

(Re)Defining Afghan Women Characters as Modern Archetypes using Khaled Hosseini's *A
Thousand Splendid Suns* and Asne Seierstad's *The Bookseller of Kabul*

A Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts in English

By
Alexandra Andrews

27 April 2016

Liberty University
College of Arts and Sciences
Master of Arts in English

Alexandra Andrews:

Thesis Chair

Date

First Reader

Date

Second Reader

Date

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Yaw. I am a better writer and researcher because of him.

I would also like to thank Dr. M. Schmidt and Dr. S. Bell for encouraging me to explore different critics and perspectives so that I could form my own argument.

I'd also like to thank my family for always believing in me.

Lastly, thank you, Luke, for pushing me to start the thesis.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	3
Table of Contents	4
Introduction: Hosseini and Seierstad and Their Views Regarding Afghan Women’s Journey from Bondage to Freedom	5
Chapter 1: Importance of Historical Context in Hosseini’s <i>A Thousand Splendid Suns</i> and Seierstad’s <i>The Bookseller of Kabul</i>	15
Chapter 2: Modern Archetypes: Mariam and Laila from <i>A Thousand Splendid Suns</i>	31
Chapter 3: Heroines?: Making a Case for Sharifa and Leila from <i>The Bookseller of Kabul</i>	57
Conclusion	85
Works Cited	89

Introduction: Hosseini and Seierstad and Their Views Regarding Afghan Women's Journey from Bondage to Freedom

Middle-Eastern women, specifically Afghan women, are often misunderstood. Beyond the stereotypical media representations of Afghan women as submissive and in need of liberation, most people outside Afghan society lack knowledge about these women. Much of the challenge stems from hearing repugnant stories about infants and female teenagers being married to elderly men, or seeing offensive images of abused women covered from head-to-foot with the traditional burqa¹. Due to these negative depictions, those who rely mainly on the media often make quick conclusions about this culture. However, international authors, Khaled Hosseini and Asne Seierstad, among other authors, use storytelling to suggest that beneath the appearance of submission, Afghan women are reinventing themselves. Both Hosseini and Seierstad bridge the gap between stereotypical views and the realities of Afghan culture through storytelling. In their works, Afghan female characters strive for freedom in spite of the limits imposed on them by their families, religion, and patriarchal society. In a sense, the women are portrayed as fighting to reinvent themselves as modern archetypes instead of traditionally subjugated females.

Hosseini's interest in Afghan women's quest for freedom began when he visited Kabul, Afghanistan in 2003—23 years after he first left his homeland. Before this trip, Hosseini was already an established writer, having written New York Times bestseller *The Kite Runner*, but after visiting the Afghan people and witnessing first-hand how difficult life was, particularly for women, he began to focus on Afghan women and their desire for freedom in his second novel, *A*

¹ Burqa: "the burqa that covers the woman's entire body and head, with a mesh screening the eyes, is a regional style of female clothing characteristic of the Pashtun ethnic group. The burqa had existed in that region well before the advent of Islam and was the mode of dress worn by respectable woman of any social class. After the Taliban took over Afghanistan in the 1990s, its use became more widespread and was imposed on women as the most, if not the only, religiously appropriate attire" (Amer 61-2).

Thousand Splendid Suns. In an interview conducted by npr.com, he reflects on his experience of meeting some of the women in Kabul: “[W]hen I went there and I saw the enormity of the suffering that people had gone through, . . . you wonder why you were spared all of that and whether you have made good use of the good fortune that for sheer luck you’ve been granted.” That ‘good fortune’ includes the talent of writing or storytelling, and Hosseini’s personal connection (or lack thereof) to his native land was a prominent factor that contributed to his writing. Commenting on Hosseini’s talent as a writer, Sherie Posesorski describes the novel as “horrifyingly vivid as a documentary film. As you read, your belief in these two women becomes so intense that you feel their pain and joy as you would your own” (n.p.). In a way, revisiting his homeland as an adult allowed him to uncover much of the oppression that he was previously ignorant of because he saw Afghanistan in a new way. Also, hearing Afghan women’s stories about decades of war and constant oppression helped Hosseini to write about the Afghan women’s experience. Hosseini’s journey to Kabul and the interviews he conducted convicted him to share with non-Afghans what it means to endure suffering and desire hope.

Unlike his previous novel, *The Kite Runner*, where he focuses heavily on male relationships, Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns* highlights Afghan women and their roles in a patriarchal society. As Hosseini states in a BookBrowse interview, “*A Thousand Splendid Suns* is, in some ways, a more ambitious book than my first novel . . . I was performing a perpetual balancing act in writing about the intimate—the inner lives of the characters—and depicting the external world that exerts pressure on the characters and forces their fate” (n.p.). Part of the inner lives and external world that Hosseini wrote about is the lives and ambitions of two women in burqas, who are different from the Afghan women Hosseini grew up with in the 1970s. As Rebecca Stuhr explains, “[Hosseini] was raised at a time in Afghanistan when women were free

to attend schools . . . [and he] hopes this novel brings depth, nuance, and emotional subtext to the familiar image of the burqa-clad women walking down a dusty street” (4). From this, one can argue that Hosseini wrote his second novel to make important points: that not all Afghan women of the past, present, and future are bound to remain oppressed, and that the women behind the veils have inner lives and aspirations. In doing so, he focuses on the humanity of women behind the burqas, such as their talents and ambitions.

Similar to Hosseini, Norwegian journalist Asne Seierstad’s portrayal of Afghan life is appealing because of her direct interaction with the people. Approximately three weeks after 9/11 occurred, Seierstad decided to risk her life and discover what life was like for people living in Afghanistan. Seierstad willingly disguised her identity underneath the burqa when she was out in public to experience the limitations forced on women, but also freely interacted with men to understand their freedoms in this patriarchal society. While in Afghanistan, Seierstad felt compelled to write a novel about one Afghan family because of what she witnessed and learned firsthand. Similar to Hosseini, who sat down and listened to individual accounts of women living in Afghanistan, Seierstad decided that *The Bookseller of Kabul* would be a way to share with others what life in a war-torn environment is like, especially for females.

Unlike in her previous works where Seierstad gives her opinions about specific events or people, *The Bookseller of Kabul* attempts to give authority to its characters and their individual stories. Since storytelling is used to give a voice to individual experiences within the Khan family, the stories reflect human identity. Seierstad explains this further in an interview conducted when she states that “The family is the single most important institution in Afghan culture . . . If we can’t understand the Afghan family, we can’t understand Afghanistan” (Hill 2010). By limiting her scope to just one family and their struggles, hopes, and dreams, Seierstad

demonstrates that individual stories matter. She says at the beginning of *The Bookseller of Kabul*, “I did not choose my family because I wanted it to represent all other families but because it inspired me” (xv), emphasizing that every family is different. In sum, Seierstad, like Hosseini, sat down and interviewed Afghan people to get a sense of what life was like pre- and post-Taliban, and it is because of the powerful stories that she heard that she, too, decided it was necessary to write a narrative. Also, since Seierstad focuses on one family, she hopes that telling this story will help readers imagine that there are millions of other untold stories in Afghanistan.

In order to better understand the women in Hosseini’s and Seierstad’s novels, it is necessary to identify Afghan storytelling techniques, and examine if the female characters embody the same traits one would see in a typical Afghan story. First, since the majority of Afghans cannot read or write, “Afghanistan remains a primarily oral society,” suggesting that stories are often passed down orally (Health and Zahedi 60). Second, since stories are passed down orally, folktales become a way to understand one’s heritage and history. Third, Afghan storytelling researcher and expert, Margaret Mills, suggests that female characters are often portrayed as tricksters (237). In both novels, women use forms of trickery to protect themselves and illustrate their authority. Fourth, many Afghan stories have “gender centering,” which means that the author traditionally focuses on a specific sex in his or her work, and also, male characters are usually portrayed as the leaders who work outside of the home, while women hold responsibilities in the home. Fifth, Mills notes that when women are the main characters in stories, they become heroines because of the adventures or journeys they experience. Though five popular and traditional Afghan storytelling techniques have been mentioned, only three will be expanded upon: that Afghan female characters use trickery or manipulation to demonstrate power, that gender-centering allows the authors to redefine what constitutes ‘an Afghan woman’

in the narrative and, finally, when women are the main characters of a given work, they typically undergo a journey of transformation that enables them to become heroines.

Though there are many male characters in both novels, the focus of this study is on Afghan women and their quest for freedom from oppression. Out of all the females in both novels, only four will be analyzed: Mariam and Laila from *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and Sharifa and Leila from *The Bookseller of Kabul*. Though these women do not reflect every Afghan woman, their perspectives and actions represent an ideal that women in oppressive environments desire to be free. Moreover, these women are particularly interesting because Mariam and Sharifa follow the traditions of the culture, while Laila and Leila refuse to follow tradition, but their desire to escape oppression and embrace freedom is what unites them all.

Through their efforts, the women in Hosseini's and Seierstad's novels become modern archetypes because they influence modern day behaviors and attitudes. As Sophon Shadraconis explains, an "archetype [in this sense] guides mental use of images and symbols to conform to certain themes or motifs that are found everywhere" (1). First, instead of the women accepting their fate, they build a tight community with other women to create their own space and discourse to fight injustices. By creating their own space, they illustrate a desire for independence. They also risk their lives and do not allow fear to hold them back from going after freedom. Since they do not allow fear to get in their way, they are represented as heroic because they endanger their lives to escape bondage. In addition, they use both traditional and untraditional techniques associated with the oppressed to demonstrate their power, such as manipulation and trickery, resistance during intimacy, and choosing death instead of life. Lastly, despite living in a patriarchal society where males dominate and oppress women, the women

remain hopeful, and because of this, they encourage others battling oppressive forces to remain optimistic.

Joseph Campbell suggests in *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* that a heroic archetype undergoes a journey of transformation through different stages, including departure, initiation, and return. As such, the female characters participate in a journey where they experience transformation and form a new identity. The women take strides to make their dreams a reality, such as risking their lives to gain an education, or enduring abusive relationships to protect others from further violence. In the process, the women's actions allow them to break away and reconstruct their identity in terms of self-definition and self-realization that is different from traditional views of Afghan women. Lindsay E. Rankin and Alice H. Eagly suggest that "observation of [such] heroic women can change the perception of women in general" (421), and since the women represented in both novels take risks and remain courageous instead of fearful and weak, the audience gains a new perspective of these Afghan women characters as modern archetypes whose pursuit for freedom entails a quest for a new identity and a new perception of women.

In addition to the heroic nature of the women, they are also modern in their pursuits because they attempt to break away from their traditional roles, expectations, or fates, and choose new callings of a sacrificial nature. For instance, the term 'hero' is often understood to be masculine in nature, but as a study performed by Rankin and Eagly revealed, if women are placed in certain circumstances, they will risk their lives to help those in need because women are generally viewed as nurturing. Rankin and Eagly go on to suggest that "women do behave heroically in situations that involve risk to the hero and benefit to others, albeit usually in contexts that are unlikely to yield widespread public recognition for heroism" (415). Likewise,

the women represented in the novels risk their lives for themselves or others, thus illustrating their desire to break down the traditional view of ‘what is heroic’ to suggest that heroism includes anyone who risks her life for a greater purpose.

In traditional Afghan society, women who either attempt to or succeed in breaking away from traditional values are viewed in a negative manner because of the honor code. The honor code enforces traditional values, such as respecting parents or spouses and obeying their decisions. When it comes to marriage, Afghans hold strict traditions. Penelope Andrews notes that “in 2010, the Taliban stoned to death a couple who chose to marry, and eloped—against the wishes of their parents” (157). However, Mariam from *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Sharifa from *The Bookseller of Kabul* venture to break away from their traditional views through their journeys. These two women hold traditional values, such as being obedient to their parents and husbands, accepting their fate without question, and finding fulfillment by being part of a community. But even though they hold traditional roles, they actively fight to achieve freedom. As such, though tradition is important in Afghan society, the women break away from traditional expectations because the value of freedom is more important than remaining oppressed².

In contrast, the modern Afghan woman is a visionary, outspoken, and willing to risk her life because she believes that she can change her fate. In other words, the modern Afghan woman is not afraid to break away from traditional customs. Laila from *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Leila from *The Bookseller of Kabul* possess traits of modernity. Laila dreams about having an education and making a difference in the world, and Leila believes she can attend school and

² Though Feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak suggests that ‘subaltern’ [women] who do not speak are often shadows and appear vulnerable, based on the actions of the women in the novel, they choose to speak and act despite historical dangers imposed on women. To learn more about Spivak’s view regarding women in Colonist countries, read “Chapter 3: Can the Subaltern Speak” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin.

become a teacher one day. Both girls have more confidence in themselves, allowing them to vigorously pursue their dreams instead of merely daydreaming about an alternative life. Unlike how Hosseini and Seierstad describe traditional Afghan women, both Laila and Leila believe in falling in love with suitors instead of being forced into marriage by family. They also view life as an opportunity where they can become independent, instead of believing that their only goal in life is to procreate. They continuously attempt to pursue their goals, instead of remaining complacent and letting opportunities slip away. They are also more rebellious, such as Laila having sexual relations with her lifelong friend, Tariq, and Leila writing love letters to a boy she never marries. Though these acts are committed in secret, the girls risk their reputation because they would rather choose their own journeys instead of simply dreaming about them.

Hosseini and Seierstad strive to use storytelling to reinvent Afghan female characters as courageous modern archetypes. Storytelling in particular is fitting for Afghan literature since “women have had important roles as poets, storytellers, and oral history custodians throughout the Middle East. Since early Islamic times, women guarded the heritage of Arabic storytelling by transmitting stories orally from one generation to the next” (Beitler and Martinez 194). Examples like the storyteller, Shahrzad, from *The Thousand and one Nights*³ or, more recently, Malala Yousafzai’s account in *I am Malala*⁴ illustrate that women use storytelling to voice concerns and hopes for humanity, but it is also a way to show their heroism. In the case of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Bookseller of Kabul*, storytelling is used to show the strength and determination required to overcome oppression. Furthermore, using storytelling as a way to

³ *The Thousand and one Nights*: “Shahrzad is a storyteller and disobeys her father’s wishes by marrying a king who weds a new virgin every night only to execute her the next day . . . Shahrzad brilliantly and creatively weaves together innovative stories to keep the king entertained” (Beitler and Martinez 194).

⁴ *I am Malala: The Girl Who Stood up for Education and was shot by the Taliban*: Malala Yousafzai was shot by a Taliban on a school bus in Pakistan and uses this story to encourage girls to stand up for education instead of allowing extremist groups to control a society.

redefine these Afghan women's roles allows rediscovery of humanity's value—regardless of ethnicity, because these women's quest for freedom is relatable. Like all oppressed peoples, they desire to escape bondage in one form or another and gain emancipation, suggesting that the desire and opportunity for freedom unites all individuals.

Hosseini's and Seierstad's characters share common views regarding bondage, such as oppression being both an internal (home life) and external (public life) struggle. To the female characters, bondage means lack of opportunity in the home and in society, and in both stories, familial relationships expose the intrinsic cultural and patriarchal oppression of women. Each author depicts family relationships and structures as irreplaceably and traditionally hierarchal, and illuminates the struggle women face in traditional family environments. Instead of women finding solace in their homes, males practice dominance and authority in the home. From being unable to pick a suitor to not owning anything, women's power is minimal in the home. In addition, both authors highlight the effects of war on women. Due to decades of war, women have been removed from public life. Since women lack basic opportunities, such as contributing in education or vocation, women are fighting for equal opportunity in the public sphere. However, because Afghanistan uses a patriarchal system, it is difficult for women to gain independence and opportunities. As such, the women experience oppression in the home and in society. In either case, the authors depict the women as role models who endure and overcome bondage in a society where males are traditionally the leaders in all categories of Afghan culture.

The term freedom is also redefined in the novels. According to Oxford English Dictionary, freedom means "the state or fact of being free from servitude, constraint, inhibition, etc., liberty," but the term "freedom" means something different for each woman in the novel. For some of the women, freedom is experienced through death—whether that is a physical death,

as is the case for Mariam in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, or an emotional death, as is the case for Sharifa in *The Bookseller of Kabul*. For others, freedom represents an opportunity to be independent, as is the case for Laila in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Leila from *The Bookseller of Kabul*. Independence can range from pursuing an education, working outside of the home, or choosing who one wishes to marry. Though freedom is defined differently for each woman, the theme of resisting oppression is apparent in the novels. In the stories, the women resist patriarchal, economic, and social oppression, which are intrinsically linked.

In order to understand why the female characters in Hosseini's and Seierstad's novels are modern archetypes, chapter 1 will include historical information regarding Afghanistan's culture and its treatments of women—specifically how Afghan women have been treated and the challenges they have had to overcome because of their gender. Chapter 2 will then focus on Hosseini's two main characters, Mariam and Laila, to show how their journeys from enduring to overcoming bondage allow them to experience emancipation and become heroines. Though Hosseini's characters undergo obstacles before the Taliban invasion, Seierstad's characters—Sharifa and Leila—discussed in chapter 3, will illustrate that bondage continues post-Taliban. However, in the midst of bondage, Sharifa and Leila strive to obtain independence, which they equate to freedom. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss how Afghan women characters are used to illustrate the journey from bondage to freedom in storytelling, but the final chapter will suggest that the pursuit for freedom is a universal ideal instead of limited to just one gender or race. As a result, though only four female Afghan characters are analyzed, the conclusion will reiterate the value of universal ideals—specifically escape from oppression to freedom.

