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## THE PLAY

In 1992, Afghanistan is embroiled in brutal civil war. Bombs and attacks threaten towns and cities; civilians are fleeing by the thousands. As bombs descend on the neighborhoods surrounding them, **Laila** and her parents prepare to escape the violence by fleeing to the city of Peshawar in Pakistan. They must leave their lives and possessions behind. After the unthinkable happens, Laila must rely on her neighbor, **Rasheed**, and his wife, **Mariam**.

Although Laila's life changes forever, her mind often wanders to memories of her childhood crush and best friend **Tariq**. Despite tensions between them, Mariam and Laila work together to survive the daily persecution they face as Afghan women under Taliban rule.

With danger everywhere, Laila struggles to adjust to this new reality. She fights for a better life for her and her family. However, as the world around her continues to deteriorate, how will she find the peace she has been in search of?

## COURAGEOUS VOICES

# A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS



ADAPTED BY **URSULA RANI SARMA**  
BASED ON THE BOOK BY **KHALED HOSSEINI**  
DIRECTED BY **CAREY PERLOFF**  
KREEGER THEATER | **JANUARY 17 - MARCH 1, 2020**

**“Your reputation is a delicate thing. Like a mynah bird  
in your hands, loosen your grip and away it flies.”**

— Fariba, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* is generously sponsored by  
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# MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT



URSULA RANI SARMA

Photo Credit: Helen Warner

“I love the immediacy that [theater] presents and the sheer intimacy of a story unfolding live in front of a captive audience.”

Ursula Rani Sarma is an award-winning writer of Irish and Indian descent from County Clare, Ireland. She attended college in Ireland at the University College Cork, where she started writing plays. In 1999, the first play she wrote, *Like Sugar on Skin*, was selected by her university to be presented for the Irish Student Drama Association, where she won several awards. Since then, she has written 13 plays and five television shows.

When Sarma first read the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, she fell in love with the story of the two main female characters. She found them both strong and determined with complicated emotional journeys. Sarma connected with the characters so deeply that she felt compelled to transform their story into a play. In a conversation with the American Conservatory Theatre she says, “The theater is one of the best mediums with which to explore complex human relationships like the ones at the center of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.”

Sarma has been writer-in-residence for Paines Plough, Eugene O’Neill Theater Center, and Royal National Theatre. She is currently adapting the book *Henry’s Demons* for BBC One and writing an original drama entitled *Guardian*.

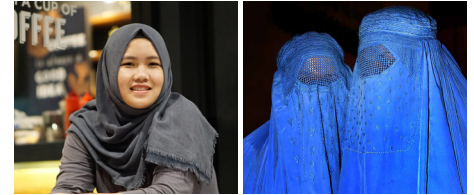
# THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* takes place in Afghanistan, which is one of 16 countries in the Middle East. The country was first settled around 7,000 B.C. Afghanistan is the 40th largest country in the world and is almost the same size as Texas. It is surrounded by the beautiful snowcapped Hindukush mountains. Nearly 35 million people call Afghanistan home. Dari and Pashtu are the two major languages spoken. Islam is the primary religion practiced in Afghanistan. Prior to becoming a democratic republic in 2004, the country went through several forms of government including monarchy, oligarchy and dictatorship.



# A GUIDE TO ISLAMIC CLOTHING

Costumes convey information about the characters, their culture and customs. Here is a quick guide to clothing and veils in Afghan and Islamic culture:



**HIJAB** A square or rectangle shaped fabric that is only placed over the hair, covering all hair and/or neck on women. This is used to signify modesty as dictated by the Quran for women.

**BURQA** A fabric and veil that completely covers the body, face and eyes of a woman. There is a mesh screen over the eyes so that women can see out of them. Before being required by the Taliban, burqas were used as a status symbol for the wives and daughters of successful businessmen, politicians and military commanders.

# MEET THE AUTHOR

## KHALED HOSSEINI

Khaled Hosseini is the author of three best-selling novels: *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, *And the Mountains Echoed* and *The Kite Runner*. He has had his books published in over 70 countries around the world. With more than 40 million copies of his books sold, Hosseini is one of the bestselling authors in the world today.

Born in Kabul, Afghanistan to a diplomat and a history teacher, Hosseini’s family moved to Paris when he was a child and then sought political asylum in the United States after a communist coup in their homeland. Prior to his acclaim as an author, Hosseini went to medical school and was a doctor for eight years.

