Year 12 English Literature Transition Work

Your summer work is based on one of the novels we will most likely be studying for our coursework unit later on in Year 12. This work is designed to see how you read a whole novel independently and how you can use the skills gained at GCSE to write about a character.

TASK ONE - READ

Please read the novel 'A Thousand Splendid Suns' by Khaled Hosseini.

If you will find it difficult to access your own copy, please let the English Department know.

After you have read the novel, read the following article from emagazine:

Uncovering Afghanistan's Women through Narrative in A Thousand Splendid Suns Lucy Hinchliffe

English & Media Centre | Articles | emagazine (englishandmedia.co.uk)

TASK TWO - WATCH

Khaled Hosseini discusses A Thousand Splendid Suns - YouTube

Khaled Hosseini on writing from the female point of view - YouTube

TASK THREE - DO

Write a response to the question:

How is Mariam portrayed in this extract? Make some links to the wider novel.

Use your knowledge of how to write and structure an analytical character essay from your GCSE English Literature to help your write this response. You should:

- Provide an overview: who is Mariam and what is her role in the novel;
- Think how this extract is significant;
- Structure your response using PEAs;
- Zoom in on specific evidence and the effect of the author's choices in the extract, e.g. dialogue, narrative perspective, setting, metaphor.

You should also aim to include some reference to the wider reading and videos you have seen.

Your written response will be assessed by your English Literature teacher(s) in September. You should bring a hard copy (print out) of your response to your first lesson.

You will also be having a discussion with your classmates in your English Literature lesson about the novel and the character of Mariam.

Your response should be 2 sides of A4 maximum.

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Uncovering Afghanistan's Women through Narrative in A Thousand Splendid Suns

Lucy Hinchliffe examines not only what Hosseini uncovers about Afghani women in his powerful novel but also, crucially, how he employs particular narrative techniques to achieve this.

Once you've enjoyed the story, I always think that a strong place to start analysing Literature is to consider why it has been sent out into the world to be read. Before or after you read A Thousand Splendid Suns, you could have a look at a poem from which Hosseini took his inspiration for the novel's title. Named simply 'Kabul', it was written in the 17th century by Saib-e-Tabrizi. Within it, Kabul is feminised and its women referred to as 'suns' hiding behind its walls, suggesting something of their energy and vibrancy; even at this time, a mysterious and enigmatic section of society. Unlike Tabrizi, Hosseini's writing spans the politically turbulent period of Afghanistan from 1953-2003. Questioned about why he decided to take on the creation of two female voices in this setting, Hosseini stated in a Q&A on his website that he was inspired by the Afghan women he met when he visited Kabul and wanted to expose their 'dismal' treatment. It seems to me that he also wants to challenge our cultural assumptions about them – very much a symptom of media coverage – so that we leave the novel with a sharpened understanding of individual lives beyond the passive stereotype and political struggles. He manages this in two ways I will discuss here: firstly, by using embedded Farsi (one of the cultural variants of the modern Persian language) to position the reader as 'other' and secondly, by aligning the lives of his characters with actual historical events. In creating his narrative, he aims to uncover a 'hidden' section of Afghan society.

When English Doesn't Work – Hosseini's Use of Farsi

Hosseini writes in English, but not without making us incredibly conscious that the society he is depicting is not one we can easily relate to; there is a sense that he implicates us in viewing Afghan women as 'hidden' and 'other', and plays on it. He crafts his narrative to give the Western reader in particular a sense of this otherness, stemming partly from his embedded use of Farsi throughout the novel. As a consequence, he makes it very clear that the female experience, here, is a geographically significant one; one that we can never fully know. This use of a language we do not understand makes us pause, and in doing so represents the gaps in our understanding, reinforcing the idea that the difficult experiences we read about are culturally distinctive.

These 'gaps' – the Farsi words – are thoughtfully chosen and often relate to the unique life of women in Afghanistan. The first sentence of the novel, for example, describes an occasion where protagonist Mariam's mother calls her a 'harami'; a bastard. The stigma of the fact that Mariam's father Jalil impregnated her mother whilst she was working in his service, then cast both mother and child away to a tiny 'kolba' – another word we discover means hovel or hut – in the countryside, is gender significant. Being technically a fatherless child means Mariam's life lacks the respectable, patriarchal structure of home and society exemplified by her father Jalil's cosmopolitan city home in Herat, his three wives and legitimate, educated children. Culturally, this has knock-on effects: Mariam is unable

to make a 'good' marriage; instead she is coerced into a hurried marriage to an unattractive, violent widower called Rasheed who uses the word to taunt her when he takes a second wife. Sadly, 'harami' is embedded in to her existence throughout the narrative. When she is unable to become pregnant, she sees it as punishment for her illegitimate status and considers herself as unworthy of love throughout the novel. As it is common to be the child of unmarried parents in the modern Western world, this is probably why Hosseini chooses not to use the English term 'bastard', keeping the gravity of 'harami' as an experience unique to its context.