**Chapter 1: Importance of Historical Context in Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid
Suns* and Seierstad's *The Bookseller of Kabul***

This thesis presupposes an oppressive, traditional Afghan society where women characters in Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Seierstad's *The Bookseller of Kabul* strive to gain freedom. Understanding, then, the historical background will provide not just an overview of this traditional and religiously defined society, but help make clear the efforts, motivation, as well as the change Afghan women usher as a result of their actions. More specifically, the commonalities include the unfortunate effects of tribal and patriarchal rule on Afghan women; sexism; classism or poverty; and effects of internecine political change and wars on women for the last 100 years. Moreover, since the subject matter in both *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Bookseller of Kabul* not only deals with female characters escaping bondage and experiencing freedom, but also explores universal ideals of freedom, the historical background will offer parallels with other societies on similar quests for freedom. From this, readers can get a better understanding of why Afghan women are resilient and represent modern archetypes through storytelling.

Unlike its neighboring countries, Afghanistan has faced decades, if not centuries, of societal violence, resulting in the destruction of structural landmarks and disorder among its people. Meredith Runion argues that much of the conflict results from Afghanistan's location; it is situated "along the crucial trade routes between Asia and the Middle East" (1). Though Afghanistan is a forgotten place in world trade today, because of its location, it has served as a frequent battleground for wars. For example, Afghanistan served as a battleground when Britain invaded it twice. Its land was also used when the Soviet Union exerted influence in governmental

policies in the late 1970s to late 1980s⁵. Also, because it is considered landlocked, Afghanistan depends on neighboring countries for economic growth; however, since money is spent on products being imported into the region, Afghanistan struggles to export products at the same rate. The country is set up in three regions: the northern plains, the central highlights, and the southern plains” (7). Much of the northern plains was previously used for agriculture, but due to droughts and wars, most of the plains have been destroyed. As such, Afghanistan is considered a third-world country largely because of its location and history of wars.

Afghanistan’s geographical location, as well as the conflicts surrounding the region, have adversely affected Afghan women in particular. Due to the lack of flourishing vegetation in the region, Lynn Walter and Manisha Desai report that Afghanistan cultivates a flourishing opium trade, such as heroin and cocaine (10). Since the country relies on heroin instead of vegetation for economic growth, its citizens run the risk of suffering from drug addiction problems or being abused by individuals addicted to such substances. According to statistics that Deborah Ellis researched, “Afghanistan now produces more than 90 percent of the world’s heroin . . . [and] the number of opium addicts in Afghanistan is estimated at 1.5 million. In a country of thirty million people, that works out to one of the highest rates of addiction of any country in the world” (34-5). Due to the rise of opium and the decline of agricultural approaches, women have less jobs to perform outside of the home, which means fewer opportunities and an increasingly poor economy. In the novels, readers will observe that the women are more comfortable with inside chores, and are often discouraged and afraid to work outside of the home due to male dominance

⁵ Afghanistan’s location: “In the 19th century Britain twice invaded Afghanistan (the first and second Anglo-American Wars; 1839-1840 and 1878-1880). The British were unable to fully subdue the country, and the third Anglo-Afghan War (1919) led to its full independence. The outbreak of the civil war in 1978 led to an invasion by the Soviet Union the following year (the Afghan war)” (Britannica Concise Encyclopedia).

in the public sphere. More specifically, as a result of the Afghan civil war, which occurred between Russia and Afghanistan from 1979-1989, millions of mines were hidden underneath Afghan soil, and though the war ended, Walter and Desai reveal that “about ten million mines and other unexploded ordinance are buried in Afghanistan” (10). Women took on the responsibilities of the home and stayed indoors because it was both encouraged by family and society and safer than being outside. Because of the drastic shift where educated women were removed from public vocations for nearly a generation, the economy and family dynamic suffered, as Walter and Desai point out:

[T]he removal of skilled and educated urban women meant the closure of most schools because over 50 percent of teachers were women. It meant further deterioration of public health as women workers were sent home. It meant the near collapse of a badly maintained civil service as women were banned from public places and forced to stay at home. Overall, it intensified the social malaise gripping Afghanistan as a result of illiteracy, unemployment, poverty, and disease. (13)

The isolation of Afghan women from societal influence has created social and economic problems, illustrating that equal contribution from both genders is necessary to produce economic growth.

In addition to geography being a hindrance to Afghanistan’s progress, another reason it did not become independent until the 20th century is because the nation was dominated by tribal and traditional influences. For example, in 1900, the government was organized using the authoritarian approach where kings were appointed to the throne based on family bloodlines. The method of appointing men to influence decisions was also encouraged in the home, where men

were viewed with more authority than women. If a husband passed away, his son would become the head of the household, instead of the wife because society viewed males as leaders. Ruth M. Beitler and Angelica R. Martinez explain how the role of a patriarchal structure influences family life:

[T]he patriarchal structure...the concept of endogamy, or marrying within one's own lineage [was enforced] in order to retain inheritance rights for men . . . a father exercised control over his wife and children, and when he died, the eldest son, or another male relative, such as a brother, would assume control of the family . . . and [s]ocietal preferences for male children over female children was directly associated with the males' enhanced ability to support the family and assure the continuity of the family since descent in patriarchal societies is traced through male bloodlines. (50)

The method of marrying within one's own lineage still continues today, but when the country consisted of tribal influence—before independence—no other mainstream method was used in marriage traditions. Interestingly, the influence of the government and how it was structured was also influenced in how families organized and viewed the roles of males and females. Since independence, families still typically conform to the patriarchal structure, where males have greater influence in family life, suggesting that government has great power and impact in the country, but this method is also encouraged in a family structure.

The influence of tradition is also evident in Afghanistan's religion. In Afghan culture, the majority of citizens take Islam seriously, and creating reforms or rituals that go against the faith are seen as intolerable and disrespectful. Health and Zahedi note that "historically, the gender policies of Kabul have reflected the perceptions, attitudes, and traditions of those in power . . .

policies have always reflected the ruler's own social milieu at the expense of the wishes of the larger populace" (57). In other words, many of Afghans' rulers in the 20th and 21st centuries have attempted to create social reforms that help women create lives for themselves, but some extreme Islamic groups in the country—such as the Mujahideen⁶ and Taliban⁷—did not agree with the 'new' reforms proposed by those in power. Before these two extreme Islamic groups came to power, the country witnessed much prosperity. In the late 1970s until the early 1990s, Afghanistan was technically secular because of its government; women were allowed to work outside of the home, attend school and wear western clothes. But the majority of people "maintained its Islamic cultural identity" (Walter and Desai 21), suggesting that despite the social reforms changing, the majority of Afghan individuals remained faithful to the Islamic faith. Walter and Desai go on to say that "Among the tribes, women had their traditional place as wives and mothers and gained power as their sons grew up and started their own household. Women organize many traditional rituals and ceremonies such as birthing, naming of sons, etc." (21). Based on the above considerations, it is apparent that leaders have attempted to create opportunities for Afghan women through the establishment of laws and reforms, but because of extreme groups, such as the Mujahideen and the Taliban, women remain targets, and therefore, progress is slow.

Since women are often targeted, Afghan women traditionally cover themselves in public as a sign of respect to their religion, families, and themselves, but also because the veil protects them from further oppression. According to Sahar Amer, "Islam did not invent veiling, nor is

⁶ Mujahideen: Seven Afghan guerrilla groups came together in 1985 to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan in the name of Islamic Shari'ah law. The word Mujahedin comes from the Arabic word, meaning Islamic Unity of Afghan warrior. It also comes from the same root word of Jihad (Licher 21).

⁷ Taliban: (plural of Talib, which in Arabic means 'student' and implies those who seek Islamic knowledge) took over much of Afghanistan. They drove Rabbani's government from Kabul into the northern Panjsher Valley, where Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks formed the United Islamic Front for Salvation of Afghanistan, known as the Northern Alliance in the West" (Health and Zahedi 55).

veiling a practice specific to Muslims. Rather, veiling is a tradition that has existed for thousands of years . . . Throughout history . . . veiling has been a custom associated with women, men, and sacred places, and objects” (1). Veiling had never been an issue until recently because it had been a tradition practiced for centuries. In fact, according to its history, veiling was a way to identify a woman’s social class. Amer notes that “Married women and concubines accompanying their mistresses were required to veil their heads when going out in public . . . slaves were prohibited from veiling and could incur punishment if they did . . . [and] a veiled woman signaled an aristocratic lady who did not need to go out to work, unlike peasant women or slaves” (6). Though the veil represented one’s class throughout history, the veil in the 20th and 21st century became a way for women to protect themselves, and also a way for them to remain oppressed. Amer also suggests that “Until 1979, Saudi Arabia was the only Muslim-majority society that required the veiling of women (both native and foreign) when going out in public. Today, veiling is imposed on women” (57) due to the political upheaval in many Middle-Eastern cultures, including Afghanistan, and because of this, veiling has become a way that men can exercise authority over women, and also a way that women choose to protect themselves.

Despite the limitations Afghan women have faced throughout history, its citizens have continuously attempted to create a societal structure where independence is possible, but because of its emphasis on traditional values, Afghanistan has struggled to become modern. In 1919, Afghanistan achieved independence from British influence under the rule of King Emir Amanullah Khan, illustrating the country’s determination to seek liberation despite a 60-year battle (Licher 21). Under King Amanullah’s reign, he declared Afghanistan a monarchy and attempted to rapidly introduce social reforms in Afghanistan in the hopes of modernizing the country. Known as a progressive leader, King Amanullah’s reforms included creating

cosmopolitan schools where both boys and girls could attend; discouraging the veil and polygamy; and changing public policies for women to advocate for equal rights and freedoms—mainly encouraged by his wife, Queen Soraya Tarzi (21). His changes helped his relations with outside nations because his ideas encouraged women to become independent.

Though King Amanullah encouraged positive changes in the country, the reforms were negatively received by the Loya Jirga Grand Assembly⁸, emphasizing the persistent influence of tradition, and the struggle to modernize the region. The Assembly was initially created to “settle intertribal disputes, discuss social reforms, and approve a new constitution” (BBC News – World Edition), but in this event, the assembly reinforced the power of tradition and patriarchal rule. As such, instead of Afghanistan continuing to become progressive, the Assembly reemphasized a male-dominated society where women lived with restrictions due to traditional values. The Assembly was also very influential in communities, resulting in many males rallying behind tribal leaders who possessed similar views. Unfortunately, civil turbulence ensued as a result of the disagreement, resulting in King Amanullah’s resignation and departure from the country in 1929. But despite the reforms being rejected by the assembly, King Amanullah’s vision encouraged progress and modernization for the first time in the 20th century.

In 1933, Mohammed Zahir Shah was elected king at 19 years of age, becoming the last monarch of Afghanistan. However, since he was considered an apathetic ruler, he was not fully embraced until 20 years into his reign. In the midst of his four-decade reign, he appointed his cousin, Mohammed Daoud, as Prime Minister in 1953. Unlike King Shah, Daoud was a visionary and passionate about forming positive relationships with other nations. According to *The Bookseller of Kabul*, Daoud “shocked the population when he and his wife appeared on the

⁸ Loya Jirga Grand Assembly is a grand assembly where leaders are either appointed to higher positions within government rankings by tribal leaders or dismissed.

national day, she without a burka . . . As soon as the next day, in Kabul's streets, women were walking around in long coats, dark glasses, and a little hat, women who had previously gone out completely covered up" (Seierstad 90). This public demonstration stimulated emancipation for Afghan women for the first time in the public sphere. After this event, Afghan women in cities confidently pursued employment, education, the right to vote, and entered parliament as elected candidates. Because of Daoud's popularity and strong influence and vision, he overthrew King Shah and became the first President of Afghanistan from 1973-1978.

Similar to the challenges King Amanullah faced, President Daoud's social and Western-styled democratic political reforms were negatively received by the People's Party of Afghanistan (PDPA)⁹. Though Daoud's ideas were progressive and appreciated by many Afghans, the PDPA (consisting of individuals who held to Marxist ideas) did not believe the changes benefited the greater good. The People's Party of Afghanistan advocated male dominance and a resistance to progress and change once again. Unfortunately, Daoud's resistance to the PDPA resulted in his bloody assassination in 1978, including the death of most of his family, and the start of the Saur Revolution¹⁰ on April 27, 1978.

The Saur Revolution was the third most significant political event in Afghanistan's 20th century history. It sparked the beginning of a decade-long civil war, resulting in political unrest and two thirds of the country fleeing to neighboring countries for refuge, including Pakistan, Iran, and Iraq. Hosseini's character, Mariam, describes the Saur Revolution as "[Russian] military planes zooming past, heading north and east. Their deafening shrieks hurt her ears. In

⁹ Farr, Grant. "[People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan](http://www.encyclopedia.com)." *Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East and North Africa*. 2004. *Encyclopedia.com*. 11 Feb. 2016 <<http://www.encyclopedia.com>>.

¹⁰ Saur Revolution: The revolution was led by the PDPA, a trained group educated by the Soviet Union. This group revolted against President Daoud because the Afghan President wanted to pull away from Soviet Union influence, but the PDPA continued controlling Afghanistan using Marxist principals.

the distance, loud booms resonated and sudden plumes of smoke rose to the sky” (100), illustrating the impact of governmental unrest in Afghanistan during the latter portion of the 1970s. Up until this point, Afghanistan showed signs of economic prosperity because of its emphasis on equal rights, but the Soviet invasion in 1979 resulted in much unsteadiness due to clashing ideas between Russian and Afghan leaders. Health and Zahedi note that the Soviet policies

[W]ere viewed as un-Islamic social reforms, [and] the state resorted to the use of force to compel females to attend literacy classes in rural communities. Fearing the curriculum intended to convert their daughters to communism and was therefore antithetical to Islam, tribal and rural elements burned schools and other government buildings. (53)

In other words, many rural communities did not trust Soviet efforts due to their lack of religious interest in important areas of life, including government, education, and family.

Since legalistic Afghan groups, such as the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), saw Soviet influence as anti-Islamic, in 1985, a group of students known as Mujahideen, came together to fight the Soviets. Their main goal was to ensure that Afghanistan remained a traditional legalistic Islamic country instead of a progressive country that supported equal rights and opportunities for males and females. Eventually, the Soviet Union withdrew in February 1989, but instead of leaving a thriving country, Health and Zahedi suggest “urban women witnessed an overnight reversal of their status. As the country drifted toward failed-state status, the various Mujahideen militias and the warlords (regardless of their ethnic affiliations) battling each other in Kabul, all targeted women” (54). Just like in years past, when women were targeted, the takeover of the Mujahideen resulted in women seeing their basic rights taken away

once more. More specifically, in 1992, women's basic rights, such as choice of restriction on dress, behavior, and education were all controlled by the Mujahideen, and those who ignored their demands were jailed or killed (21). Women could still legally work, but many women began covering themselves and taking male escorts with them due to the Mujahideen targeting women who failed to align with official policy.

The Mujahideen invasion brought destruction and set back the practice of women's freedom, but the consequent formation, power, and government of the Taliban resulted in the most ruthless period in Afghanistan's history. As Licher explains, unlike its former leaders, the Taliban, which seized power in 1996,

Took control of Kabul and enforced Shari'ah law. In their zeal, the religious leaders authorized the complete subjugation of women by men and openly blamed women's liberty for the country's political corruption and years of conflict. These views were more widely held by the poor in rural areas where illiteracy was high. Traditional mullahs were afraid that female education would undermine religious authority and were in favor of child marriage or marriage at puberty to prevent sexual immorality. (22)

Ironically, the Taliban were initially well received by the Afghan people, including Rasheed from *Thousand Splendid Suns* and Sultan from *The Bookseller of Kabul* because they restored order in a country that previously experienced chaos under Mujahideen rule. However, under the Taliban, women especially suffered because their basic needs were not met, such as health care, education, or work (232). The Taliban also encouraged misogyny, suggesting that not only did women have to be careful in the public sector because the Taliban had spies patrolling the streets, but they also lacked authority in their homes. And even though the Taliban believed that

restricting women from basic freedoms was necessary for societal prosperity. The Taliban's goal of restricting women in all areas of life resulted in real social harm. Because of these restrictions, women were not only discouraged to leave the home without a male being present, they were also fearful of the outside world. The fears resulted in women becoming illiterate and dependent on males for their basic needs.

Based on the above historic details, one can see several patterns regarding Afghanistan's series of official governments. First, though former Kings and Presidents attempted to modernize Afghanistan, tribal leaders or men with authority overthrew reforms and former policies through the use of direct force, suggesting that conflict is commonly handled through violence and abuse of power relations in Afghanistan. Second, though the average citizen is eager to see progress for both males and women take place in Afghanistan, progress is often interrupted by both external and internal traditional, ideological, political, and religious forces. Lastly, though tribal leaders use violence to create fear in the nation, Kings, Presidents, and average citizens persistently press forward to achieve independence and freedom from oppression.

