

Maternal Influence And Female Identity in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract:

In patriarchal societies where women's roles are socially restricted and culturally defined, motherhood has long been recognized as a central factor in the formation of identity. In literary studies, the analysis of mother daughter relationships offers valuable insights into the psychological mechanisms through which identity is constructed, transmitted, and transformed. Feminist, socio political, and postcolonial frameworks has been widely examined in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini. Gender oppression, war, and female resilience primarily draw attention of scholars. Nevertheless, relatively minimal attention has been paid to the psychological dimension of maternal influence, particularly the ways in which maternal narratives are reflected and later reconsidered by female characters. This study argues that maternal influence is not just a fixed social role, the novel operates it as a dynamic and evolving psychological system. It illustrates how maternal models represented by Nana, Fariba, and later Mariam herself shape the identities of Mariam and Laila during processes of internalization, resistance, and transformation. Combining literary analysis with psychological theory, the novelty of this research lies in its interdisciplinary approach, particularly the concepts of intergenerational trauma, internalized maternal voice, and surrogate motherhood. This article highlights the internal psychological mechanisms that determine how female characters perceive themselves and make life decisions.

Keywords: Maternal Discourse, Identity Construction, Intergenerational Transmission, Trauma Theory, Maternal Subjectivity, Surrogate Motherhood, Narrative Psychology, Gendered Identity, Literary Analysis

Introduction

Intergenerational transmission of trauma where maternal enduring reflected on the child's identity structure can be seen in the relationship between Nana and Mariam. Instead of functioning solely as a victim of patriarchal oppression Nana formed what Bi characterize as a mechanism of "transmission of shame" through which macro-level gender oppression is reproduced at the micro-level of the family.[1] A number of researches demonstrates that maternal trauma can shape offspring's emotional and psychological development. For instance, Enlow suggests that

unresolved maternal suffering may influence how children perceive themselves and the world and it shows that maternal trauma is closely linked to patterns of attachment and vulnerability in children.[2]

Methodology

In the novel Nana always repeats “*a woman’s lot in life is endurance*” and this assertion about women’s inevitable suffer which functions as a powerful form of maternal discourse that Mariam internalizes. This statement declines female existence to passive suffering and forms endurance as an inevitable and defining condition of womanhood. As well as, Nana warns Mariam that “*like a compass needle that points north, a man’s accusing finger always finds a woman*” she is reinforcing the idea that women are inherently blameworthy and socially defenceless.[3] Through such statements, Nana transmits not only her personal bitterness but also a broader patriarchal logic that normalise injustice. Consequently, an internalized psychological structure shaped by early maternal influence reflects not only on Mariam’s submissiveness but also a response to external violence. These repeated maternal narratives illustrate how trauma experienced and psychologically inherited and normalized across generations.[4]

On the contrary, Laila’s identity develops within a more complex maternal environment marked by emotional absence rather than direct trauma transmission. As Islam noted , in the novel women’s identities under patriarchal conditions are shaped through biological and surrogate bonds, mother daughter relationships. [5] Laila’s mother Fariba due to grief becomes emotionally unavailable, nevertheless Laila is not confined to a single maternal narrative. Her father introduces an alternative ideological system centered on education and freedom, which allows her to resist internalizing passivity.[6]

Result and Discussion

This difference can be further supported by research on intergenerational trauma pathways. Roubinov demonstrate that such mediating factors as maternal emotional availability and depressive states influences children.[7] In Laila’s situation maternal absence does not bring to the internalization of a trauma-based identity, as observed in Mariam’s growth. While Fariba loses her sons and becomes emotionally unavailable, her absence effects differently from Nana’s influence. Unlike Nana Fariba does not inflict a discourse of suffering, guilt, or inevitability upon her daughter. Significantly Fariba’s absence does not transmit trauma through language or psychological conditioning.[8] Rather her separation implicitly models a different possibility, that a woman may detach from social expectations and temporarily disengage from her roles when she is overwhelmed. Although this absence creates emotional distance it does not construct a negative identity model for Laila. Moreover, this absence is partially compensated by the presence of Laila’s father, who introduces an alternative discourse centered on education, freedom, and future oriented thinking. As a consequence Laila develops a more flexible and resilient identity.[9]

Other important role of Laila’s father in her transformation is characterized by patience and non coercion according Fariba’s loss. He does not require traditional expectations of domestic duty or emotional availability upon her. This understanding allows Fariba to withdraw without being forced to perform her social role as a wife and mother. Thus Fariba’s absence does not turn to the form of trauma transmission through language or control. Instead it grows into a form of permitted absence an emotional space made possible by the presence of a supportive partner.[10]