Indeed, as we pick up our phones to Google 'what does _____ mean in English?' (or, to be truthful, access one of the now readily available glossaries for the novel) we are forced to recognise our relative lack of understanding and the way words are used against women in society. Rasheed repeatedly uses the idea of 'nang and namoos' – honour and pride – as a threat against Mariam and, later, his second wife Laila, with the aim of controlling their behaviour. Hosseini's disdain for this hypocrisy is made clear when Mariam discovers a pornographic magazine in Rasheed's bedside table and ironically wonders about the 'nang and namoos' of the women portrayed. Later, when Rasheed marries Laila as his second wife, he claims he is doing so to protect the honour of both women. Mariam begs him not to. She says:

> *Eighteen years [...] I never asked you for a thing. Not one thing. I'm asking now*

and

> *I am too old [...] for you [...] to make me an ambagh.*

Here, Hosseini challenges our assumption that women are accepting of this element of their culture; their supposed 'honour', with 'ambagh' used negatively to represent the stigmatic label of the second wife.

Opening Our Eyes – Stories in Context

Since September 11th, the women of Afghanistan have become more visible in the press and have sometimes been presented as weak and vulnerable; used as a kind of sympathy screen to legitimise Western involvement in the country's wars. Hosseini works against this notion of weakness; he creates characters we are invested in, women who are strong and have integrity, but are victims of the politics around them. In doing so, he gives the reader an insight into the human side to the war-focused media coverage of the newspapers.

Firstly, we learn about the country's losses, particularly impactful for women. Hosseini sets up a foundation of cultural understanding through which the Western readers' perspective is sharpened; this is not how it always was. He describes how Mariam's birthplace, Herat:

> *had once been the cradle of Persian culture, the home of writers, painters, and Sufis.*

In the 1900s, women had begun making headway towards empowerment in Afghanistan, taking up roles as university professors and doctors, as Laila points out to Rasheed when the Taliban announce that women can no longer work. Hosseini brings the sadness of this to the fore later as Laila herself is having a caesarean in an anaesthetic-free, women-only hospital enforced by the Taliban:

> *'They want us to operate in a burqa,' the female doctor says and Mariam understood that this was a woman far past outrage. Here was a woman, she thought, who has understood that she was lucky to even be working.*

Hosseini clearly wants us to comprehend how the volatility and fickle nature of outside forces affects his characters (implicitly, Afghan women in reality) so completely in both public and private. For Laila, during the worst of the civil war, her boyfriend leaves Kabul and her parents are killed, leaving her orphaned. Now, for the same reason as Mariam is stigmatised for her 'harami' status, Laila must find a man to marry in order to live with 'nang and namoos' in the eyes of society. The bitter irony of this is stark; her father was an advocate for women's rights and freedom and, after his death, this only becomes worse for Laila. Indeed, when the Taliban finally occupy Kabul, women are not allowed to step out in public spaces unaccompanied. In the private space of their home, this means for Mariam and Laila that the violence and restriction they experience at the hands of Rasheed is legitimised.

The Ending – Triumph or False Hope?

The novel ends ambiguously, with a sort of triumph for the women in the novel in tandem with the rebuilding and repair of Kabul. Hosseini's critics have hated it for its lack of realism, with a review in the (World Socialist Website or WSWS) calling it 'false hope'. And okay, it's a little contrived; Laila is reunited with Tariq and embarks on a life of relative happiness. She comes through the horror of her former life which lends itself to Hosseini's message that the women of Afghanistan are not weak and helpless; that they face a struggle for empowerment and some of them struggle for it head on. To be fair to Hosseini, though, Laila acknowledges that:

> *the warlords have been allowed back into Kabul*

suggesting further hardships ahead, but by now we know that these won't just be passively accepted by Afghanistan's women.

> *KABUL*
> *(Translated by Dr. Josephine Davis)*
>
> *Ah! How beautiful is Kabul encircled by her arid mountains*
> *And Rose, of the trails of thorns she envies*
> *Her gusts of powdered soil, slightly sting my eyes*
> *But I love her, for knowing and loving are born of this same dust*

My song exhalts her dazzling tulips
And at the beauty of her trees, I blush
How sparkling the water flows from Pul-I-Bastaan!
May Allah protect such beauty from the evil eye of man!

Khizr chose the path to Kabul in order to reach Paradise
For her mountains brought him close to the delights of heaven
From the fort with sprawling walls, A Dragon of protection
Each stone is there more precious than the treasure of Shayagan

Every street of Kabul is enthralling to the eye
Through the bazaars, caravans of Egypt pass
One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs
And the thousand splendid suns that hide behind her walls

Her laughter of mornings has the gaiety of flowers
Her nights of darkness, the reflections of lustrous hair
Her melodious nightingales, with passion sing their songs
Ardent tunes, as leaves enflamed, cascading from their throats

And I, I sing in the gardens of Jahanara, of Sharbara
And even the trumpets of heaven envy their green pastures

Saib-e-Tabrizi, 17th Century

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Print

him a daughter. So, you see, your sin is even less forgivable than mine."

Laila rose to her feet. "I know it's chilly outside, but what do you say we sinners have us a cup of *chai* in the yard?"

Mariam looked surprised. "I can't. I still have to cut and wash the beans."

"I'll help you do it in the morning."