In addition to Afghanistan having an unstable government where power is often achieved through direct violence, it is patriarchal, which is evident in both public and domestic/private spheres where males hold primary power in leadership positions, hold moral authority, and are privileged over women. As a result, government rule, especially by the Taliban, together with the patriarchal social system, serve to promote sexism. Naomi Nkealah notes, "Patriarchy by its very nature permeates all levels of society . . . [and] because it is essentially a power relation, it remains a major determinant of women's access to power" (221), signifying not just the general power that males have in Afghanistan but, most significantly, the oppression as well as control

that men have over of women, including familial control of fathers, elders, and brothers to decide marriages, clothing, and movement of women.

Interestingly, the patriarchal structure of Afghanistan was enforced prior to the rise of Islam, and during early Islam, Muhammed treated women fairly well because he grew up in an era where women had important roles in society and home (Beitler 51). However, once Muhammed lost his first wife, Khadija, he became more protective of his other wives and controlled their attire—specifically making sure they wore the veil to remove temptation for other males while they were outdoors (56). Many citizens imitated Muhammed’s treatment of women in their own lives because they, too, believed that concealing women would protect them. According to Nikki Keddie, “a husband who had the means to keep his wife veiled and secluded showed that she was protected from advances and did not have to work or shop outside” (205), suggesting that isolating women was a cultural and social phenomenon. The Koran does not explicitly state women should be restricted to certain regulations, but many Islamic followers use the example that Muhammed and his predecessors set forth. The ritual of women being covered for security reasons is especially apparent in how Rasheed from *A Thousand Splendid Suns* views and treats his two wives.

Since Afghan women are discouraged to participate in public activities due to governmental policies and patriarchal rule, women are less educated and unable to discover their individual skills. Ellis suggests that “social customs make it very difficult for women to have independent economic power, and without that, they must depend on men for their survival . . . when a woman is forced to be dependent on an abusive man, her choices are often limited” (30). Consequently, most women are impoverished and suffer double marginalization of sexism and classism in a society that values male dominance and subservience of women and

restriction/denial of their goals, desires, support systems, and economic opportunities. Also, due to the frequency of war and men demanding that women leave their studies, women have suffered intellectually for decades and, consequently, appear ignorant and simple-minded. Though women have historically been deprived of education, with the recent fall of the Taliban, women have been reintroduced to education. This mirrors a recurring motif in Afghan history, which is that women are either given the chance to gain an education or are denied an education. In both cases, the intellect of women is controlled by male dominance, but as the women in the novels show, the desire to learn makes her more assertive because education—and the idea to reason for oneself—is worth the risk.

Based on government mandates and regulations, the restrictions that Afghan men impose on women are not limited to the public sphere; they are also transferred into the home. In Afghan culture, women are seen as having less power, especially when it involves making decisions. According to Ida Licher,

The overthrow of the Taliban did not end the existing constraints on women. Their notions of obedience to husbands and family, acceptance of responsibility for family honor, and acceptance of a subordinate social, legal, economic, and political role had been internalized. It is estimated that 80 percent of marriages still involve betrothal in infancy and coercion by families . . . Mullahs tend to justify child marriage on the basis that one of the Prophet's wives was only nine years old when he married her. (22)

Such treatment of women in Afghanistan is challenging, especially when women are forced to accept the honor code and are not seen as equal to men, which worsened in 1996 when the Taliban took control and enforced Shari'ah law, the legal system of Islam: "religious leaders

authorized the complete subjugation of women by men and openly blamed women's liberty for the country's political corruption" (Licher 22).

In addition to the Taliban's view of women, the Koran also mentions male superiority where "a man's share was deemed twice of a woman" (22), suggesting that males have more power. In other words, women are not viewed or treated as equals because society and Islamic laws value traditional and repressive gender roles. Though women attempt to help their husbands with the workload, limited participation is preferred, resulting in Afghan women remaining dependent on their husbands instead of becoming equal partners in the home.

The value—or lack thereof—of diversity in gender roles is especially evident in the practice of marriage. Unlike Western culture where females have control over wedding details, Afghan citizens rely on male elders for direction, and marriages are often forced. Health and Zahedi note that marriage depends on the family:

[M]arriage decisions are influenced by a multiplicity of factors both internal to the family and originating externally. Factors internal to the family include the structure of and the gender and generational dynamics of *individual households and families* . . . external factors include gender and generational dynamics in a *given community*; the current political, economic, and social situation. (164)

It can be surmised that marriage is primarily a strategic affair instead of being found on considerations of love, and instead of women making the decisions, males have greater influence. Men have more authority in choosing who the woman will marry, but Health and Zahedi note that as a woman's position changes in the marriage, her input regarding final decisions change; however, men ultimately have the final authority in all decisions (165). Since gender and generational dynamics are of equal importance in the household, Afghan women

must remain obedient to the traditional customs, and rebelling or taking advantage of marriage rituals can result in familial abandonment, including women losing custody of their children. Since marriage is vital to an Afghan woman's identity, a concept thematized in Hosseini's and Seierstad's novels, the psychological effects of marriage will be discussed in the later chapters.

In addition to marriage being a major topic in the novels, the effects of children entering into marriage is also a topic highlighted in the novels. According to a statistic from UNICEF, the legal age to marry is 18; however, "Afghanistan, a country which maintains age 16 years as its legal age for marriage, has been identified as a nation with very high rates of child marriage linked to poor health outcomes for both Afghan women and children" (Raj, Gomez, and Silverman 1490). UNICEF goes on to report that internationally, child marriage is on the decline, but Afghans still practice child marriage in rural, low-income families, no education areas (1490). Though several methods have been enforced, such as the Bonn Agreement¹¹, which encourages Afghans to view women as equals in government and society, Penelope Andrews notes the reality of the agreement: "regardless of the promises of freedom, liberty, and equality made to Afghan women, their situation appears to have only marginally improved" (153). Child marriages overall are on the decline, but both novels discuss the realities that young Afghan women must suffer as a result of lack of education or losing their parents.

Not only is traditional monogamous marriage a large part of an Afghan woman's identity, polygamous marriages are also practiced in households as a result of interpretations of Islamic doctrine. Researchers have suggested that polygamy leads to household conflicts due to wives becoming jealous of their husband's new bride, and though this may be an accurate insight, Afghan women often adapt to the new marriage dynamic in healthy ways. Health and Zahedi

¹¹ Bonn Agreement: The agreement was meant to "include women in the process of drafting the constitution, as well as the inclusion of rights for women in the final document" (Andrews 144).

suggest that “co-wives provide a source of support to one another, particularly by resisting a husband’s violence” (172), emphasizing that Afghan women attempt to turn a negative environment into a place where women can become united in their misfortunes. The idea of co-wives working together to achieve freedom is also an idea that will later be explored.

The historical context in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Bookseller of Kabul* allows for a better understanding of the ways that the female characters in the novels are not just modern archetypes because they choose to be, but also because they are fleeing governmental, religious, traditional, and patriarchal oppression and seeking freedom. First, tribal/traditional society and religion of Islam have historically defined women in a certain way. Various governments introduced progressive policies and education to change the former restrictions imposed on women, but failed. The Saur Revolution also introduced and unsuccessfully tried to force Marxism on women, only to be resisted by the Mujahedeen. On the frontlines, these internecine political changes affecting women appear to be dominated by men, but as will be seen in the novels, the women carry out their own freedom fight. By understanding what Afghan politics and culture was like during this time, one is able to better understand the conditions that these Afghan women characters must endure. As a result, through encountering powerful stories that express truths, the reader has the chance to better understand a person, place, or idea. Both Hosseini and Seierstad use storytelling to portray what life is like for Afghan women in the latter portion of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. In doing so, their interpretations encourage an awareness of the plight of women. Additionally, the stories illustrate the frequent injustice perpetrated against women and their desire for emancipation.

Chapter 2: Modern Archetypes: Mariam and Laila from *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

Though the fall of the Taliban in 2001 encouraged Afghan boys and girls to return to school, citizens remain predominantly illiterate. As mentioned earlier, because Afghans are illiterate, storytelling/orality forms their primary mode of cultural transmission. However, Khaled Hosseini—a migrant writer and Afghan-born—is literate and his use of storytelling in writing is “both literate and orate” (Ong 81), exhibiting what Walter Ong calls the “literate orality” of the secondary oral culture (161). He is literate but also aspires to rewrite the stories he has been told to reflect the lives of Afghans. Instead of simply entertaining or amusing an audience, “spoken words matter profoundly in everyday affairs. People’s words are their bonds; social values are taught orally” (Health and Zahedi 60). As such, oral storytelling is a way to communicate truths about Afghan people.

Hosseini uses traditional Afghan techniques of storytelling such as the employment of gender-specific protagonists, the power of using trickery to achieve success, and using the quest motif as a way to show what an Afghan woman’s experience may look like. Unlike Hosseini’s first novel, *The Kite Runner*, much of his inspiration and ideas for capturing the female characters in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* originated from the stories he heard during a trip he took to Kabul in 2003. He explains in an interview:

When I began writing *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, I found myself thinking about those resilient women over and over. Though no one woman that I met in Kabul inspired either Laila or Mariam, their voices, faces, and their incredible stories of survival were always with me, and a good part of my inspiration for this novel came from their collective spirit. (“*A Thousand Splendid Suns* Q&A”)

As such, though Hosseini admits that his main characters, Mariam and Laila, are not based on actual women he met in Kabul, he does emphasize the value of storytelling in stimulating his own fiction. Because of the oral stories that Hosseini heard in Kabul, he felt compelled to write a novel that focused on Afghan women's experiences. Unlike mainstream news, which typically focuses on superficial or the negative, storytelling, is a way to better understand individuals and their current circumstances; it also provides hope to those in oppressed situations who desire freedom.

This chapter will be divided up into two sections in order to closely examine the truths about Afghan women that Mariam and Laila represent, such as their endurance of subjugation under patriarchal rule, and their desire to escape bondage in order to experience freedom and embrace independence. Each section will focus on the journey of one of the women mentioned in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Both sections will use specific elements from Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* to discuss how Mariam and Laila are archetypes. Campbell suggests that the archetype undergoes several stages to become a heroine, but for the sake of argument and relevance, only specific subheadings from the three stages of departure, initiation, and return will be used to support how both women embody the characteristics of a heroic archetype. In addition, the sections will explain that both women are modern archetypes by examining how they use traditional and modern approaches to escape bondage and embrace freedom.

According to Campbell, the first stage a heroine must experience is a separation from the world (35). Mariam is born in the small village of Gul Daman, approximately 2 kilometers from Herat, Afghanistan's third largest city; her birth is untraditional because her mother and biological father conceived her out of wedlock. In fact, when the reader first meets her, she is

described as a *harami* or bastard child, clearly setting up a character who is anything but average. Though her father is a respected citizen in Herat, she is physically separated from her father's world, as is alluded to in the following passage:

To get to [the shack], one took a rutted, uphill dirt track that branched off the main road between Herat and Gul Daman. The track was flanked on either side by knee-high grass and speckles of white and bright yellow flowers. The track snaked uphill and led to a flat field where poplars and cottonwoods soared and wild bushes grew in dusters . . . Two hundred yards upstream, toward the mountains, there was a circular grove of weeping willow trees. In the center, in the shade of the willows, was the clearing. (9)

The secluded location of the home represents a physical reminder that Mariam is separated from her father's world, and if Jalil, Mariam's father, wants to visit, he must make the journey to see her.

Mariam is also intellectually separated from the world. For instance, instead of Mariam questioning her father early on about where she lives and why she does not live with her father's family in the city, she remains silent and naïve over the situation at hand. Unlike Mariam's home, Jalil "own[s] land in Karokh, land in Farah, three carpet stores, a clothing shop, and a black 1956 Buick Roadmaster [; is] . . . one of Herat's best-connected men, friend of the major and the provincial governor [and has] a cook, a driver, and three housekeepers" (6). The juxtaposition between Mariam's world and Jalil's world illustrates how far removed from reality Mariam is since she does not think twice about how different her life is compared to her father's nor does she question her father. As such, Mariam remains naïve and secluded due to her physical and intellectual separation from her father's reality.

The separation and naivety that Mariam experiences cause her to dream of a different life outside of the one she knows. Mariam daydreams of what life would be like if she could attend school: “thoughts of classrooms and teachers had rattled around Mariam’s head, images of notebooks with lined pages, columns of numbers, and pens that made dark, heavy marks. She pictured herself in a classroom with other girls her age. Mariam longed to place a ruler on a page and draw important-looking lines” (17). She imagines what life would be like if she could live with her father in his home in the city: “She pictured herself sitting in the private balcony seats, lapping at ice cream, alongside her siblings and Jalil” (27). She even goes so far as to imagine what it would be like to be a bird, free to travel anywhere unseen: “She was envious of these birds. They had been to Herat. They had flown over its mosques, its bazaars. Maybe they had landed on the walls of Jalil’s home, on the front steps of his cinema” (28). This calls to mind the powerful image of Frederick Douglass in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* when he wishes to be like the ships and vessels of Chesapeake Bay going in and out of the pier and imagining what life would be like if he, too, were free:

I have often, in the deep stillness of a summer's Sabbath, stood all alone upon the lofty banks of that noble bay, and traced, with saddened heart and tearful eye, the countless number of sails moving off to the mighty ocean. The sight of these always affected me powerfully. My thoughts would compel utterance; and there, with no audience but the Almighty, I would pour out my soul's complaint, in my rude way, with an apostrophe to the moving multitude of ships. (62)

Just as Frederick Douglass dreams about freedom and the chance to pursue more than the world has allowed him, Mariam dreams about life outside of the one she knows. Also, since both Douglass and Mariam belong to a marginalized group, the image suggests that oppressed

individuals use daydreaming as a way to escape reality. One of Mariam's earliest forms of defense from the world is to separate from reality by daydreaming of an alternative life.

The stories Mariam hears about the outside world encourage her to daydream. Storytelling is a way that Afghans learn about history and the world, and Mariam learns more about the world through the stories she hears. Nana, Mariam's mother, and Jalil are the primary storytellers in Mariam's life, but interestingly, though the stories they tell Mariam discuss the same events, their perspectives and interpretations are very different. In other words, storytelling becomes a way for Mariam to learn more about her mother and father in their former life, but it also becomes a way that readers can understand who she values more. When Nana tells Mariam in her own words about her birth, she says: "In Nana's account of the day that she gave birth to Mariam, no one came to help . . . She lay all alone on the kolba's floor, a knife by her side, sweat drenching her body" (11). In contrast, when Jalil tells Mariam what he remembers about her birth, he describes it as: "he'd arranged for Nana to be taken to a hospital in Herat where she had been tended to by a doctor. She had lain on a clean, proper bed in a well-lit room. Jalil shook his head with *sadness* when Mariam told him about the knife" (italics for emphasis 12). To an extent, the reader is supposed to take Jalil's side when he retells the birth story because Mariam likes his version better. However, the problem of trusting a fabricated story is, at some point, the main character will need to face the truth—either by her free-will or by force.

Though Mariam initially daydreams about a life outside the one she knows, she embarks on the journey of trying to recreate her fantasy of being reunited with her father, thus fulfilling Campbell's first portion of stage one: the call to adventure. She thinks about what makes her happy and goes on to say that "there was no one, no one, that Mariam longed to see more than Jalil" (20). And when Jalil fails to visit her, she is "deflated at the thought of the week that stood,

like an immense, immovable object, between her and his next visit” (24), suggesting that Mariam genuinely cares about her father and loves him. It is because of her father’s absence that Mariam decides to find him. As such, unlike her mother who constantly reminds her of regret, Jalil is a source of hope and happiness for Mariam.

Mariam is also motivated to leave her home and find her father because he has never disappointed her. Mariam believes that “she would always land safely into her father’s clean, well-manicured hands” (21) regardless of the outcome, suggesting how distant Mariam is from understanding disappointment. As well, Mariam’s relationship with Jalil is simple because Jalil remains superficial and tells his daughter what she wants to hear instead of being honest with her. One such example is when Mariam asks her father to take her to the cinema for her birthday instead of simply talking about it: “‘I want you to take me.’ ‘Mariam jo—’ . . . Jalil sighed. He was looking away, toward the mountains . . . Jalil looked at her with a forlorn expression . . . ‘Come here,’ [Jalil] said. He hunkered down, pulled her to him, and held her for a long, long time” (26-7). Instead of Jalil telling Mariam that her request is impossible, he gives her hope.

In Campbell’s second stage, the heroine undergoes various trials and victorious initiations. Similarly, Mariam’s departure to Herat is at first victorious because she sets out to make her dream a reality on her own. According to the novel, instead of asking her mother to go with her, “she rolled up the legs of her trousers to the knees, crossed the stream, and, for the first time in her life, headed down the hill to Herat” (30). This initial description suggests that Mariam is facing the journey alone, and instead of being fearful of what she might face, she embraces the adventure: “How brave! She gave herself over to the new life that awaited her in this city, a life with a father, with sisters and brothers, a life in which she would love and be loved back, without reservation or agenda, without shame” (31). Mariam remains hopeful about her journey because

she believes that her dreams will be made into reality. As she walks through the city alone, she thinks back to the stories she heard about Herat, and believes that the call to adventure is worthwhile: “Mariam could hardly believe that she was here. Her heart was battering with excitement” (31). These initial glimpses of Herat are positive for Mariam because she is still in control of her temporary fate.