This difference is crucial. While Nana’s suffering is actively inherited to Mariam through discourse and psychological conditioning, Fariba’s grief remains largely contained within herself. As a result Laila is not subjected to a suffering and sacrifice but grows up in an environment where alternative models of identity particularly through her father can be possible. When we see connection between Laila and Aziza, transformation of Mariam becomes fully visible. In contrast to her early life which was formed by Nana’s internalized discourse of suffering this new environment was structured by mutual dependence and emotional exchange.[11]

Mariam does not only adopt a maternal role but also reconstruct it. Having grown up under a model of trauma based motherhood, she does not repeat her mother’s discourse of endurance and blame. Instead she becomes caregiving and affectionate where maternal identity is no longer dictated by fear or inevitability but formed through relational choice.[12]

This can be seen as a transformation from **transmitted motherhood** to **constructed motherhood**. **While influence of Nana operates through** repetition and internalization Mariam’s identity as a mother

develops through interaction, care, and emotional sensitivity. Mariam's relationship with Aziza in this regard represents not only affection but a reconfiguration of what motherhood means. She creates a form of maternal relationship that she herself never received. Mother who is protective, attentive, and free from the language of suffering. Fariba and Mariam in this case demonstrates that maternal identity is shaped not only by personal experience but by the conditions under which motherhood is lived. As mentioned before when Fariba's husband allowed her to be absent due to her grief it caused to withdrawing of trauma. However Mariam's situation structures differently. Although she inherits a trauma based maternal model her relationship with Aziza shows a new relational structure which is based on cooperation, shared struggle, and emotional interdependence.[13]

This shift is notable because it demonstrate that maternal identity can change from absence to presence not through external enforcement but through relational reshaping. Mariam becomes a mother through involvement, attachment, and responsibility when she is not required to be. Female solidarity becomes here as a transitional mechanism. It starts as a coexistence under oppression than grows into emotional connection and eventually into maternal care. Hence relational presence replaces both trauma transmission and emotional absence, creating a third model of motherhood.

Nana's suffering is internalized and transmitted as inevitability through despair and the absence of relational support. Mariam in contrast makes her final decision within a relational context which was defined by care, attachment, and responsibility for others. That's why her sacrifice is not persistence of inherited trauma but its reconstruction. It shows a transformation shift from passive endurance to active protection from imposed suffering to chosen responsibility. This difference is significant because Mariam comes to her difficult decision not thinking that suffering is inevitable as Nana taught her but she has developed a maternal identity that prioritizes the survival and future of others. Her final deed demonstrates the culmination of a broader transformation. Maternal legacy is not repeated instead it is breaking the cycle of transmission and opening the possibility of a different future for the next generation. This is the movement from **internalized trauma to ethical agency**. Mariam's final decision could be analyzed in another way within this framework of transformed maternal identity. It can be seen as Nana's self-destructive act but basically it differs in its psychological structure and ethical meaning. Maternal influence in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* cannot be explained just through simplified binaries such as presence versus absence or care versus neglect. Instead it shaped by the environment in which motherhood is performed and the manner in which emotional experience is transmitted.[14]

The difference between Nana and Fariba shows that maternal influence is determined not only by the mother's psychological state but by the **mode of transmission**. Nana actively forms and communicates a discourse of suffering, inevitability, and blame, accordingly she embeds trauma within Mariam's identity. Contrary Fariba does not inflict such a narrative. Her withdrawal remains largely non transmissive inspite of his emotionally significance. This distinction leads to an important theoretical clarification **absence is not always equal trauma transmission**. Female oppression and solidarity emphasized in novel extends existing scholarship of it by introducing a more nuanced psychological perspective.[6] It points out that maternal influence depends not only on what the mother experiences, but on **how that experience is structured within relational dynamics**. This progression challenges deterministic models of intergenerational trauma and highlights the possibility of interruption and change. This article has examined maternal influence in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini, focusing on how different maternal models shape the identities of Mariam and Laila. Moving beyond traditional interpretations centered on oppression and resistance, the study has proposed a relational and psychological framework for understanding motherhood in the novel.[15]

Conclusion

The evidence demonstrate that maternal influence works through three distinct but interconnected forms, trauma transmission, non transmissive absence, and transformative motherhood. Nana represents the transmission of internalized suffering through discourse. Fariba represents absence without ideological imposition and Mariam embodies the possibility of rebuilding maternal identity through relational engagement and ethical choice. It proves that maternal influence is determined by the **conditions under which maternal experience is communicated or contained** not by presence, absence, or emotional intensity. This allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how identity is formed, suggesting that trauma is not automatically reproduced across generations. Therefore Mariam's deed should not be interpreted as a repetition of inherited suffering but as its transformation. Her decision demonstrates a shift from internalized inevitability to conscious responsibility marking the emergence of ethical agency founded in maternal care. In conclusion,

the novel presents motherhood not as a fixed role but as a **relational and transformative process**, capable of both transferring and interrupting cycles of trauma. Through this prism maternal influence becomes not only a source of limitation but also a powerful site of change.

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