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# *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

by

**Khaled Hosseini**

**2007**



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Diane Clapsaddle

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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

The story takes place in Herat, Afghanistan, and Gul Daman, a small village outside of .....

### LIST OF CHARACTERS

#### Major Characters

**Miriam** - She is the main character of the story. She was born illegitimately to a wealthy man of Herat and one of his housekeepers. She tries to force her father to acknowledge her as his daughter, but it leads to the heartache of her mother's suicide and her own arranged marriage to.....

**Laila** - She is a beautiful young girl with golden hair who is raised by a modern set of parents to be an educated woman in an Islamic world. Because her parents are killed by a Mujahideen rocket, and she is six weeks pregnant to Tariq whom she believes is dead, she.....

**Tariq** - He is the neighbor boy who Laila has always loved. He lost his leg when he stepped on a land mine quite early in his life, but is one of the toughest kids in his neighborhood. He always protected her from anyone who bullies her. He leaves Afghanistan with his parents when it.....

**Rasheed** - He is villain of the story, a cruel, abusive man who was dead drunk when his only son fell into a lake and was drowned. He had already.....

**Jalil Khan** - He is Mariam's father who made the mistake of an affair with one his housecleaners to produce her. He is a loving father who visits her once a week at the hut in the village of Gul Daman where he has sent her and her mother to live. She is really an object of.....

#### Minor Characters

**Nana** - She is Mariam's mother who spends her last years becoming more and more bitter over the life she has been forced to lead with her *harami* daughter. She is the object.....

**Aziza** - She is the daughter of Laila and Tariq, but Laila passes her off as Rasheed's son when she discovers she is an unwed pregnant woman in a Muslim country. She grows up abused by.....

Additional characters are identified in the complete study guide.

### CONFLICT

**Protagonist** - Mariam and Laila are the protagonists who teach the reader the reality of life as a woman in a backward Muslim country. They overcome several wars throughout their lives to.....

**Antagonist** - The antagonists are Rasheed, the Mujahideen, and the Taliban who abuse women and destroy their country. They live in a world of old time values and refuse to.....

**Climax** - The climax occurs when Mariam murders Rasheed. After that the.....

**Outcome** - Mariam is arrested for murdering Rasheed and is executed in the stadium in front of thousands of people. Laila escapes Kabul and goes to Pakistan with.....

## SHORT PLOT/CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The story covers three decades of anti-Soviet jihad, civil war and Taliban tyranny seen from the perspectives of two women. Mariam is the scorned illegitimate daughter of a wealthy businessman, forced at age fifteen into marrying Rasheed, who grows increasingly brutal when she fails to produce a child. Eighteen years.....

## THEMES

The theme of **inner strength of women** is the most prevalent theme. Both Mariam and Laila endure so much heartache merely because they are women, yet each continuously pulls together the strength to persevere. Mariam faces a father who refuses to acknowledge her, a husband who abuses her for twenty-seven years, and the need to murder the man when he is determined to kill Laila. Through every instance, she keeps her.....

Additional themes are identified in the complete study guide.

## MOOD

At times, the mood is tragic, filled with despair, and very sad; at other times, it is.....

## BIOGRAPHY OF KHALED HOSSEINI

Khaled Hosseini was born on March 4, 1965. He is the oldest of five children. His father worked for the Afghan Foreign Consul and his mother taught Farsi and history at a girls' high school in Kabul.

Kabul, Afghanistan is the boyhood home of Khaled Hosseini,

In the early 1970s, Khaled's family moved to Tehran, Iran when his father was assigned to a diplomatic post at the Afghan Embassy in Iran. They returned home to Kabul in 1973. In 1976 his family moved to Paris, France, where his father was a diplomat at the Afghan Embassy. They were to return home to Afghanistan in 1980, when the Russians invaded his country. His father was recalled home after the invasion, but decided to ask for political asylum in the United States and received it.

As a result, Hosseini ended up in San Jose, California. They struggled to make ends meet for a while, as they had lost all of their property in Afghanistan and had to start over. His father worked .....