However, Mariam’s first victory of initiation is short lived once she interacts with others in Herat, emphasizing Campbell’s idea that heroines undergo victories and challenges. As Mariam enters the city, she is forced to ask for directions because she is unsure of where her father lives, illustrating that Mariam is an outsider: “[Mariam] worked up the nerve to ask the elderly owner of a horse-drawn gari if he knew where Jalil, the cinema’s owner, lived. The old man had plump cheeks and wore a rainbow-striped chapan. ‘You’re not from Herat, are you?’ he said companionably. ‘Everyone knows where Jalil Khan lives’” (31). Even once she makes it to her father’s home, she remains isolated from her father and his family: “[The chauffeur] closed the gates. Mariam sat, and drew her knees to her chest. It was early evening already, and she was getting hungry. She ate the gari driver’s toffee” (33). Instead of being welcomed into her father’s home, as she dreamed she would be, she remains an outsider. She later tries to sneak onto the grounds of Jalil’s home, but is rejected by him: “Her gaze skimmed over all of these things before they found a face, across the garden, in an upstairs window. The face was there for only an instant, a flash, but long enough. Long enough for Mariam to see the eyes widen, the mouth open. Then it snapped away from view” (35). The ‘face’ that Mariam refers to is Jalil’s face, as readers later find out; this image of her father as the ‘face’ reiterates how disillusioned by reality she is the moment she spots him in his home.

Mariam's return to her home in Gul Daman is inevitable because her father rejects her, but the return represents the beginning of her journey to becoming a modern archetype. According to Campbell, in the third stage of the return, the heroine either returns willingly or unwillingly: "the return and reintegration with society, which is indispensable to the continuous circulation of spiritual energy into the world, and which, from the standpoint of the community, is the justification of the long retreat, the hero himself may find the most difficult requirement of all" (36). There are two reasons why the return is difficult for Mariam. First, the return to Gul Daman represents a metaphorical death because she realizes that what she thought was 'reality' was only a fantasy: "All during the ride, as she bounced in the backset, she cried. They were tears of grief, of anger, of disillusionment" (Hosseini 35). For the first time, Mariam is no longer blinded by her father and is able to understand that she was creating a fantasy. Second, Mariam realizes she is going back to nothing; her mother hanged herself while Mariam was gone: "Mariam caught a glimpse of what was beneath the tree: the straight-backed chair, overturned. The rope dropping from a high branch. Nana dangling at the end of it" (36). The death of Nana means that Mariam must face harsh realities, but it also becomes the main reason Mariam must use trickery, physical strength, and become self-sacrificial to gain her freedom in the face of an oppressive and abusive marriage.

As such, Mariam begins a second journey as a modern archetype, only this time, she is forced into it. Campbell suggests that there are several types of 'calls' for the heroine, and for Mariam, 'the refusal of the call' proves how vulnerable she is in this patriarchal society (60). When her father insists that she listen to her new stepmothers about marrying an older man, she says, "'I don't want to,' Mariam said. She looked at Jalil. 'I don't want this. Don't make me.' She hated the sniffing, pleading tone of her voice but could not help it" (Hosseini 47). Even

after Mariam is legally married to Rasheed and is about to leave for Kabul, approximately “six hundred and fifty kilometers to the east of Herat” (48), she voices her opinion to Jalil about the situation: ““I thought about you all the time. I used to pray that you’d live to be a hundred years old. I didn’t know. I didn’t know that you were ashamed of me . . . It ends here for you and me. Say your goodbyes”” (55). Unlike the first journey that Mariam willingly takes, this second journey is a forced endeavor. As such, instead of Mariam showing respect to her father, she displays anger and hate towards her father, illustrating that she has changed as a result of the challenges that arose.

In addition to Mariam treating her father differently because he has forced her into a marriage with a stranger, she initially breaks the stereotype of being a subjugated wife by controlling her intimacy with Rasheed. There are two reasons why Mariam is able to control intimacy in the marriage: Mariam is vulnerable and scared because she is in an unknown territory, and she gives Rasheed hope that she can become accustomed to her new surroundings in time. When Rasheed tries to touch Mariam, she remains vulnerable: ““You’re shaking. Maybe I scare you. Do I scare you? Are you frightened of me?”” (60). This sign of vulnerability, a traditional technique used by oppressed individuals, allows Mariam to buy some time for herself: ““At [Mariam’s] door, he paused, took a long drag, crinkled his eyes against the smoke. Mariam thought he was going to say something. But he didn’t. He closed the door, left her alone with her suitcase and her flowers”” (61). Mariam also lies to gain additional time for herself before becoming intimate with Rasheed. When Rasheed questions her about being afraid of him, ““she quickly shook her head in what she recognized as her first lie in their marriage”” (61). This act shows that there is dishonesty in the marriage, but is a further way for Mariam to gain control of the situation.

Another way that Mariam decides to escape bondage and create a fulfilling life is by trying to conceive a male son. Interestingly, Mariam is initially happy when she finds out that she will conceive a boy or a girl because she finds purpose in the prospect of being a mother: “This is why God had brought her here, all the way across the country” (89). But as Walter and Desai note, Afghan women “gain status by bearing sons which will make them mother-in-laws in a position of authority in the future” (16). Based on this reality, Mariam feels obligated to conceive a male because she knows that not only will a boy’s life be easier, but also her life will be easier. Even when Mariam and Rasheed have a conversation about a baby, Rasheed always refers to the baby as a boy, but “Mariam wish[es] he wouldn’t do that, hitch his hopes to its being a boy. As happy as she was about the pregnancy, [Rasheed’s] expectation weighed on her” (Hosseini 87), illustrating the social pressure placed on Afghan women to have a boy. Unlike men, “[Afghan] women ha[ve] their traditional place as wives and mothers and gain power as their sons gr[o]w up and start their own households. Women organize many traditional rituals . . . although men preside over the ceremonies” (Walter and Desai 21), suggesting that men have more opportunity and authority over all avenues of life in Afghanistan. As such, favoritism to male heirs is displayed in the family.

Mariam’s efforts to conceive a son are unprofitable after seven miscarriages, and as a result of the failed attempts, Rasheed becomes increasingly abusive, but Mariam remains strong. In Campbell’s second stage, there is a section called, ‘the belly of the whale,’ where he argues that “The hero[ine], instead of conquering or conciliating power . . . [she is] swallowed into the unknown, and would appear to have died” (90), implying that some trials are too difficult for the heroine to overcome on her own. But Mariam shows determination by enduring Rasheed’s abuse. Baldry, Pagliaro, and Porcaro argue that in Afghanistan, honor is valued more than law,

including a woman showing respect to her husband regardless of whether his motives are right or wrong¹². Instead of leaving her home because of the abusive relationship, Mariam continues to tolerate it. Huma Ahmed-Ghosh suggests that unlike Westerners, who believe that equal rights includes the privilege to divorce abusive husbands, many Afghan women do not consider divorce an option because of their faith: “For Afghan women, the discourse on human rights has a very different connotation than for those who debate it on purely intellectual or political grounds: Human rights should be about securing political and economic liberty and freedoms for the individual, and involve the freedom to practice one's culture and religion within her community” (31). Mariam stays married to Rasheed because of her lack of family, her devotion to her faith, and because of cultural obligation.

Even when Rasheed takes on a second wife, Mariam stays in the family to reestablish her role in the family, and prove her authority, illustrating her strength and determination despite the challenges. For the past 18 years, Mariam has endured emotional, mental, and physical abuse from her husband, but once Rasheed officially marries Laila, Rasheed tests Mariam's self-control even further. When Rasheed gives Laila the rules and expectations of being a wife in the home, he refers to Laila and him as “city people, you and I, but she [Mariam] is dehati¹³. A village girl. No. She grew up in a kolba made of mud outside the village . . . She is sturdy . . . if she were a car, she would be a Volga¹⁴” (Hosseini 22). During this criticism, Mariam shows strength by remaining composed, but when Mariam is finally alone with the woman, she demonstrates authority over Laila, “I won't take orders from you. You can complain to him and he can slit my

¹² Baldry, Pagliaro, and Porcaro researched Afghans and noted that “people, mostly in rural areas, practice this tradition [masculine honor] and act in the name of honor rather than in the name of the law. The law itself, with regard to the position of women and moral behavior, reflect a culture of masculine honor” (366).

¹³ Dehati: insulting form for ‘village girl’ in Farsi.

¹⁴ Volga: Soviet Union car that replaced the GAZ Pobeda in 1956

throat, but I won't do it . . . I was here first. I won't be thrown out" (225). Mariam does not voice her anger towards Rasheed, but she does show her authority to Laila because she does not want Laila to take advantage of her like Rasheed has done throughout their marriage.

Though Mariam is upset about her role changing as a result of Rasheed gaining another wife, she remains a good example to Laila. As soon as she stands up to Laila and tells her that she will not be ordered around, she reflects on her outburst and realizes it is out of character for her: "when she was done speaking, her heart was hammering and her mouth felt parched. Mariam had never before spoken in this manner, had never stated her will so forcefully. It ought to have felt exhilarating, but [Laila's] eyes had teared up and her face was drooping, and what satisfaction Mariam found from this outburst felt meager, somehow illicit" (226). Though she is rightfully angry about the situation, Mariam's actions reflect her desire to be part of a community. Before Laila came along, Mariam experienced isolation in the marriage, but when Laila entered her life, Mariam starts to want community again. As such, instead of Mariam feeling satisfied that she has yelled at Laila, she experiences the opposite, illustrating that she does not want to be a negative role model because she simply craved community.

Because Mariam shows empathy once she contemplates how she treated Laila, she establishes respect from readers and Laila. Asma Arshi believes Mariam is "altru[istic], self-sacrificial, as well as valour and courage[ous]. She is a character who becomes a role model for the reader because of her devotion and sacrifice for the people she loves" (4). One would expect Mariam to take revenge on Laila because she stole her husband's affection, but Mariam does the complete opposite. She slowly works to create a friendship with Laila because she wants to protect her from oppression: "[Laila's] fall from grace ought to have pleased Mariam . . . but it didn't. It didn't. To her own surprise, Mariam found herself pitying the girl" (239). In polygamist

families, it is common for co-wives to learn to get along because they share responsibilities. And as Health and Zahedi explain further, polygamous marriages can change the family dynamic, because “there are expectations whereby co-wives provide a source of support to one another, particularly by resisting a husband’s violence” (172-3). Similarly, Mariam chooses to form a relationship with Laila as a result of both women enduring an abusive relationship. Hosseini describes the women as completing “their chores together . . . Mariam slowly grew accustomed to this tentative but pleasant companionship. She was eager for the three cups of tea she and Laila would share in the yard, a nightly ritual now. In the morning, Mariam found herself looking forward to the sound of Laila’s cracked slippers slapping the steps as she came down for breakfast” (251-2). Instead of the women being disunited because they must share the same husband, they form a strong friendship.

As a result of experience and authority, Mariam becomes a mother figure to Laila and protects her. One way that Mariam becomes a mother figure to Laila is by protecting and assisting Laila through her labor process:

Mariam waded in. She dug in her heels and burrowed against the elbows, hips, and shoulder blades of strangers. Someone elbowed her in the ribs and she elbowed back. A hand made a desperate grab at her face. She swatted it away. To propel herself forward, Mariam clawed at necks, at arms and elbows, at hair, and, when a woman nearby hissed, Mariam hissed back. (287)

Mariam uses her body to protect Laila from harm, and because of her actions, the reader can see how strong she really is. She does not allow challenges to get in her way. Also, even though she has had multiple miscarriages, Mariam treats Laila’s children as if they were her own because she believes that Laila would do the same for her: “Mariam positioned herself behind the crown

of Laila's head and lowered her face so their cheeks touched. She could feel Laila's teeth rattling. Their hands locked together" (292). This beautiful description shows that through trials and challenges, Mariam willingly helps Laila because she realizes that they experience bondage together and can achieve their freedom working as allies rather than enemies. As such, the quest for freedom becomes a way that the women are united.

In the midst of enduring bondage, Mariam also protects Laila from further abuse from Rasheed. When Rasheed learns that his first child is not his, he lashes out at Laila, but Mariam protects her from death, and in the process, fulfills Campbell's second stage—initiation—and becomes a heroine to Laila and the reader. As Rasheed attacks Laila, the text reads that: "[Mariam] clawed at him. She beat at his chest. She hurled herself against him. She struggled to uncurl his fingers from Laila's neck" (345). In this scene, the reader realizes that the only way for Mariam to obtain freedom is if she takes the situation in her own hands and does not think about the consequences. Because of her love for Laila, she "grabbed the shovel" (347) from the toolshed and "raised the shovel high, raised it as high as she could, arching it so it touched the small of her back. She turned it so the sharp edge was vertical, and, as she did, it occurred to her that this was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life" (349). In this moment, Mariam realizes that freedom is literally available in her hands, and instead of doubting herself, she "brought down the shovel. This time, she gave it everything she had" (349). Unlike other societies where she would not have been held liable for any wrongdoing, during the reign of the Taliban, if a woman killed her husband—even if she was defending herself—the charge was death. Mariam understands the consequences of her actions, but she is at peace because Rasheed will never harm her or Laila.

In Campbell's last stage, return, he suggests that heroines are transformed because of the journey that they have endured (193). Similarly, instead of Mariam feeling guilty and angry that her life consisted of deceit and abuse by males, she tells Laila that she is happy with the choices she made: "There's nothing more I want. Everything I'd ever wished for as a little girl you've already given me. You and your children have made me so very happy" (Hosseini 358). The happiness that Mariam experiences is echoed in Marxists critic Aijaz Ahmad's view of oppressed people: "lives lived under oppression . . . — of resistance, of decency, of innumerable heroisms of both ordinary and extraordinary kinds— . . . makes life, even under oppression, enduring and frequently joyous" (139). As Ahmad suggests, instead of oppressed women characters feeling defeated in the midst of their circumstance, they choose to be joyful with the outcomes. When Mariam kills Rasheed, she knows that she has guaranteed freedom for herself and for Laila, and knowing this gives her joy. Even as Mariam sits in the van, awaiting her death, she remains poised and confident: "Mariam's leg did not buckle. Her arms did not fail. She did not have to be dragged" (Hosseini 369). Mariam is no longer fearful of the future because she knows that Rasheed can no longer harm her, Laila, or Laila's children.

Mariam's self-sacrifice is not a negative outcome because she chose her fate for herself and has no regrets: "she was leaving the world as a woman who had loved and been loved back. She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A mother. A person of consequences at last. No. it was not bad at all, Mariam thought, that she should die this way. Not so bad. This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings" (370). Mariam's life and strength provide inspiration for all that are living in oppression, and as Asma Arshi suggests, "[Hosseini] gives us many characters, but the character that wins our heart and stands out from the rest is Mariam.

She is an epitome of sacrifice” (2). Because of Mariam, not only does Laila get a chance to pursue her dreams, but her sacrifice also allows other women to hope for a different fate.

Unlike Mariam, Laila is not born out of wedlock, and is born in a modern household where her father encourages her to love learning in the classroom. Laila’s father is a professor at Kabul University and encourages Laila to pursue education: “the most important thing in his life, after her safety, was her schooling” (114). Laila attends school in 1987 and, during this time, women who lived in cities were encouraged to attend school, work outside of the home, and vote for candidates in parliament. In addition to that, women were not forced to wear versions of the veil since the government was trying to modernize the country, suggesting how progressive Afghanistan was trying to be as a result of the Soviet Union’s invasion. Laila’s father only views marriage as an alternative in case the educational route does not work in her favor:

‘I know you’re still young, but I want you to understand and learn this now,’ he said. Marriage can wait, education cannot. You’re a very, very bright girl. Truly you are. You can be anything you want, Laila. I know this about you. And I also know that when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, maybe even more. Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila. No chance.’ (114)

Along with Laila’s father, Tariq, Laila’s childhood best friend is someone that allows her to be herself. One example of this is when the young friends are watching a movie in the cinema and “Tariq burst out crackling. And, soon, they both were in the grips of a hopeless attack of laughter” (156). Unlike Mariam who was only told stories about attending the cinema, Laila is able to experience the basics of life freely and she is encouraged to do so by important males in her life.

Laila also exercises freedom in terms of her relationship with Tariq. Around the time that Laila starts to have strong feelings for Tariq, the year is 1992 and during this year, “Najibullah surrendered at last and was given sanctuary in the UN compound near Darulaman Palace, south of the city. The jihad was over. The various communist regimes that had held power since the night Laila was born were all defeated” (159). Najibullah was considered a modern president and because of his ideals, the Mujahideen leaders and his comrades overthrew him to reestablish ‘order’ and strong Islamic ideals in Afghanistan. But in the midst of this, Laila experiments with love—a concept that is not favored in Afghanistan. Penelope Andrews notes that if a woman is even suspected of adultery, she “may be stoned to death, assaulted, or sent to prison on trumped up charges. In fact, women’s prisons are full of women and their children . . . for merely trying to avoid child marriage or rape or other forms of violence” (157). Though Laila is aware of the danger, she admits that “she had fallen for Tariq. Hopelessly and desperately. When he was near, she couldn’t help but be consumed with the most scandalous thought of his lean, bare body entangled with hers” (Hosseini 163). Unlike Mariam, Laila freely thinks about a future with Tariq and imagines what intimacy would be like. Instead of simply imagining a life outside of the one she knows, she actively begins a relationship on her own.