"And I have to clean up here."

"We'll do it together. If I'm not mistaken, there's some *halwa* left over. Awfully good with *chai*."

Mariam put the rag on the counter. Laila sensed anxiety in the way she tugged at her sleeves, adjusted her *hijab*, pushed back a curl of hair.

"The Chinese say it's better to be deprived of food for three days than tea for one."

Mariam gave a half smile. "It's a good saying."

"It is."

"But I can't stay long."

"One cup."

They sat on folding chairs outside and ate *halwa* with their fingers from a common bowl. They had a second cup, and when Laila asked her if she wanted a third Mariam said she did. As gunfire cracked in the hills, they watched the clouds slide over the moon and the last of the season's fireflies charting bright yellow arcs in the dark. And when Aziza woke up crying and Rasheed yelled for Laila to come up and shut her up, a look passed between Laila and Mariam. An unguarded, knowing look. And in this fleeting, wordless exchange with Mariam, Laila knew that they were not enemies any longer.

35.

Mariam

From that night on, Mariam and Laila did their chores together. They sat in the kitchen and rolled dough, chopped green onions, minced garlic, offered bits of cucumber to Aziza, who banged spoons nearby and played with carrots. In the yard, Aziza lay in a wicker bassinet, dressed in layers of clothing, a winter muffler wrapped snugly around her neck. Mariam and Laila kept a watchful eye on her as they did the wash, Mariam's knuckles bumping Laila's as they scrubbed shirts and trousers and diapers.

Mariam slowly grew accustomed to this tentative but pleasant companionship. She was eager for the three cups of *chai* she and Laila would share in the yard, a nightly ritual now. In the mornings, Mariam found herself looking forward to the sound of Laila's cracked slippers slapping the steps as she came down for breakfast and to the tinkle of Aziza's shrill laugh, to the sight of her eight little teeth, the milky scent of her skin. If Laila and Aziza slept in, Mariam became anxious waiting. She washed dishes that

didn't need washing. She rearranged cushions in the living room. She dusted clean windowsills. She kept herself occupied until Laila entered the kitchen, Aziza hoisted on her hip.

When Aziza first spotted Mariam in the morning, her eyes always sprang open, and she began mewling and squirming in her mother's grip. She thrust her arms toward Mariam, demanding to be held, her tiny hands opening and closing urgently, on her face a look of both adoration and quivering anxiety.

"What a scene you're making," Laila would say, releasing her to crawl toward Mariam. "What a scene! Calm down. Khala Mariam isn't going anywhere. There she is, your aunt. See? Go on, now."

As soon as she was in Mariam's arms, Aziza's thumb shot into her mouth and she buried her face in Mariam's neck.

Mariam bounced her stiffly, a half-bewildered, half-grateful smile on her lips. Mariam had never before been wanted like this. Love had never been declared to her so guilelessly, so unreservedly.

Aziza made Mariam want to weep.

"Why have you pinned your little heart to an old, ugly hag like me?" Mariam would murmur into Aziza's hair. "Huh? I am nobody, don't you see? A *dehati*. What have I got to give you?"

But Aziza only muttered contentedly and dug her face in deeper. And when she did that, Mariam swooned. Her eyes watered. Her heart took flight. And she marveled at how, after all these years of rattling loose, she had found in this little creature the first true connection in her life of false, failed connections.

EARLY THE FOLLOWING YEAR, in January 1994, Dostum *did* switch sides. He joined Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and took up position near Bala Hissar, the old citadel walls that

loomed over the city from the Koh-e-Shirdawaza mountains. Together, they fired on Massoud and Rabbani forces at the Ministry of Defense and the Presidential Palace. From either side of the Kabul River, they released rounds of artillery at each other. The streets became littered with bodies, glass, and crumpled chunks of metal. There was looting, murder, and, increasingly, rape, which was used to intimidate civilians and reward militiamen. Mariam heard of women who were killing themselves out of fear of being raped, and of men who, in the name of honor, would kill their wives or daughters if they'd been raped by the militia.

Aziza shrieked at the thumping of mortars. To distract her, Mariam arranged grains of rice on the floor, in the shape of a house or a rooster or a star, and let Aziza scatter them. She drew elephants for Aziza the way Jalil had shown her, in one stroke, without ever lifting the tip of the pen.

Rasheed said civilians were getting killed daily, by the dozens. Hospitals and stores holding medical supplies were getting shelled. Vehicles carrying emergency food supplies were being barred from entering the city, he said, raided, shot at. Mariam wondered if there was fighting like this in Herat too, and, if so, how Mullah Faizullah was coping, if he was still alive, and Bibi jo too, with all her sons, brides, and grandchildren. And, of course, Jalil. Was he hiding out, Mariam wondered, as she was? Or had he taken his wives and children and fled the country? She hoped Jalil was somewhere safe, that he'd managed to get away from all of this killing.

For a week, the fighting forced even Rasheed to stay home. He locked the door to the yard, set booby traps, locked the front door too and barricaded it with the couch. He paced the house, smoking, peering out the window, cleaning his gun, loading and loading it again. Twice, he fired his weapon into the street claiming he'd