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES / ANALYSIS

### PART I

#### CHAPTER 1

##### Summary

The story begins with the word that Mariam comes to hate her entire life – *harami* or *bastard* - which she heard for the first time when she was only five years old. She has never forgotten the day it happened even though she was quite young when she first heard it. It occurred on a Thursday, the day Jalil always visited her at the *kolba* (hut). To pass the time while she waited for him, imagining him waving as he crossed the knee-high grass in the clearing, Mariam decided to climb a chair and take down her mother's Chinese tea set. Mariam loved the set almost as much as her mother did. Her mother loved it, because it was the sole relic that she still had that had belonged to her own mother who had died when she was two. Just as she was climbing down, Mariam lost control of the pot, and it fell to the floor and shattered. When her mother, Nana, saw what had happened she became so angry that Mariam thought she might be possessed by a *jinn*., as she had been once before. Nana gritted her teeth and proclaimed her a clumsy little *harami*. She added that this was her reward – an heirloom-breaking clumsy little *harami*. At the time, she didn't understand the meaning of the word. "Nor was she old enough to appreciate the injustice, to see that it is the creators of the *harami* who are culpable, not the *harami*, whose only sin is being born." Even though she didn't understand the meaning, Mariam knew from the way her

mother spit out the word that it meant she was an unwanted thing: an illegitimate person who would never have a legitimate claim to such things as love, family, home, and acceptance.

Mariam was reminded that Jalil never called her by this name, but instead, called her his little flower. He would sit her on his lap and tell her stories of Herat, the city where Mariam was born in 1959. He would tell her about how it was the cradle of Persian culture, the home of writers, painters, and Sufis. He told her about Queen Gauhar Shad who had raised the famous minarets in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. He told her about a pistachio tree beneath which was buried the great poet Jami and that he had taken her there once when she was very little. Mariam didn't remember the pistachio tree. In fact, even though she would live the first fifteen years of her life within walking distance of Herat, she would never see this famous tree. Nonetheless, she would listen to him with enchantment, filled with pride that she had a father who knew such things.

When Jalil would leave, Nana would tell Mariam that he told rich lies – a rich man telling rich lies. She told Mariam that he had never taken her to see the tree and that he had betrayed them both by casting them out. Mariam hated herself for allowing Nana to speak this way about Jalil, because she never felt like a *harami* when she was with him. She loved him even if she had to share him. He had three wives and nine legitimate children, all of whom were strangers to Mariam. He owned a movie theatre where he bought the children who came to the movies ice cream. Of course, said Nana, he never bought ice cream for Mariam. He was one of Herat's best - connected men with other businesses and a home with a cook, a driver, and three housekeepers. Nana had been one of those housekeepers until her belly began to swell. Jalil's family was outraged by her and ordered that Jalil throw her out. Nana's own father had also disowned her and moved away. Sometimes, Nana wished that her father had had the stomach to sharpen one of knives and do the honorable thing. It might have been better for her. Jalil didn't have the courage, either, to do the honorable thing: stand up to his family and accept the responsibility for what he had done. Instead, he made her pack up her things and moved her into the *kolba* outside the city. Nana often told Mariam that he had told his wives that Nana had forced her self on him and that it was her fault. "This is what it means to be a woman in this world," she would say. This prepares the reader for what will follow in this novel. Nana says, "Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman."

## Notes

This first chapter introduces the reader to the basic premise of the novel – the lives of women in the Islamic world, in this case, Afghanistan. Mariam is an illegitimate child, the product of a servant and a wealthy man. Her mother is the one who emphasizes this idea the most, because she is bitter about the circumstances of her life. She has paid the full price for having a child out of wedlock while Jalil has seemingly paid nothing more than money to support her and Mariam in little more than a hovel outside of Herat. She has been ostracized even by her own father and now is doomed to a life of loneliness. In the meantime, Mariam also pays for having even been born, because she is a reminder of all Nana has lost.