Laila tests her limits further by experiencing sexual intimacy with Tariq, which demonstrates her confidence in herself since a Muslim girl’s virginity is only meant for her husband. The first time Laila allows Tariq to touch her shows that she is in love: “Laila thought of Tariq’s hands, squeezing her breast, sliding down the small of her back, as the two of them kissed and kissed” (178). On the other hand, since Laila allows herself to give in to temptation, she appears naïve because she does not think about the consequences of her actions. As a result, instead of their act of intimacy being a beautiful gift, it becomes a secret that she must hide from

her family and her future husband: “the shame set in, and the guilt, and, upstairs, the clock ticked on, impossibly loud to Laila’s ears. Like a judge’s gavel pounding again and again, condemning her” (183). It is only after the act that Laila thinks about the ramifications of her actions, and realizes because of what she did, she will live with guilt for the next two decades.

In Laila’s case, her journey to escape bondage and attempt to find freedom does not occur until 1992, when her parents die, and she is left homeless and pregnant with her first child.

According to the story:

Something hot and powerful slammed into her from behind. It knocked her out of her sandals. Lifted her up. And now she was flying, twisting and rotating in the air, seeing sky, then earth, then sky, then earth. A big burning chunk of wood whipped by. So did a thousand shards of glass, and it seemed to Laila that she could see each individual one flying all around her, flipping slowly end over end, the sunlight catching in each. Tiny, beautiful rainbows. (194)

The account that is described in the above passage represents two monumental events in Laila’s life. First, the explosions represent the death of Laila’s former life since her parents both die in the explosion. Not only do Laila’s parents die, but her dreams of obtaining an education dissolve well as. Second, the explosion represents a symbolic rebirth for Laila, but instead of this new life bring the same opportunities she was used to, Laila’s new life begins with rules and regulations. This scene, emblematic of Campbell’s first stage, departure, shows that Laila, too, is called to a journey which is out of her control—a traumatic experience which began with the death of her parents as a result of the violence in Kabul. Consequently, Laila is left parentless and at the mercy of anyone who will take in a female minor.

Unlike Mariam, Laila is relieved to learn that Rasheed wishes to marry her, suggesting that Laila views Rasheed's marriage proposal as an escape from her current bondage. Moreover, since Laila learns about her pregnancy after her sexual relations with Tariq and believes he is gone, she is forced into the marriage with Rasheed: "Laila was dimly aware that she was nodding. She'd known. Of course she'd known" (209). Out of fear, she lies about her situation and quickly jumps into a marriage and sexual relations with Rasheed: "the girl's face twisted, and she was on all fours then saying she was going to be sick" (203), illustrating how desperate Laila wants to escape her current situation.

Subsequent events illustrate the second phase of Laila's journey in light of Campbell's second stage, initiation, where the hero undergoes great trials and some achievements. Laila initially experiences some achievements when she marries Rasheed. Her plan of hiding the pregnancy from Rasheed pans out in her favor because Rasheed does marry her—even though she had been with another man a few weeks prior: "She knew that what she was doing was dishonorable. Dishonorable, disingenuous, and shameful . . . but even though the baby inside her was no bigger than a mulberry, Laila already saw the sacrifices a mother had to make. Virtue was only the first" (219). Moreover, since Laila is holding another man's baby in her belly, she breaks away from the traditional stereotype of being a virgin on her wedding day and hiding her prior sexual encounter from her future husband. However, Laila's reasoning for doing so is valid because she loved Tariq: "something of her former life remained, her last link to the person that she had been before she had become so utterly alone. A part of Tariq still alive inside her, sprouting tiny arms, growing translucent hands. How could she jeopardize the only thing she had left of him, of her old life" (219). Though Laila initially lies and tricks Rasheed into believing

that the baby she has is, in fact, Rasheed's, the truth always comes out—whether individuals want for it to or not.

In Laila's case, married life after the wedding gradually worsens due to Rasheed's legalistic views regarding Afghan women. Unlike Rasheed, who restricts Laila from leaving the home unescorted, Laila's father is liberal in terms of letting his daughter experience life and adventure. But Rasheed's actions are a result of the societal dynamics outside of the home. Rosemaire Skaine says that "In 1994 the Taliban began capturing cities . . . [a]s part of the Taliban's rise to power, they imposed severe restrictions on women" (7). Likewise, when Laila is first married in 1992, the streets of Kabul are becoming increasingly dangerous, and Rasheed knows that many men will pursue his new bride, so he rapidly controls Laila by restricting her freedoms. He asks that Laila follow two commands: 1) "I ask that you avoid leaving this house without my company. That's all. Simple, no?" (223); 2) "I also ask that when we are out together, that you wear a burqa. For your own protection, naturally. It is best. So many lewd men in this town" (223). Despite societal tensions, which targeted women, women were still able to work and attend school, but Rasheed does not allow Laila to be out on her own.

Laila, though an outspoken young person, remains quiet in the beginning of her marriage because she is aware of what will happen to her and her baby if Rasheed finds out the truth. She chooses to remain under Rasheed's authority because she has nowhere else to go, but she does voice how lonely she feels: "Laila passed that winter of 1992 sweeping the house, scrubbing the pumpkin colored walls of the bedroom she shared with Rasheed, washing clothes outside in a big copper lagoon . . . she felt lost then, casting about, like a shipwreck survivor, no shore in sight, only miles and miles of water" (231). Laila continues to undergo the oppression because she is

physically stuck due to her pregnancy, but she is also strategic because she desires to escape, but knows that she is not in good physical condition to escape.

Laila remains quiet around Rasheed, but she does find the courage to stand up to Mariam, showing that she is breaking the critical tradition of respecting the first wife. During the fight, Laila accidentally gets into Mariam's way and calls her a "sad, miserable woman" (233). But after the fight, Laila reflects on her actions and realizes that she has more inner strength and confidence than she remembered: "Laila was still shocked at how easily she'd come unhinged, but the truth was, part of her had liked it, had liked how it felt to scream at Mariam, to curse at her, to have a target at which to focus all her simmering anger, her grief" (234). Mariam becomes the person that Laila can take her frustration out on because she knows that Rasheed will protect Laila first before he saves Mariam.

Though the women are initially divided and despise one another, their relationship quickly changes and strengthens once Laila has her first child and protects Mariam. When Rasheed loses control over petty things, Mariam becomes the target of his frustration; however, Laila shows her determination to protect Mariam from him by "lung[ing] at him. [Laila] grabbed his arm with both hands and tried to drag him down, but she could do no more than dangle from it. She did succeed in slowing Rasheed's progress toward Mariam . . . They struggled like this, the girl hanging on, pleading, Rasheed trying to shake her off, keeping his eyes on Mariam, who was too stunned to do anything" (241). Because Laila risks her life for Mariam, the women are able to form a bond that allows them to resist Rasheed together. Interestingly, up until this point, whenever Mariam referred to Laila, she always called her 'girl' instead of Laila to limit her authority and show her annoyance at the situation. But after Laila comes to Mariam's aide, Mariam calls Laila by her name to acknowledge her respect for what she did for her (242).

Once Laila protects Mariam from Rasheed's verbal and physical abuse, she gains more confidence and begins to plan an escape to escape bondage. Laila's first plan is to flee their home and escape to Pakistan, but because women must be escorted by males in public, "the first risky part [was] finding a man suitable to pose with them as a family member. The freedoms and opportunities that women had enjoyed between 1978 and 1992 were a thing of the past now" (259). Laila knows that times have changed and it is difficult for a woman to leave the home alone without being noticed, but she willingly risks her life because she desperately desires to be free from Rasheed's control. But as she leaves the home, she also realizes that she must be aware of her external environment since women in 1994 were often targeted by extreme Islamic groups: "Laila felt watched. She looked no one in the face, but she felt as though every person in this place knew, that they were looking on with disapproval at what she and Mariam were doing" (259). Laila desires to experience freedom, but due to increasing tension within the country, she also faces social limits.

Because the Mujahideen leaders had undercover soldiers scattered within and around Kabul, Laila's plan comes to a halt and Rasheed shows his control by abusing Laila and Mariam. The only way that Rasheed exemplifies his power is through physical violence, a strategy that the Afghanistan government has used on its people for the last 100 years. But what is interesting about Laila and Mariam is that the abuse the women experience gives them a reason to keep fighting:

Laila didn't see the punch coming. One moment she was talking and the next she was on all fours, wide-eyed and red-faced, trying to draw a breath. It was as if a car had hit her at full speed . . . [Laila] watched him shove Mariam into the toolshed. He went in, came out with a hammer and several long planks of wood.

He shut the double doors to the shed, took a key from his pocket, worked the padlock. (268-9)

The women remain in bondage because they are frightened for their lives due to Rasheed's threat: "You try this again and I will find you . . . and when I do, there isn't a court in this godforsaken country that will hold me accountable for what I will do" (272)¹⁵. Due to the threat of force, the women continue to remain oppressed, suggesting how difficult it is for women to endure or flee this type of environment.

Laila's plan to flee is unsuccessful, but she continues to show confidence by voicing her opinion to Rasheed, illustrating her intelligence and her desire for equality. For instance, the story quickly moves to 1996, the year that the Taliban arrive in Kabul, and according to Rasheed, "the Taliban are pure and incorruptible. At least they're decent Muslim boys. Wallah, when they come, they will clean up this place. They'll bring peace and order. People won't get shot anymore going out for milk. No more rockets" (274). In the midst of this societal change, Laila demonstrates her knowledge of what is occurring in the city: "This isn't some village. This is Kabul. Women here used to practice law and medicine; they held office in the government" (279). To an extent, Laila's knowledge regarding the outside world demonstrates that, even though educated women were removed from the public sphere during the Taliban reign, women continued to hope and voice their opinions about equality. Her words also reiterate that Rasheed can abuse and scare Laila, but she still has her intelligence and voice to show her confidence. By telling Laila's story then, non-Afghans may realize that women in Afghanistan during the Taliban lived under subjugation and oppression, but they fought for equality, freedom, and happiness as well.

¹⁵ During the early 1990s, women in Afghanistan did not have authority or a voice; their only voice was their husbands.

The latter part of Laila's life parallels Campbell's last stage, return, which is more of a metaphorical return when applied to Laila's life. After a few years, Laila tries to escape again, this time because her childhood lover, Tariq, returns. The reunion of Laila and Tariq is significant because Tariq was always a source of hope for Laila. Seeing him allows her to consider a new life, away from Rasheed and his torment: "Laila stood perfectly still and looked at Tariq until her chest screamed for air and her eyes burned to blink. And, somehow, miraculously, after she took a breath, closed and opened her eyes, he was still standing there. Tariq was still standing there" (327). This reunion is also symbolic because Laila's life prior to marrying Rasheed was good; Laila was encouraged to pursue her desires, she was viewed as an equal, and her opinions mattered to those with whom she interacted. Tariq is also the only individual who intimidates Rasheed because of his past with Laila. When Rasheed finds out about Tariq's return, "[Rasheed's] face turned stony. 'So you let him in. Here. In my house. You let him in. He was in here with my son'" (337). Rasheed's words to Laila are significant because he is referring to a male stranger visiting his home while he was away and his children were present, but he may also be referring to Laila letting Tariq take her virginity away before Rasheed could.

Though Laila is not the one who kills Rasheed, she is also a heroine because her untraditional sexual relations caused Rasheed's death. In other words, it is because of Laila's sin of fornication that Mariam is able to protect Laila from Rasheed. Early on, Rasheed warns Mariam first that he is "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" (70). Because of Rasheed's insecurity and jealousy, he uses the veil to hide his wives from other men. But when he learns the truth about Laila's past

relationship with Tariq, he ventures to kill his second wife. In a sense, then, if Laila had not made the mistake of sleeping with another man that was not her husband, Rasheed would have never attacked the women. Moreover, even though Laila escapes oppression by marrying Tariq and fleeing to Pakistan, Laila desires to return to Afghanistan because she wants to be part of the society's progress: "she has become plagued by restlessness. She hears of schools built in Kabul, roads repaired, 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" (389). Her willingness to come back demonstrates that she has become stronger and more independent because of the journey she went through.

Mariam and Leila are modern archetypes because they pursue the journey from oppression to freedom. Using Campbell's three stages of adventure, including departure, initiation, and return, both women are able to experience freedom on their own terms. The call to adventure begins when both women desire to escape their present reality—both in response to deaths in the family. However, the deaths of their family members also symbolize new life since the women pursue a departure with the intent of creating a new life for themselves. In the midst of their transition, both experience years of challenges, which entail physical abuse from their husband and also decades of war, including further oppression, but also victories since the women become united and are able to conquer challenges together. Because the women work together, they are able to escape oppression and pursue freedom individually. Though Mariam experiences freedom through death, she is happy because of the journey that she went on, and Laila is able to experience independence because of Mariam's sacrifice. Hosseini uses these women to illustrate that Afghan women characters do not remain oppressed; rather, they pursue

their dreams, illustrating their strength. Mariam and Laila are also used to show that the pursuit of freedom from oppression is universal.

Chapter 3: Heroines?: Making a Case for Sharifa and Leila from *The Bookseller of Kabul*

The September 11, 2001 attacks on America, the resulting American invasion of Afghanistan, and consequent Afghan-American war (2001-present) further impacted the condition of Afghan women and led to their depiction and perception in literature as either victims of internecine wars, regime change, extremism, and patriarchal systems, or heroines fighting for freedom from oppression. Much of the reason that readers view Afghan women characters in these extremes is because it is difficult for non-Afghans to imagine what life is like in a war-torn patriarchal environment. Jennifer Health and Ashraf Zahedi note that “After the United States routed the Taliban in 2001, women were *expected* to emancipate themselves from the burqa and embrace the new choices available to them. It didn’t happen” (italics used for emphasis 105). This expectation that a non-Afghan reader has about Afghan women is improbable because, as Dena Rosenbloom and Mary Beth Williams explain, “Traumatic events shatter illusions about how safe the world really is and how much control any individual has over his or her life” (119). In other words, though the fall of the Taliban was a victory for Afghanistan, the women nevertheless remain fearful of their surroundings, partly because of the possible resurgence of the Taliban, and especially because some of the horrendous traditional practices such as polygamy, arranged marriage, and patriarchal treatment of women have continued. These life realities of Afghan women and men are the subject of the non-fiction narrative of Norwegian journalist and author, Asne Seierstad, who entered Afghanistan three weeks after September 11, 2001 to highlight female characters as oppressed and struggling for freedom in *The Bookseller of Kabul*.

Instead of creating fictional characters, Seierstad uses real people and stories to show the day-to-day struggles and effects of post-Taliban rule on women. Many of the women represented

in the novel experience a desire to overcome bondage and oppression, but because of a patriarchal society, they face countless challenges. Though there are numerous women in the novel, Sharifa—Sultan’s first wife, and Leila—Sultan’s youngest sister, are two women who fit Campbell’s heroine archetype.

Similar to chapter 2, this chapter is divided into two smaller sections to show how Sharifa and Leila epitomize heroines as defined by Campbell. The first section will examine Sharifa’s life to illustrate how she undergoes Campbell’s three stages—separation, initiation, and return—and overcomes them to become a heroine. Then, an analysis of her return will be explored to conclude that she is both a modern archetype in terms of her intellectual attributes and also a traditional heroine because of how she views marriage and gender roles. The latter portion of the chapter will show how Leila is also a heroine using Campbell’s three stages, but unlike Sharifa, Leila undergoes the journey from oppression to freedom multiple times as a result of external circumstances. Though Leila is modern in terms of her motivation to obtain a different future than the one orchestrated by her family, she remains just a traditional heroine as opposed to a modern heroine due to her inability to break away from rules and boundaries enforced by family and society.

The first stage that a hero undergoes is departure, more specifically to pursue the adventure worthy of a hero; as Campbell notes, “the ‘call to adventure’ signifies that destiny has summoned the hero . . . within the pale of his society to a zone unknown” (58). In Sharifa’s case, the call to adventure is better described as a journey. In the opening section of *The Bookseller of Kabul*, Sharifa’s husband, Sultan Khan, is strategizing a proposal to another woman named Sonya since Sharifa is no longer physically capable of producing children. Until this point, Sharifa has been the only woman Sultan has been with. But Beitler and Martinez discuss the

pressure that Afghan women face in marriage to produce children and explain that “after marriage, a woman’s productivity or *worth* [i]s often associated with her fertility and, more specifically, her ability to produce male heirs” (italics used for emphasis 50). Interestingly, instead of Sharifa being unprepared for the proposal, she faces the difficult reality of her husband pursuing another woman with strength: “the time had come for a man of Sultan’s standing to find a new wife” (Seierstad 4). This initial glimpse of Sharifa shows that she is exceptional because she is emotionally strong and ready for her husband to take an additional wife. As Sultan makes the arrangements to get married, “No one wanted to attend the engagement party. But Sharifa had to bite the bullet and dress up for the celebrations” (8). In the midst of the second union, Sharifa remains strong and shows others that she can handle any challenges that arise.

