sacrifice, and direct confrontation. Because *A Thousand Splendid Suns* follows its protagonists across different stages of life, the reader observes how their understanding of themselves and their possibilities changes over time.

Ellis's representation is more immediately connected with adaptive agency and economic survival. Parvana's agency emerges through her ability to cross a socially enforced gender boundary, enter public space, work, earn money, and provide for her family. Her resistance is therefore closely associated with mobility and purposeful action.

A useful distinction can consequently be made between relational agency and adaptive agency. Mariam and Laila primarily demonstrate relational agency because their capacity to resist develops through solidarity, caregiving, and mutual protection. Parvana demonstrates a strongly adaptive form of agency because she alters her social presentation and behavior in response to restrictive circumstances. These categories are analytical rather than absolute: Mariam and Laila also adapt, while Parvana's actions are deeply motivated by family relationships.

The two works also differ in their relationship to gender roles. In Hosseini's novel, resistance frequently occurs within or in response to marriage, motherhood, and domestic life. Ellis makes gender boundaries themselves especially visible by allowing Parvana to move between socially recognized female and male positions. Her disguise reveals how access to work and public space changes when the same individual is perceived differently according to gender.

Ultimately, both novels complicate representations of Afghan women as merely powerless victims. Their differences in genre, narrative perspective, characterization, intended readership, and authorial positioning also shape the forms of agency each text foregrounds.

5. Conclusion

This study has comparatively examined the portrayal and position of women in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Deborah Ellis's *The Breadwinner*, with particular attention to patriarchy, gender-based restrictions, survival, resistance, solidarity, and female agency. Although the two works differ in genre, narrative structure, intended readership, and authorial perspective, both place female experiences at the centre of narratives shaped by political instability and restrictive gender structures.

The analysis demonstrates that Hosseini portrays female agency primarily through the experiences of Mariam and Laila. Their lives reveal the effects of constrained marriage, domestic violence, limited autonomy, war, and patriarchal authority. Nevertheless, their characterization develops beyond victimhood. Their relationship becomes a source of emotional strength and practical resistance, and Mariam's movement from

marginalization toward decisive protection demonstrates that agency may develop even under extremely restrictive circumstances.

Ellis constructs agency differently through Parvana. Her disguise and assumption of the breadwinner role expose the gendered nature of access to public space and employment within the world represented by the novel. Parvana does not acquire new abilities by appearing male; rather, a change in social perception enables her existing abilities to be used for economic survival. Her experience therefore highlights the constructed nature of gender-based restrictions and demonstrates how adaptive agency can emerge under constraint.

The comparison supports a distinction between relational agency and adaptive agency, which constitutes the study's principal comparative contribution. Hosseini gives particular emphasis to relational agency through solidarity, caregiving, motherhood, protection, and sacrifice, while Ellis foregrounds adaptive agency through mobility, work, economic responsibility, and the crossing of prescribed gender boundaries. These categories overlap, but they provide a useful framework for understanding the different narrative strategies employed by the two authors.

The findings challenge interpretations that reduce Afghan female characters to passive victims. Mariam, Laila, and Parvana are subjected to powerful restrictions, but they continually negotiate those restrictions through consequential choices. Agency in these texts does not necessarily mean complete freedom from oppressive structures. It may consist of protecting another person, earning an income, pursuing education, forming supportive relationships, attempting escape, challenging abusive authority, or imagining an alternative future.

The two novels should not be read as comprehensive representations of all Afghan women. They remain literary constructions shaped by particular historical settings, genres, narrative perspectives, and authorial choices. The female characters inhabit spaces in which vulnerability and strength, restriction and choice, suffering and resistance coexist. By examining these complexities comparatively, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of female agency in contemporary literary representations of Afghanistan.

Future research may extend this comparative framework to other literary works concerning Afghan women and examine how female agency intersects with ethnicity, class, displacement, migration, education, and generational difference. Comparative studies of Afghan, diasporic, and non-Afghan authors may also provide further insight into how cultural position, genre, and narrative perspective shape representations of Afghan women.

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