## CHAPTER 2

### Summary

Chapter Two is one of "he said – she said." Nana tells her side of the story, and Jalil has his side. Nana tells Mariam that to Jalil and his wives, she was a mugwort or a weed that is ripped out and tossed aside. However, unlike a weed, she had to be replanted and given food and water on account of Mariam. That was the deal Jalil made with his family. Nana insisted that she wanted to live somewhere removed, detached, so that she didn't have to see Jalil parade around town with his wives. She also refused to live in her father's old house because of the way he had treated her. And so, after his oldest son suggested building a *kolba* in the clearing which overlooked all of Herat, Jalil agreed to build a *kolba* there. It was nothing more than sun-dried bricks with a dirt floor, two sleeping cots, a table, two straight-backed chairs, and one window. They must use an outhouse some

distance from the house. Jalil could afford to have others build this hut, but he and his sons did all the work. Nana says that it is his idea of penance, and she calls the hut a rat hole.

Nana had almost married when she was fifteen to a young parakeet seller. When she tells Miriam this story, her daughter can tell that “perhaps for the only time in her life, during those days leading up to her wedding, Nana had been genuinely happy.” Then, a week before the wedding, a *jinn* had entered her body, causing her to have severe seizures. It was no doubt epilepsy, but for these superstitious, uneducated people, it was a deal-breaker and the parakeet seller’s family called off the wedding. After that, Nana had no more suitors.

Nana also frequently tells Mariam about the day she was born. She says that no one came to help her, and Jalil never summoned a doctor or midwife to attend the birth. She said she lay on the cold dirt floor for two days trying to push Mariam out and that when the baby was finally born, she cut the cord with a knife that she had kept beside her. At this point in the story, Nana would always give a slow, burdened smile, one of lingering recrimination or reluctant forgiveness. Mariam never realized until she turned ten that it was unfair to have to apologize for the manner of her own birth.

Of course, Jalil tells Mariam that none of this ever happened. He had been out of town, just as Nana said, but he insisted that he had already made arrangements for the birth and that Mariam had been born in a hospital. Furthermore, the birth was all over within an hour, he said, so that “even in birth, she was a good daughter.” When he had been informed of the birth, he hadn’t just shrugged and kept on riding his horse. Instead, he had rushed right back to bounce her in his arms and a hum a lullaby to her. Nana insists that she had chosen the name Mariam, because it had been her mother’s name. However, Jalil says that he chose it, because it was the name of a lovely flower. Because Jalil doesn’t fill her with recriminations, Mariam tends to believe him instead of her mother.

## Notes

This chapter is so sad, because it is reminiscent of a divorced couple and how they use their children to hurt each other. Nana passes on her bitterness to Miriam for whom she is responsible for all but one day a week, while Jalil plays the loving father who only has to spend a few hours a week with his daughter.....

## OVERALL ANALYSES CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Mariam** - What’s most important to know about Mariam is her own realization that her life was hard and yet she had loved and been loved in return. She lives in a loveless marriage, but doesn’t forget, in spite of her disappointment and her guilt the ones she loved all her life: Jalil and Nana, her parents. She perseveres even though she regrets leaving her mother behind and turning to a father who.....

**Laila** - She represents the hope for the future in Afghanistan, because she is the strong woman who can outlast every evil man who tries to take away the ones she loves and lives for. She never forgets Tariq or.....

**Tariq** - As a young boy, Tariq had been injured in a landmine accident and lost his leg, but it never dimmed his love and enthusiasm for life. He loved Laila all his life and willingly took chances to protect her. Even after he left Kabul, he couldn’t forget her and came looking for her after he.....

**Rasheed** - He is the villain of the story, but there are some aspects of his life where one can see why he became as bitter as he did. The loss of his first wife in childbirth and the loss of his son to.....

**Jalil Khan** - He, too, is a man who mistreats a woman – his daughter, Mariam – because he doesn’t want the shame her birth will bring him. However, his mistreatment was never intended to.....

## **PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS**

The story is a narrative told from the perspectives of the two women characters, Mariam and Laila. Each shows how she was raised, what she.....

## **THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS**

### ***The Inner Strength of Women***

The theme of the inner strength of women is the most prevalent theme. Both characters, Mariam and Laila, are forced into life situations which challenge their strength and their ability to endure. Mariam is born illegitimate in a world which turns their back on such women. She is later forced into a marriage to a cruel, abusive man and endures twenty-seven years with him. She bonds with Laila later in her life, which allows her to understand that she can love and be loved in return. In the end, her great strength allows her to face the sacrifice she makes of her own life to save the ones she loves. As for Laila, she is born into a.....