Sharifa uses humor to face this journey. When Sultan comes home and tells her about the proposal, her confidence is projected based on how she views the proposal: “Sharifa thought he was joking and laughed and cracked jokes in return” (7). Her response may shock readers, but her technique allows her to cope with this situation and remain positive and confident. In contrast, an angry outburst would have resulted in drastic consequences. Also, this strategy is not out of character for her; as the text reveals, “Sharifa had always humored her husband, and now too, in this worst circumstance, giving him to someone else, she knuckled under” (8). Campbell suggests that normally, heroes do not view the call with such enthusiasm; rather, “all moments of separation . . . produce anxiety” (52), but Sharifa refuses to display her concern in front of her husband and family, illustrating her strength during crises.

In addition to Sharifa using humor as a means of maintaining control, she also relies on the support of others as a way to show her authority. One such example is when Sultan wants Sharifa to participate in the wedding festivities between him and Sonya. She and her female

relatives show their concern for the marriage by using untraditional methods to show their disapproval of the union between Sultan and Sonya: “No one bought new dresses or applied the normal amount of makeup required at wedding ceremonies. They wore simple coiffures and stiff smiles—in deference to the superannuated wife who would no longer share Sultan Khan’s bed” (8). Sharifa has much authority in the family, and because the women respect Sharifa, they are more likely to follow her lead instead of taking Sultan’s side. In this case, women use their attire to show their disapproval of Sultan’s new bride, when normally, a woman’s covering is a sign of her obedience to Allah and family, as Sahar Amer mentions in her book *What is Veiling?*: “Each society, each community and each individual interprets the Qur’anic injunction to be modest, to hide one’s charms, differently and thus, carries out the goal of not drawing attention to the self differently” (59). In Sharifa’s case, her attire becomes a way for her to visually protest what her husband is doing, and the women in the family support her efforts. Due to the positive support she has from her family, Sharifa is able to remain confident in herself.

Much of the reason that Sharifa remains confident is because of her upbringing. She is described as being the “daughter of a general” (17). Though the text does not mention more than this small detail, based on her ability to handle situations, it is probable that she knows how to hide her true emotions because of her background. Instead of letting her emotions show her pain and frustration, she hides her feelings when Sultan finalizes the proposal: “Sharifa pulled herself together and put on a brave face” (Seierstad 8). Also, instead of vocalizing her opinions to show that she is upset with the marriage between Sultan and Sonya, she strategically withdraws her comments and shows a lack of interest: “No one ever heard her complain, quarrel with Sonya, or show her up” (25). Because of her upbringing and what she has been through, Sharifa remains confident and knows how to “swallow her pride and appear the model wife” (25). Unlike

instances where silence reflects voicelessness, this scene paradoxically signifies resistance and tension; it speaks louder than words. Bulgarian-French critic, Tzvetan Todorov, wrote in *The Poetics of Prose* about the concept of ‘comportment verbal,’ where he argues that the act of not speaking sometimes speaks volumes since through actions, one can also powerfully sense how characters feel. Thus, Sharifa’s vow of silence thematizes her dedication to a cause, including: 1) the disallowance of the evils of patriarchy and polygamy to take away her joy and the bonds of female companionship; 2) a commitment to freedom; 3) the establishment of a female coalition to fight injustice; 4) and the demonstration of self-control and determination to overcome her flight. Silence becomes a way that Sharifa shows her authority and power early on.

Since Sharifa is described as being intelligent, she can easily compare herself to her rival, Sonya, and assure herself that she is the stronger woman because of her status in the family. When Sultan first tells his family about his desire to marry another woman, “none of Sultan’s close female relations wanted to have anything to do with this offer of marriage” (3), suggesting that there is unity among the women relatives. Even when Sultan goes to his sons for advice and encouragement, “no one in the family backed him up, not even his own sons” (7), illustrating Sharifa’s authority in the home. As Health and Zahedi clarify, a woman’s role in the family changes with age, and since Sharifa is over fifty and older than Sultan, age gives her more authority in the family (164). In addition to being one of the older authorities in the home, she is also educated, whereas Sonya is not. She reflects on the differences between herself and Sonya and inwardly says, “What really rankled was the fact that the man had picked an illiterate, someone who had not even completed nursery school. She, Sharifa, was a qualified Persian teacher” (7). Sharifa sees Sonya as less intelligent and because of that, she believes that she is

less hardworking and less determined – two attributes that Sharifa believes she possesses in abundance.

Sharifa's humor, confidence, and authority allow her to gracefully begin her journey of separation, but it is short-lived because Sultan still has the authority to control her destiny. In the opening section of the novel, Sharifa is strong and is supported by her relatives because she is in a safe and comfortable environment. However, Sultan quickly casts her off to Pakistan and the second chapter of the novel starts with Sharifa seeing herself as the "pensioned-off wife . . . waiting in Peshawar" (23). In her new environment, Sharifa is trapped and waiting to be granted freedom by Sultan. The physical separation Sharifa experiences illustrates the control that Sultan has in the marriage, and also demonstrates the challenges associated with polygamous marriages. Health and Zahedi state that a polygamous marriage is a "problematic practice . . . it is seen as a difficult family dynamic to manage, usually associated with destructive family relationships and violence" (172). Though the novel does not describe Sultan as aggressive towards his wife, the fact that he forces Sharifa to leave her home and family in Kabul and move to an unfamiliar location indicates that tension may have escalated as a result of the second marriage. Moreover, Sharifa admits "She cannot move without permission from her husband" (Seierstad 25), reminding readers of the dependence that Afghan women have on males. As soon as Sharifa is forced to move to Pakistan "because it suits Sultan" (24), Campbell's second stage, initiation, as expressed in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* begins.

Campbell notes that the second stage, initiation, is challenging for the heroine because this stage begins with the heroine moving to an unknown location (58). In a way, the heroine loses her identity and must formulate a new one. Similarly, when Sharifa moves to Pakistan, she is uneasy because she has been removed from her comfort zone. She admits, "[S]he has no

peace. She knows that Sultan will turn up one of these days, but he can never be bothered to tell her exactly when he is leaving Kabul, so Sharifa expects him home every hour for days on end” (Seierstad 23). Thus, because of Sharifa’s dependence on her husband, she does not know what true independence means. Additionally, instead of looking at her new environment as an opportunity to become independent, she believes her identity is directly linked to Sultan’s life:

Sharifa’s beautiful brown eyes, the ones Sultan once said were the most lovely in Kabul, stare into space. They have lost their radiance and are encircled by heavy lids and soft lines. She discreetly covers her light, blotchy skin with makeup . . . It has always been a fight to keep up her youthful appearance – she conceals the fact that she is a few years older than her husband. Gray hair is kept at bay by home coloring, but the sad facial features she can do nothing about. (27)

Sharifa finds confidence by being around Sultan because much of her responsibilities and identity are linked to being his wife, but because he has cast her out into an unknown location, she struggles to adapt to a new environment alone.

Unlike in other cultures, women in Afghanistan do not have the same freedoms that men have, which makes it difficult for them to flee a polygamous marriage. Health and Zahedi note that “improvements have been made since the fall of the Taliban, but the majority of Afghan women still suffer from human right abuses, including discrimination and lack of autonomy” (230). As such, it is not that Sharifa does not desire to obtain freedom; she simply cannot gain independence on her own due to cultural expectations and regulations for women. According to the story, “Sharifa lives like a divorced woman, but without the freedom granted divorced women. Sultan is still her master. He has decided that she must live in Pakistan in order to look after the house where he keeps his most precious books” (24), emphasizing the gender inequality

that determines life for women in Afghanistan. Also, due to Taliban rule, Sharifa does not know a life outside of patriarchal rule, which causes her to believe that divorcing Sultan would not bring her happiness. Health and Zahedi explain the psychological results of Taliban reign on women: “Afghan society as a whole endured enormous challenges, but women’s suffering was incomparable . . . They were not allowed to work outside their homes and punished harshly and indiscriminately” (232). Sharifa stays married because her husband has protected her during much of the civil war and the rise of the Taliban. Divorcing him would cause greater stress, as she admits:

Divorce is not an alternative. If a woman demands divorce, she loses virtually all her rights and privileges. The husband is awarded the children and can even refuse the wife access to them. She is a disgrace to her family, often ostracized, and all property falls to the husband. Sharifa would have to move to the home of one of her brothers. (24)

For Sharifa, divorce is not the answer because she believes the risks are too big. Rather, she endures the challenges ahead in the hopes of possibly being reunited with her family.

In Sharifa’s case, instead of continuing to feel burdened by her new environment, she chooses to make a life for herself and her daughter in Pakistan, illustrating her determination to find happiness regardless of the circumstance. Campbell suggests that it is common for heroines to “discover and assimilate . . . either by swallowing it or by being swallowed. One by one the resistances are broken. [S]he must put aside [her] pride, [her] virtue, beauty, and life; and bow or submit to the absolutely intolerable. Then [s]he finds that [s]he and [her] opposite are not of differing species, but one flesh” (108). Since Sharifa is practical and intelligent, she realizes that she must adapt to her new environment or risk losing her confidence. She thinks to herself about

her life and “justif[ies] this new life of Sultan’s. She had to make up an excuse to show it was not she, Sharifa, who was at fault, but external circumstances that had ousted her” (Seierstad 26). In other words, Sharifa decides to view her circumstance as a situation that she could not control, but also use reason, humor, and storytelling to try and make the best out of it. When she approaches people to discuss why she is in Pakistan, she uses trickery to appear authoritative:

To anyone who was willing to listen she divulged that a polyp had developed in her womb. It had been removed and the doctor had warned her that if she wanted to survive, she could no longer lie with her husband. It was she, Sharifa, who had asked her husband to find a new wife and it was she who had chosen Sonya. After all, he was a man, she said. (26)

Unlike her husband who depends on his wives, Sharifa is stronger and can live without a man. Sharifa is able to overcome her current bondage by choosing to view the circumstance as something she could not control, and when she speaks to others about her situation, she uses narrative to show her authority in the marriage. In some ways, by using trickery, she appears dishonest; however, since people trust Sharifa, she is able to appear trustworthy: “The women listen wide-eyed. Especially Sonya. These are stories she can relate to with all her senses. Sharifa’s stories are her soap operas” (173). Sharifa is physically separated from her family, but she chooses to overcome bondage by using humor and storytelling to illustrate her confidence to others. By doing so, she is able to reestablish her authority as a woman who can be trusted by others.

In addition to using storytelling to create authority among the community, Sharifa also actively participates in activities with the women in Pakistan to take her mind off of what she is missing in Afghanistan. For instance, “When it looks as if Sultan will not turn up, she pops down

to the neighbors.’ The women of the house and a few assorted women from the surrounding backyards are gathered. Every Thursday afternoon they congregate for nazar, a religious feast – to gossip and pray” (28). Sharifa is most comfortable when she is around others, and though her environment may have changed because it suited Sultan, she participates in activities with other women to illustrate her desire to have community. These women become her family and she seems happy when she is with them, as is indicated when Seierstad describes a traditional tea party: “The women seat themselves on cushions along the wall. The oilcloth on the floor is laid with cups and saucers. Freshly brewed cardamom tea and a dry sweetmeat made of biscuit crumbs and sugar is put out. Everyone puts her hands to her face and prays again” (29). When Sharifa is surrounded by women, she is more confident and comfortable. This intimate meeting reveals that in Afghan culture, women participate in activities together, suggesting that there is a strong sense of community for women. The meeting also displays that Afghan women create an environment that is their own, regardless of where the meeting is held.

Sharifa’s initiation into Pakistan is also successful because she knows how to control events that arise. When Sultan comes to visit Sharifa, she shows her enthusiasm and her desire to make things right so that she can be taken back to her homeland. As the text suggests, “Sharifa hears blows on the gate . . . she runs down the stairs to open the door. There he is, tired and dirty. He hands her the sugar bag, which she carries up the stairs before him” (48). The image of Sharifa and Sultan is telling of their relationship. Instead of Sharifa appearing upset about Sultan leaving her in Pakistan, she hides her emotions. On one hand, Sharifa appears strong because she runs to Sultan while he is described as looking tired. On the other hand, she appears oppressed because Sultan hands her the sugar and she takes it and goes up the stairs. Sharifa behaves this way because she is determined to get back to the life she previously had with her family: “It’s

not that she misses him. But she misses the life she once had as a wife of an enterprising bookseller, respected and esteemed, the mother of his sons and daughter; the anointed” (24). In other words, though she appears weak because she gives in to Sultan’s demand, she is also smart because she knows that remaining cheerful and obedient may grant her freedom.

Even when Sharifa is interacting with relatives in her new environment, she chooses to remain confident because she believes that displaying a good attitude will allow her to return to Afghanistan. Her confidence is evident based on her physical attire and her demeanor. When they leave the house, Sharifa is described as wearing “sky-high pumps, followed by Sultan and Shabnam sauntering behind, hand in hand” (53). Sharifa’s shoes symbolize her desire to obtain freedom because they draw attention. In contrast, while the Taliban were in power, Anastasia Telesetsky notes that women were restricted in what they could wear: “Bans on white socks, shoes that squeak, and ankles showing are all decrees in the brave new world that marks Afghanistan under the Taliban’s moral code [which were] enforced by the Ministry of Vice and Promotion of Virtue” (293). Sharifa, thus, makes a statement and exposes her feet by showing off her high pumps in public. Also, since Sharifa walks in front of her husband while visiting guests, she appears in control of the situation, which was discouraged during the reign of the Taliban. According to one of the sixteen decrees that the Taliban enforced in 1996, “Women, you must not leave your homes. If you do, you must not be like those women who wore fashionable clothes and makeup and exposed themselves to every man, before Islam came to the country . . . a woman’s responsibility is to bring up and gather her family together and attend to food and clothes” (Seierstad 83). Since Sharifa leaves the house with fashionable shoes and walks in front of her husband, not only is she making a statement to her husband and readers, she is also reminding herself that she can take control of situations in a new environment.

Sharifa's confidence continues to grow as she meets with relatives and takes control of the gatherings. One such example is when Sharifa and Sultan meet with Yunus's prospective bride. Sharifa has arranged the meeting because Yunus, Sultan's younger brother, asked her to: "He had asked Sharifa to propose for him. He himself has never spoken to the girl" (54). Sharifa's role in the family becomes even more meaningful because she must select a wife that is good for Yunus. Interestingly, though men generally have more influence and control in family dynamics, Health and Zahedi show that "individual relationships between family members and family structure at the time a marriage is decided on" (166) is more important. In other words, because Sharifa has a good relationship with Yunus, her authority grants her the control to select a wife for her brother-in-law. Also, though the text suggests Yunus keeps being rejected, Sharifa appears strong-willed and determined: "In spite of being rejected, Sharifa has returned continually to ask for Belqisa. It was not seen as rudeness; on the contrary, it indicated the seriousness of the proposal" (54-5). Sharifa remains determined because her future happiness depends on Yunus's relationship. As such, her motivation to help her family allows her to understand why she has been placed in Pakistan. Unlike Sonya, Sharifa knows how to act confident and to manage unpredictable situations: "When the couple are out visiting, Sharifa is the one who keeps the conversation flowing. She tells stories, spreads laughter, and smiles. Sultan prefers to sit and listen" (53). When Sharifa is around others, she overcomes the terms of her bondage and is able to show others her strength.

It is not clear why Sultan allows Sharifa and her daughter to move back to Afghanistan, but her return brings great joy for Sharifa and the rest of the family. According to Campbell, the return for the heroine is either difficult because of the trials that she has had to overcome, or the return signifies her freedom because she has escaped bondage. For Sharifa, the return represents

her freedom from isolation and a reunion where “the composite hero . . . is honored by [her] society” (Campbell 37). When Sharifa first walks through the door, the house is described as one in which “chaos reign[ed]” and women embraced one another: “‘Sharifa has come back! Sharifa!’ Bulbula points, happy . . . Sultan and Sharifa’s youngest child, Shabnam, runs around like a happy filly” (Seierstad 172). The celebration illustrates the love that the family has for Sharifa, and also how freedom and happiness in Afghan culture are continually connected back to the family. Sharifa has always desired to return to her family because freedom to her means being around those she loves, as she indicates: “she misses the life she once had as a wife of an enterprising bookseller, respected and esteemed, the mother of his sons and daughter; the anointed” (Seierstad 24). When she is reunited with her family, she finds her identity again, as is evident when Sultan says that Sharifa will only stay for the summer and Sharifa quickly says, “‘For always,’ whispers Sharifa” (172). Also, when Sultan leaves for work, the women are described as “sit[ting] down in a circle on the floor. Sharifa doles out presents” (172), illustrating that she maintains her control in the family since the women support her. Sharifa willingly overcomes isolation and when she is reunited with family, she appears content and satisfied, suggesting that she has achieved her dream of being with her family once more.

Unlike Sharifa, Leila’s journey from being oppressed to experiencing freedom is arguably a slower process and one with greater obstacles because of Leila’s role in the Khan family. As opposed to Sharifa, who has authority in the family, Leila is the youngest unmarried woman in the family and lacks such authority. According to Penelope Andrews, “All women [in Afghanistan regardless of class] experience an extreme loss of freedom” (140), and in Leila’s case, because she is the youngest child in the Khan family, most of the household chores fall on her. When the reader first meets her, she is described as “Bibi Gul’s youngest daughter . . .

Intelligent, industrious Leila who does most of the family housework. She is the afterthought at nineteen and at the bottom of the pecking order: youngest, unmarried, and a girl” (Seierstad 120). Much of her identity has already been created and determined by how her family views her. She is also described as “[being] brought up to serve, and she has become a servant, ordered around by everyone” (176), suggesting that she is considered less significant than her other siblings. Right away, Leila’s fate appears sealed. She is viewed as someone who is obligated to be submissive to the family’s demands; refusing them will result in much greater problems for her.

Though Leila is the youngest unmarried woman in the family, because of her role, she is viewed as hardworking. While at home, she works hard: “Leila turns up early in the morning, having made breakfast for her own family . . . and when the guests arrive, she has barely time to change clothes before continuing to serve and then spending the remainder of the party in the kitchen with the washing up” (177). Leila’s drive to take care of others allows her to feel useful in the family dynamic. Not only is she hardworking in the home, she also displays stewardship when she is out in public. One of the first images that the reader has of Leila is when she is washing herself in a hammam¹⁶. She is described as having “childlike skin that never sees the sun, and her hands – rough and worn like an old woman’s” (Seierstad 165). This initial image suggests that she is strong and, more importantly, that she does the chores without complaining. Working is a way that she has established an identity for herself. When she is at the hammam, she cares for her mother first: “Leila rubs and kneads the wobbling body. She is rough, and uses all her strength in order to get her mother clean. The white skin turns red under Leila’s hands” (169), illustrating that she is humble and selfless. Part of the reason that Leila participates in these activities is because she is aware that she is good at creating order: “She is good at most

¹⁶ Hammam – Turkish steam room, sauna.

things. That is why she is made to do everything” (176). Leila embraces the work because it allows her to feel like she is contributing in the family.

The call to adventure for Leila begins when she realizes that her efforts and hard work are not positively viewed by her family. Her younger nephew, Mansur, bullies her around and constantly reminds her that she is different from everyone else: “‘This is not your home, it is my home,’ [Mansur] says fiercely. Leila does not feel it is her home either. It is Sultan’s home, for Sultan and his sons and second wife” (167). Though Leila is criticized by her nephew, she continues to take care of the home to feel useful, but remains devalued by others—regardless of her efforts. In addition to receiving criticism from Mansur, Leila also feels a lack of support from her mother, as she later inwardly expresses: “Leila loves her mother, but she feels that no one really cares about her. She has always been at the bottom of the pecking order, where she has remained” (167). Until this point, Leila has always dealt with her feelings in a practical way—she has relied on her chores as a way to express her frustration: “She washes the oil off her fingers and goes to bed, in the same clothes she has been wearing all day . . . a new day that smells and tastes like every other day: of dust” (180). Staying busy is a way for Leila to keep her mind from thinking about a new life that is distinct from the one she currently lives in, but when she does take the time to think about others valuing her, she realizes that she must fight for her dreams on her own.

As a result of how she is treated, Leila begins to imagine what life would be like outside of her normal day-to-day activities. A good example of this is when Leila assesses her current life after leaving the hammam; she notices that her days are consumed in doing the same chores over and over again: “No one brought a change; they pull on the same clothes they arrived in. The burkas are pulled over clean heads. Little air gets in, so the burkas have their own peculiar

smell . . . Leila's smells of young sweat and cooking fumes. Actually, all the Khan family burkas stink of cooking fumes because they hang on nails near the kitchen" (170). Even though Leila finishes washing herself, she puts on the same dirty clothes she previously wore, symbolizing that her current state is consumed by repetition and enforced obedience. But a few moments later, Leila demonstrates a desire to change her fate by shedding the dirty burqa in public:

In an empty street they whip off the burkas over their heads. Only little boys and dogs roam around here. The cooling wind feels good on their skin, which is still sweating. But the air is not fresh. The back streets and alleyways of Kabul stink of garbage and sewage. A dirty ditch follows the mud road between the mud huts. But the girls are not aware of the stink from the ditch, or the dust that sticks to their skin and closes their pores. The sun touches their skin and they laugh. (170-1)

This maneuver shows that Leila wants to experience adventure and create memories that are her own instead of having someone tell her what to do. The girls laugh to themselves, partly because they are seeing the sun without being covered up by the heavy burqas, but also because for a brief moment, they are experiencing what freedom looks and feels like. According to Campbell, "whether small or great, and no matter what the stage or grade of life, the call rings up the curtain . . . which, when complete, amounts to a dying and a birth" (51). When Leila sheds the burqa for a brief moment, she is making a statement about how much she values independence, and the fact that she is taking this stance with her female relatives also hints at the fact that emancipation is a universal ideal that brings happiness.

Though Leila returns to her day-to-day affairs after removing her burqa in public, she begins to plan a life that is separate from the one she currently leads, leading her to stage two of

Campbell's "road of trials" (97). The first trial that Leila faces is considering how to escape her current fate. Because Leila is a woman and lacks authority in the home and society, she must depend on others to flee her current state and achieve independence. First, she depends on her brother, Yunus: "Yunus is the only one Leila happily attends to. She loves this brother" (Seierstad 177). Unlike the other males in the home, Yunus is someone that Leila relates to because he is also an outsider in terms of his demeanor, as Seierstad alludes to when she first describes his mannerisms: "He is quiet and sober and seldom joins in the family conversations. It is as though he does not care and keeps his unhappiness to himself" (177). In the same way, Leila is quiet, does not contribute much in conversations, is currently unhappy, and is looking for a way out. However, instead of Leila telling her brother about her plan, she decides to proceed on her own, illustrating her desire to break away from the traditional expectation that Afghan women must depend on men for support.

Leila initially begins the journey from oppression to freedom on her own because she believes she only has herself to rely on, but this plan is short lived. She is described as "pull[ing] the burka over her head, put[ting] on her high-heeled outdoor shoes, and sneak[ing] out of the flat" (181). This initial image represents Leila's determination to change her destiny—regardless of the outcome—but in the very next sentence, Leila must rely on a male figure to support her. The text indicates that she "she picks up a little neighborhood boy as escort and chaperone" (181), illustrating the dependence that Afghan women have on men. Though she is in control of the situation because she picks up an escort, she must rely on a male escort to help her escape, and without his aid, she is unable to leave her home. Andrews points out:

The struggle for women's rights in Afghanistan is not only over the interpretation of . . . cultural laws, but also about the economic subordination and disadvantage

that such interpretation may spawn . . . In short [women] are not treated like full human beings . . . the patriarchal basis of traditional authorities excludes women from . . . making decisions that will have a profound effect, not only on their lives, but on their communities as a whole. (163)

Leila's gender hinders her from moving forward on her own because of society's views of women. She must rely on the help of a male in order to remain safe.

The second trial that Leila faces is when she reaches her destination—an educational building—and is reminded of how difficult it is for women to attend classes. Unlike Sharifa who did not lack a community after moving to Pakistan, Leila struggles to gain support from fellow members of Afghan society. Prior to the invasion by the Mujahideen and the Taliban, Afghan women were encouraged to attend school and work outside of the home, as Health and Zahedi state, “Women comprised more than 70 percent of the teachers, 40 percent of doctors, and 50 percent of university students; they were also prominent in other traditionally male careers . . . because many urban males had either joined the Mujahideen . . . or had been conscripted into the Afghan National Army” (53-4). In Leila's case, gaining an education is essential because it could change her fate. Deborah Ellis notes that “After the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan needed everything—school buildings, books, chalk, pens, and teachers. Trained teachers were in short supply . . . the Taliban all targeted teachers because teachers have such power to encourage independent thought – and independent thought is the enemy of despots” (56). For Leila, an education means freedom—freedom to think for herself and to escape her current environment. But as Leila enters the classroom, she notices the lack of women in the classroom: “*Can it be possible? Boys in the class?*”, she wonders. She wants to turn and disappear but steels herself. She goes and sits at the back” (italics used for emphasis 182), because of the culture that Leila has

been brought up in. She is conditioned to feel uncomfortable when she is surrounded by males in public places.

Leila struggles to pursue an education and become a teacher because she has been conditioned to believe that women do not deserve equal opportunities. Ellis notes that the effects of war on the Afghan people are permanent: “In 2010, the Afghan government estimated that two-thirds of the Afghan people suffer from psychological problems such as depression, severe anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder” (64). The reader is able to see the effects that war has on Leila as she sits in the classroom and struggles to feel comfortable with her new environment. She tries to ignore her feelings of fear by participating in the same activities as the boys: “The boys start scribbling on the blackboard . . . Leila regards the words uninterestedly. She has an English-Persian dictionary and looks the words up, under the table, so the boys won’t see it. But she cannot find the words” (Seierstad 182-3). Since Leila does not understand the boys’ slang language, she is unable to move forward and participate in the same activities as the boys. As such, though she desperately wants to learn, she feels awkward because the boys make her feel this way. She notes that the “hour is torture . . . she feels she is turning her soul inside out, in front of these boys. She feels dirty, exposed, her honor impaired. What on earth was she thinking of? She had never dreamed that there would be boys and girls in the same class, never; it was not her fault” (183). Though the fall of the Taliban encouraged women to pursue an education, Afghan people still possess the same mentality that men and women do not deserve to be in the same space. For Leila, the trial to achieve an education is a significant challenge because she lacks the support from her community.

In addition to Leila’s belief that she does not deserve the same opportunities as the males in the class do, she lacks confidence in the public sphere. Leila has taken off her burqa because

women were encouraged to do so by society after the Taliban fell. This maneuver illustrates Leila's determination to gain an education, but the act is done with much trepidation. Contrary to the image non-Afghans have about the burqa, various forms of the veil were never intended to subjugate women; rather, the veil was meant to represent a woman's standing in society. Nikki Keddie argues that:

[V]eiling was a sign of status. Respectable Athenian women were often secluded, and veiling was known in the Greco-Roman world . . . a husband who had the means to keep his wife veiled and secluded showed that she was protected from advances and did not have to work or shop outside. Full veiling has been both a class phenomenon and an urban one. (204-5)

Veiling was initially seen as a way for a woman to protect herself from unwanted attention, but when the Taliban took over Afghanistan, the burqa was introduced to hide the woman and make her invisible in the public sphere. Writer Harriet Logan interviewed women after the Taliban and one anonymous woman says that the burqa was a valuable accessory because it hid the women from potential harm: "Before the Taliban, men would look at us with sexual desire. If they wanted us, they could just drive up in a car and take us. Now, with our burkhas, no one knows what we look like, and we feel safe" (13). Another Afghan woman shared with Logan about the struggle Afghan women face after they were encouraged to shed the burka: "After a very short time being, I [Logan] found it easy to understand why they kept covered: the streets ha[d] become predatory. Everywhere I went, there were huge crowds of men staring at me. 'You can see why we choose to stay covered,' said my interpreter. 'These men make us feel ashamed'" (xix). In this case, the male gaze is a negative contributing factor. Because of the negative reaction Afghan women receive from men about their attire, they feel vulnerable. Similarly,

Leila desires to pursue her dream of obtaining an education, but because she is physically exposed, she feels disgraceful, and once class is over, “she rushes out, [t]hrows the burka on and dashes off. Safely home, she hangs the burka on the nail in the hall” (Seierstad 183). The burka has become her safe haven while in public and taking it off in front of men has made her feel even more inferior and insecure.

Leila’s attempt to take classes becomes challenging due to societal barriers. Rosemaire Skaine suggests that since 2001, great strides are being made for Afghan women to achieve independence, but in order to understand why change is a slow process, “it is critical to understand the larger context, society” (24). In Leila’s case, she feels the pressure to accept her fate of being married off to the next eligible bachelor, but she is also fighting against society to create a future that is her own. When Leila returns home, she evaluates her current state and quickly realizes that risking her life for freedom is more rewarding than remaining complacent about her fate. Campbell notes that as a heroine returns to her home, she views the world differently because of what she experienced (193). In the same way, Leila looks at Sonya and resents her because Sonya’s life seems easy compared to hers. Unlike Sonya, Leila must fight on her own to gain an education: “Leila cannot bear to talk to [Sonya]. The stupid girl who had not even learned the alphabet. Who did not even try. Sultan got her a private tutor to teach her to read and write. But nothing stuck, every hour was like the first one, and having learned five letters in as many months, she gave up and asked Sultan if she could stop” (Seierstad 184). Sonya’s purpose is to please Sultan, but Leila does not want to end up with the same fate, as she later expresses: “Leila dislikes [Sonya] for the many privileges Sultan gives her and because the two girls, although the same age, have such dissimilar workloads . . . [s]he gets on Leila’s nerves. She sits all day, waiting for Sultan, and jumps up when he returns” (185). Unlike Sonya,

Leila is hardworking and determined to achieve freedom on her own terms. She may be fearful of the outside world, but she is certain of this: “She needs to get out. She knows she cannot sit at home all day with Sonya, Sharifa, Bulbula, and her mother. *I’m going mad. I cannot stand it any longer*, she thinks. I don’t belong here” (187). Leila has gone out and attempted to create a life that is her own, and because she strives to be independent, she knows that she must continuously fight against society’s expectation versus her individual pursuits.

Unlike the first time that Leila goes to obtain an education, the second time she leaves her home, she relies on her older sister, Shakila, to help her. Shakila has escaped oppression by marrying a man who encourages her to work. Shakila is living in freedom and Leila strives for a similar life where she can be married, but also be given the opportunity to work outside of the home. Leila notes that “Shakila has gone back to work as a biology teacher . . . She made her husband fix the house and give her money for new curtains and cushions. She sends the children to school” (189). Since Leila relies on the help of a woman, this strategy suggests that she believes women’s roles can change and she puts her trust in a woman for the first time. Her decision to confide in her sister also demonstrates that women depend on one another to achieve freedom. However, even though Leila looks up to Shakila because she is married, raising another man’s children, and working as a teacher, Shakila does not want Leila to necessarily pursue a vocation: “Big sister Shakila was pushing for this marriage [to Said]. She wanted to have Leila around her in the backyard. But Leila knew that she would continue to be a servant. She would always be under her big sister’s thumb” (274). Leila looks to Shakila for help, but her own sister does not believe in her ability to become a teacher, emphasizing how alone Leila is in her journey to escape her current life and start a new life.

Though Leila knows what to expect when she reaches the educational building for the second time, she undergoes additional challenges that are out of her control. As Leila approaches the school, she is initially determined to “apply for work as a teacher. This is her secret plan . . . she feels confident that she could teach beginners” (190). Unlike the first time that Leila reaches the school, she is not anxious the second time. The main reasons that Leila is noticeably more confident is because she is physically prepared; she wears her burqa, which gives her security and hides her insecurities, and she is entering an all-girls school. However, as soon as she enquires about the job, the school administrator tells her how difficult it will be to become a teacher: “‘First you have to register,’ she says. ‘You must go to the Ministry of Education with your papers and apply for a job . . . you must get personal clearance from the authorities, those are the rules’” (191). Leila struggles to become a teacher because of the rules and regulations given by the government. Interestingly, Skaine suggests that in 2001, “many schools have opened . . . Estimates are that close to five million children are enrolled in school, 40 percent of whom are girls. This number is the highest percentage of female students in the history of Afghanistan” (76). Leila tries to become a teacher because she sees that boys and girls are returning to school; however, because of strict government laws and regulations, she struggles to make her dreams a reality.

Everyone, including Leila, expects her to give up on her dream of becoming a teacher, but she continues to show courage and determination because of how much she has learned from her experiences. She even admits that her ability to remain optimistic about a challenge is out of character for her: “Leila is not used to fighting for something—on the contrary, she is used to giving up. But there must be a way. She just has to find it” (193).

Leila is known for working hard for others, but when it comes to fighting for herself, she tends to give up. However, the more experience she has with rejection and facing challenges, the more courage she has to press forward with her dreams and become independent, such as when she obtains the necessary signature from the department of education and believes that, “the road to the world of teaching will be child’s play (279). Leila’s confidence is a result of the trials she has gone through. Campbell alludes to the fact that heroines have moments of illumination when they face trials, suggesting that challenges are necessary for the heroine to understand herself: “departure into the land of trials represents only the beginning of the long and really perilous path of initiatory conquests and moments of illumination” (109). Leila attempts to gain an education in order to teach three times, but unfortunately, due to the lack of support from the government and her own family, she is left with only dreams of freedom: “When it is clear that none of the men in the family is prepared to help, Sharifa takes pity on her. She promises to go with Leila to the ministry. But time passes and they never go. They have no appointment” (Seierstad 275).

After Leila is rejected for the third time from obtaining an education and returns home, she places her trust in a romantic relationship. In other words, instead of Leila pursuing freedom on her own, she starts thinking about an alternative life with a man named Karim because she believes it is something that she can control. Since she decides to pursue freedom through the aid of male, this method suggests that she is someone who does not give up easily and desperately wants freedom—regardless of who helps her. For the first time, even though Leila has overcome much, she seems happy with the current prospect: “The letters cause her to dream. About another life. The scribbles give her thoughts a lift and her life some quivering excitement. Both are new to Leila. Suddenly there is a world inside her head she never knew existed” (267). Feminist

critics may argue that because Leila finds happiness in putting her trust in men, she is not a strong woman; however, since Afghan society is composed of a patriarchal structure, where a woman's status goes up once she is to be married, it is important to understand that men become a way for women to pursue their dreams. Ellis notes that though women like Leila fight for independence, "social customs make it very difficult for women to have independent economic power, and without that, they must depend on men for their survival" (30). As a result, even though women in Afghanistan and women in oppressed countries desire independence and freedom, they have greater opportunities when they marry a man.