Additional themes are analyzed in the complete study guide.

## **RISING ACTION**

The rising action begins with Mariam's story of her childhood and ends with.....

## **FALLING ACTION**

After Rasheed is dead, the two women hide his body in the shed and then make plans to escape the country. Mariam knows all along that they cannot both go, because then they might both be.....

## **POINT OF VIEW**

It is written third person point of view from the perspective of an omniscient narrator.

## **OTHER ELEMENTS**

### **FORESHADOWING**

There are several other literary devices that pop up at various times in the story. One of the most prevalent ones is foreshadowing which frequently presents clues of something that will happen later in the novel. Some examples of foreshadowing include:

- 1.) When Jalil would leave, Nana would tell Mariam that
- 2.) he told rich lies – a rich man telling rich lies. She told Mariam that he had never taken her to see the tree and that he had betrayed them both by casting them out. This foreshadows how Jalil will one day refuse her entrance to his house and then marry her off to Rasheed.....

17 additional examples of foreshadowing are identified in the complete study guide.

### **IRONY**

Another element that is important to note is **irony** – when something happens, or is seen, or is heard that we may know, but the characters do not, or that appears opposite of what is expected. Some examples of irony include:

- 1.) Jalil told Mariam about Queen Gauhar Shad who had raised the famous minarets in Herat in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. This is ironic that a queen would be so honored when men have such power over women in Afghanistan.....

27 additional examples of irony are identified in the complete study guide.

## QUOTATIONS – IMPORTANT QUOTES AND ANALYSIS

The following quotations are important at various points in the story:

(Riverhead Books, The Berkley Publishing Group, New York, New York, 2007):

- 1.) “Nor was she old enough to appreciate the injustice, to see that it is the creators of the *harami* who are culpable, not the *harami*, whose only sin is being born.”  
(pg. 4; This emphasizes how from the very beginning, Mariam was not wanted by either her mother or father.).....

27 additional quotations are identified / discussed in the complete study guide.

## SYMBOLISM/ MOTIFS / IMAGERY / METAPHORS / SYMBOLS

Other elements that are present in this novel are **symbols and metaphors**. Symbols are the use of some unrelated idea to represent something else. Metaphors are direct comparisons made between characters and ideas. Some examples of **metaphors** include:

1. Nana tells Mariam that to Jalil and his wives, she was a mugwort or a weed that is ripped out and tossed aside. However, unlike a weed, she had to be replanted and given food and water on account of Mariam.....

19 additional examples of metaphors are identified in the complete study guide.

Some examples of **symbols** include:

1. Jalil could afford to have others build this hut, but he and his sons did all the work. Nana says that it is his idea of penance, and she calls the hut a rat hole.....

14 additional examples of symbolisms are identified in the complete study guide.

## KEY FACTS

**Title:** *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

**Author:** Khaled Hosseini

**Date Published:** 2007

**Meaning of the Title:** It refers to a poem in which the city of Kabul was described as having a thousand splendid suns. It also is a symbol for Mariam.

**Setting:** The story takes place in Herat, Afghanistan, and Gul Daman, a small village outside of Herat, and then Kabul the capital city from 1958 to the present day. There is also some time in Murree, Pakistan.....

## STUDY QUESTIONS / MULTIPLE CHOICE QUIZ

**1.) Mariam was called a harami by her mother which meant**

- a.) son of a bitch.
- b.) whore.
- c.) bastard.

**2.) Mariam’s mother was very bitter about being rejected by Mariam and her father. She showed this by**

- a.) throwing rocks at Jalil.

- b.) refusing to allow Jalil to visit Mariam
- c.) committing suicide.....

## **ANSWER KEY**

1.) c 2.) c 3.) b 4.) c 5.) a 6.) c 7.) a 8.) a 9.) a 10.) b 11.) a 12.) b 13.) b 14.) c 15.) b

## **ESSAY TOPICS – BOOK REPORT IDEAS**

1. Describe what makes Mariam go to her father's house. What is the outcome of this decision on Mariam's life?

What makes Nana so bitter? How does it affect her relationship with Mariam?.....

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