Leila pursues the secretive relationship with Karim because she wants to, and for the first time, someone supports her endeavors and dreams. Unlike her family, Karim is someone that Leila is interested in because he is modern in terms of how he views life and women's rights: "he was educated, he seemed kind; he might get her away from the life that would otherwise be hers. Best of all, he didn't have a large family, so she would not risk becoming a servant girl. He would let her study or take a job" (274). In contrast, Leila's family is traditional and has strict expectations for Leila. Though Leila has been around her family for a long time, she is fearful of what they will think if they discover her method of achieving independence, as she later expresses:

She was terrified that Yunus would find out. Of all the family, Yunus was the one who most lived by the strictest Muslim way of life . . . He was also the one she loved most. She worried that he would think badly of her if he learned that she had received letters. When she was offered a part-time job on the strength of her knowledge of English, he forbade her to take it. He could not accept her working in an office alongside men. (272)

Part of the reason that Leila is afraid of what her family will think about her secret affair is because she does not enjoy disappointing people. She is used to obeying other people's demands. But, unlike Leila's family members, Karim is someone that allows Leila to dream about the future, and because of this, she believes that the risk will be worth it: "destiny had generously bestowed Karim on her. His attentions give her the lift she needs and reason for hope. She refuses to give up and continues to look for opportunities" (275). Leila knows that pursuing a relationship that her family does not approve of is dangerous, but she desperately desires to escape bondage and believes that being married to the person she approves of will bring her happiness.

Part of the challenge of being a heroine is that Leila is bound to run into more obstacles because she pursues the relationship with Karim in secret. As such, she is only able to experience freedom temporarily. When she thinks of her new relationship with Karim, she sees hope and suggests, "'I want to fly! I want to escape!' she shouts one day while sweeping the floor. 'Out!' she cries and swings the broom around the room" (266). Instead of keeping these emotions in, she literally yells out how she is feeling, displaying her desire to find independence and happiness. She views the future with a positive attitude because of how Karim makes her feel: "For the first time in her life someone is demanding an answer from her. He wants to know what she feels, what she thinks" (269). But because the Afghan family is in charge of who the women marry, her dream of marrying Karim is destroyed. Logan notes that in Afghan culture, it is common for families to decide who their sons or daughters marry: "Marriage depends on [the] family. It's a decision between the families—not up to us. It's very rare for a couple to fall in love and marry for love" (12). Since Leila has a negative relationship with her nephew Mansur, he ends up sabotaging the prospective union, illustrating how much power the family has:

“Aimal had told Mansur about the letters. In reality he would not have minded Karim marrying Leila, on the contrary, but Wakil too had gotten wind of Karim’s courtship. He asked Mansur to keep Karim away from Leila. Mansur had to do what his aunt’s husband asked. Wakil was family, Karim was not” (281-2). Leila finds happiness when she is with Karim, but because of her culture and the traditional expectation of unmarried women, Leila’s pursuit of freedom is temporary and out of her control.

Though Leila is unfortunately unable to pursue the union with Karim because of her family’s disapproval, the reader is still able to witness her desire and drive to achieve independence—regardless of the challenges in front of her. Though she is not a modern heroine because she must give up her freedom to please her family, she is a heroine nonetheless since she fights over and over again for her dreams. At first glance, Leila appears stuck in bondage because her world rejects every dream that she has, but in the midst of her struggle, she has experienced freedoms that she never thought she could experience. She has attended a co-ed English course, gone through the process of becoming a certified teacher, and pursued a relationship on her own, even though the family did not approve of it. Had Leila remained at home and continued to be obedient, she would never have gone on the journey of understanding who she is and what she wants. As such, though Laila remains oppressed at the end of the novel, her journey was successful because she now views her life—and life in general—differently.

In *The Bookseller of Kabul*, both Sharifa and Leila undergo trials and tribulations to escape oppression, and because of their continuous determination and courage, they are able to achieve happiness in their own way. Using Campbell’s three stages of journey for archetypes, the women depart their current environment, initiate into trials and victories, and eventually return to their environment as stronger women who want independence. Seierstad uses these women

specifically to suggest that Afghan women desire a life that is different than one that society demands of them. Sharifa wants to be reunited with her family because being in the company of others allows her to experience fellowship and authority. Leila, on the other hand, wants to pursue an education because learning is more important to her than simply taking care of others. Both women have goals and aspirations that are different from one another, but their commonality resides in their willingness to work hard to achieve their goals and become satisfied in life. Sharifa and Leila are also used to suggest that individuals in oppression have the power to dream of a different life and also attempt to pursue their goals because everyone has a right to be happy.

Conclusion

In Afghan culture, storytelling is used to communicate truths. Storytelling expert Amy E. Spaulding suggests that “Storytelling enables [storyteller and listener] to be both lamp and mirror at the same moment. As a storyteller, we can present stories composed by someone else and thus reflect that person’s idea; as listener, we can create the story in our own minds while mirroring back to the teller our experience” (13). Similarly, because of the stories that Hosseini and Seierstad listened to from Afghan women when they visited Kabul, they felt the need to become storytellers and voice the stories they heard.

The women represented in Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Seierstad’s *The Bookseller of Kabul* are primarily modern archetypes because they either think about using or physically use traditional and untraditional methods to overcome oppression and fight for freedom. In addition to that, they are used to instruct others about life and culture in a patriarchal society, but also show that regardless of gender, faith, or socio-economic background, all people—men and women—desire to escape oppression and embrace emancipation. Because of the relevance of this message, the women characters are used to reveal truths about subjugated minorities. And if nothing else, the women are used to represent the hope that exists in the midst of calamity.

Just as these women are used to instruct, show truths, and provide hope for all people on a journey from bondage to freedom, traditional storytelling also uses similar techniques. First, Spaulding argues that storytelling should teach the reader a lesson, but the lesson the author chooses is not objective: “One can do a kind of intellectual travel and experience many different points of view through story. This is not to claim that one can understand them all, but one can at least play tourist and let the subconscious get what it can from these stories” (103). In other

words, storytelling is a way for readers to experiment with language, perspectives, and concepts. Additionally, Spaulding believes that truth is represented through storytelling, and this technique is especially evident in both novels as readers are able to see through countless illustrations how difficult the pursuit of freedom is, but one truth is clear; everyone deserves and desires a chance to escape an oppressive environment. Spaulding also suggests that “storytellers are selling hope . . . in other words, it is silly to expect to always win, [but] one can always gain from any experience” (5). The idea of selling hope makes it seem like hope is superficial, but the fact is that storytelling does provide some form of hope; the hope to dream or experience freedom, or the hope that readers will better understand Afghan women.

Mariam and Laila from *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Sharifa and Leila from *The Bookseller of Kabul* instruct themselves and those around them to view challenges as temporary. By approaching life this way, Mariam finds comfort in the imagination and thinking about a life outside of the one she leads, as she alludes to in the opening of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*: “Mariam could see herself too, reflected in the brown of Jalil’s eyes: her hair billowing, her face blazing with excitement, the sky behind her” (Hosseini 21). Laila, on the other hand, instructs others to be vocal about their dreams instead of allowing anyone to dictate who they should be, as is evident when she thinks about education: “the most important thing in his life, after her safety, was her schooling” (114). Because of the education she received, Laila believes that females are able to live out their dreams if they are educated. In *The Bookseller of Kabul*, Sharifa is viewed as a mentor to others, and because of her role in the family, her instruction is carefully considered by the other women, epitomizing her influence: “The women listen wide-eyed. Especially Sonya . . . Sharifa’s stories are her soap operas” (Seierstad 173). In contrast, Leila is viewed as an inferior being, but because she is hardworking and repeatedly tries to leave her

current environment for a better future, her actions reveal that she, too, believes that she can overcome the challenges set before her.

Additionally, the women are used to reveal truths about Afghans' view and treatment of women and draw specific patterns that exist in societies that do not provide equal opportunities for males and females. Afghanistan is a patriarchal society, and because its government and citizens give males more authority overall, both novels reveal the struggles that women face because of their gender. However, Feminist Julia Kristeva points out that women who settle for a division in society where men are considered superior are creating challenges. Instead, if women "demand recognition of an irreducible identity . . . this [view] situates itself outside the linear time of identities" (19). Instead of women looking at their gender as something negative, they should use it to show society that all people deserve equal opportunities—regardless if they are males or females. Similarly, the women in both novels all have ambitions and dreams that can be appreciated by both males and females, such as a desire to attend school or work outside of the home, which is in line with Kristeva's suggestion in *Women's Time*. Kristeva proposes that in order for beings to live in harmony, it is important to blend gender expectations instead of dividing roles and responsibilities (15). In the same way, though the women know that they have roles and responsibilities, they also have dreams and ambitions, illustrating the truth of people; all people have ambitions that they desire to fulfill.

Perhaps the greatest theme in both works is that all oppressed people must have hope in themselves even in the midst of hardships. Spaulding claims that "[A] story does not supply answers, but it gives one principles from which to provide one's own answers. We are teaching not to a test, but to the questions of life" (107), suggesting that stories highlight common ethics or values that can be applied to any society. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Bookseller of*

Kabul, the women provide hope for the future because they overcome adversity. Since they remain hopeful in themselves or in external elements, they are able to overcome oppression and continue on their voyage to freedom. Also, though hope does not solve all issues, people need something to believe in, in order to move forward and become more confident in themselves or their situation. On a larger scale, hope remains a common principle that individuals rely on to face struggles. Without hope in oneself or a circumstance, it is impossible to achieve freedom, and both Hosseini and Seierstad reiterate this theme through their characters' motives and actions.

Mariam and Laila from Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and Sharifa and Leila from Seierstad's *The Bookseller of Kabul* represent modern archetypes because the women face adversity in their bondage and oppression; using both traditional and untraditional techniques, and through their journeys and efforts, they experience freedom. Storytelling allows individuals to understand how difficult it is to be victimized, but instead of Hosseini and Seierstad simply suggesting that women live in oppression, their characters describe the strength and determination many oppressed people have because they strive to achieve freedom and happiness. Storytelling becomes a way to show others that individuals in subjugated circumstances are not victims; rather, they possess the same dreams and ambitions as any individual. El-Sayed el-Aswad notes that "there is an urgent demand to replace the destructive discourse of the 'clash of civilizations' in favor of a new constructive discourse of 'dialogue between civilizations'" (51). As such, Hosseini and Seierstad use the tradition of storytelling to communicate truths about cultures in a way that provides hope for change to future generations living in oppression.

Works Cited

- “A Thousand Splendid Suns Q&A.” *KhaledHosseini*. Khaled Hosseini, n.d. Web. 3 Feb. 2016.
- “Afghan Wars.” *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia*. 2014. Web. *Literati by Credo*. 3 Mar. 2016.
- Ahmed-Ghosh, Huma. “Voices of Afghanistan Women: Women’s Rights, Human Rights, and Culture.” *Thomas Jefferson Law Review*. 27.1 (2004): 27-33. *ProQuest*. Web. 19 Mar. 2016.
- Aijaz, Ahmad. *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. London: Verso, 1992. Print.
- Anonymous. “An Interview with Khaled Hosseini.” *Bookbrowse.com*. Web.
- Amer, Sahar. *What is Veiling?* Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P., 2014. Print
- Andrews, Penelope. *From Cape Town to Kabul: Rethinking Strategies for Pursuing Women’s Human Rights*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2012. Print.
- Arshi, Asma. “Countering Marginality in Khalid Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.” *Reviews of Literature*. 1.12 (2014): 1-4. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Aug. 2015.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 1995. PDF e-book.
- Aswad, el-Sayed el-. “Images of Muslims in Western Scholarship and Media after 9/11.” *Digest of Middle East Studies* 22.1 (2013): 39-56. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 27 Jun. 2015.
- Baldry, Anna C., Stefano Pagliaro, and Cesare Porcaro. “The Rule of Law at Time of Masculine Honor: Afghan Police Attitudes and Intimate Partner Violence.” *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 16.3 (2013): 363-374. *Sage*. Web. 2 Mar. 2016.
- Beitler, Ruth M., and Angelica R. Martinez. *Women’s Roles in the Middle East and North Africa*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood P., 2010. Print.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New York: Bollingen Foundation Inc., 1949. Print.

Deshmukh, Vaishali R. "A Story of Female Suffering and Sacrifice." Rev. of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, by Khaled Hosseini. Jun. 2015: 1-4. Web.

Douglass, Frederick. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Oxford: Oxford UP., 1999. PDF e-book.

Ellis, Deborah. *Kids of Kabul: Living Bravely Through a Never-Ending War*. Toronto: Groundwood Books, 2012. Print.

Health, Jennifer, and Ashraf Zahedi. *Land of the Unconquerable: The Lives of Contemporary Afghan Women*. Berkeley: U of California P., 2011. Print.

Hill, Amelia. "Bookseller of Kabul author Åsne Seierstad: 'It's not possible to write a neutral story.'" Rev. of *The Bookseller of Kabul*, by Asne Seierstad. *The Guardian.com* 30 Jul. 2010. Web.

Hosseini, Khaled. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2007. Print.

---. "Khaled Hosseini's 'Thousand Splendid Suns.'" *Npr.org*, 2007. Web. 12 Jan. 2016.

Keddie, Nikki R. *Women in the Middle East: Past and Present*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007. Print.

"Khaled Hosseini's 'A Thousand Splendid Suns.'" *NPR.org*. 22 May. 2007. Radio.

Kristeva, Julia. "Women's Time." McAfee, Noelle. *Julia Kristeva*. New York: Routledge, 2004. PDF e-book.

Licher, Ida. *Muslim Women Reformers: Inspiring Voices against Oppression*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2009. Print.

Logan, Harriet. *Unveiled: Voices of Women in Afghanistan*. New York: ReganBooks, 2002.

Print.

McCaughrean, Geraldine. *One Thousand and one Arabian Nights*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.

Print.

Mills, Margaret A. "The Gender of the Trick: Female Tricksters and Male Narrators." *Asian Folklore Studies* 60.2 (2001): 237-58. *ProQuest*. Web. 3 Apr. 2016.

Nkealah, Naomi. "The Multiple Faces of Patriarchy: Nawal El-Saadawi's Two Women in One as a Critique of Muslim Culture." *Ariel* 44.2-3 (2013): 221-38. *ProQuest*. Web. 2 Mar. 2016.

Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. Routledge: New York, 2002. Print.

Posorski, Sherie. "Not Just a One-Trick Pony; With His Second Novel, Khaled Hosseini Shows He Can Get Inside Women's Heads. As a Follow-up to *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a Huge Success: Final Edition." Rev. of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, by Khaled Hosseini. *The Vancouver Sun* 26 May 2007: C8. Web.

"Q & A: What is a Loya Jirga?" *BBC News*. BBC News – World Edition 1 Jul. 2002. Web. 18 Jan. 2016.

Raj, Anita, Charlemagne S. Gomez, and Jay Silverman. "Multisectoral Afghan Perspectives on Girl Child Marriage: Foundations for Change do Exist in Afghanistan." *Violence Against Women* 20.12 (2014): 1489-1523. *Sage*. Web. 19 Mar. 2016.

Rankin, Lindsay E., and Alice H. Eagly. "Is His Heroism Hailed And Hers Hidden? Women, Men, and the Social Construction of Heroism." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 32.4 (2008): 414-422. *Education Research Complete*. Web. 24 Mar. 2016.

- Rosenbloom, Dena, and Mary Beth Williams. "Life After Trauma: Finding Hope by Challenging Your Beliefs and Meeting Your Needs." *Simple and Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: Strategies for Comprehensive Treatment in Clinical Practice*. Ed. Mary Beth Williams, and John F. Sommer, Jr. New York: Haworth Maltreatment and Trauma P, 2002. 119-133. Print.
- Runion, Meredith L. *The History of Afghanistan*. Westport: Greenwood P., 2007. PDF e-book.
- Seierstad, Asne. *The Bookseller of Kabul*. New York: Back Bay Books/ Little, Brown and Co., 2002. Print.
- Shadraconis, Sophon. "Leaders and Heroes: Modern Day Archetypes." *LUX: A Journal of Transdisciplinary Writing and Research from Claremont Graduate University* 3.1 (2013): 1-14. Web.
- Skaine, Rosemaire. *Women of Afghanistan in the Post-Taliban era: How lives have changed and where they stand today*. Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2008. Print.
- Spaulding, Amy E. *The Art of Storytelling: Telling Truths Through Telling Stories*. Maryland: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2011. Print.
- Stuhr, Rebecca. *Reading Khaled Hosseini*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2009. Print.
- Telesetsky, Anastasia. "In the Shadows and Behind the Veil: Women in Afghanistan Under Taliban Rule." *Berkeley Women's Law Journal* 13. (1998): 293-306. *HeinOnline*. Web. 2 Mar. 2016.
- Tzvetan, Todorov. *The Poetics of Prose*. Ithaca: Cornell UP., 1977. Print.
- Walter, Lynn, and Manisha Desai. *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Women's Issues Worldwide*. Westport: Greenwood P., 2003. Print.

Yousafzai, Malala. *I am Malala: The Girl Who Stood up for Education and was Shot by the Taliban*. New York: Little, Brown, & Company, 2013. Print.