On a trip to Afghanistan after writing *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini was moved by the stories he heard from Afghan women and decided that his next book would focus on their experiences. In a *TIME Magazine* article, Hosseini states, “The two main female characters in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* were kind of inspired by my collective sense of what women in Afghanistan went through.”

He first found writing female narratives from the male perspective difficult. He said, “At some point I just let go and I began to view these two women, not as Afghan women, but rather just people and focused on their humanity rather than their femininity. Suddenly a really transformative thing happened. These women began to speak for themselves, and I kind of became a mouthpiece for them rather than me speaking through them.”



Photo Credit: UNHCR Brian Sokol

# FACTS ABOUT ISLAM

- Islam is the second largest religion in the world with over 1 billion followers.
- A Muslim is a follower of the Islamic faith.
- Islam is one of the Abrahamic, monotheistic religions. Like Jews and Christians, Muslims believe in one god – “Allah” in Arabic.
- The Quran is the central religious text of Islam. It is believed that it was orally revealed by Allah to the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century.

- Sharia law is a system of morals and ethics derived from the religious precepts of Islam, which Muslims are expected to follow in their lives. In some Islamic states, Sharia law and government law are the same.
- Muslims practice five fundamental pillars (philosophies) in their daily lives.
- **Belief (Iman)**  
The first pillar is to testify in Arabic that “There is no god but God and Muhammad is His messenger.”
- **Worship (Salat)**  
The second pillar of Islam is to worship God, facing Mecca, five times a day: at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and nightfall. This rite takes only a few minutes to perform and can be

done anywhere.

- **Fasting (Sawm)**  
Muslims abstain from food, drink, smoking and sex between sunrise and sunset during the month of Ramadan. Abstinence during Ramadan brings Muslims to greater awareness of God’s presence and helps them acknowledge their gratitude for God’s provisions in their lives.
- **Almsgiving (Zakat)**  
The fourth pillar of Islam is to give alms to the poor. Muslims are to give a fixed percentage of their earnings to charities.
- **Pilgrimage (Hajj)**  
If physically and mentally able, Muslims must travel to the holy city of Mecca at least once in their lifetime.

Credit: Excerpted courtesy of the Araca Group

## LIVING IN WAR

Afghanistan has withstood war and conflict for several generations. A *Thousand Splendid Suns* begins with one major war in Afghanistan and ends with the beginning of another. The play gives a glimpse of how war has affected Afghan citizens, their families and communities.



### AFGHAN CIVIL WAR

From 1979 to 1989, Afghanistan was occupied by the Soviet Union. After the Soviets were ousted from the country, several Afghan groups attempted to gain control of Afghanistan. War broke out largely between two groups: the Mujahideen — a loose alliance of U.S.-backed guerilla militias — who wanted a Muslim-governed state, and the former Afghan government, who wanted the country to remain communist and were backed by the Soviet Union.

After the Mujahideen and other militias overthrew the government, Afghanistan turned to chaos. With no real leader in place, militias began to fight with each other to take control of the capital and government. Rockets and bombs descended on Kabul and other large cities. More than 25,000 Afghan citizens were killed and more than 6 million fled to neighboring countries. These are the bombings that Laila’s family are attempting to escape from in the beginning of the play.

### TALIBAN RULE

In the mid-1990s, the Taliban (see article) took control and instituted strict laws in Afghanistan. The group became powerful after promising to peacefully uphold traditional Islamic values. However, their rule was characterized by brutality towards women and children.

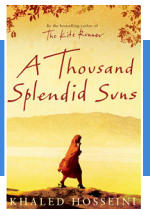
Due to widespread drought as well as daily terror from the Taliban, over 1 million Afghan civilians fled to Pakistan as refugees from 1996 until 2000. The Taliban refused to accept foreign aid during the drought, making living in the country nearly impossible for its citizens.

### U.S. WAR IN AFGHANISTAN

In 2001, after several attempted and completed terrorist attacks across the world by or supported by the Taliban (including 9/11), the United States, United Kingdom and Northern Alliance (an anti-Taliban Afghan military group) joined forces to fight the Taliban. The play ends as the Taliban starts to lose its power in the region and the U.S. War in Afghanistan begins. The war caused a new wave of Afghans to leave the country, seeking asylum and safety in countries around the world.

## READ

The play *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is based on the bestselling novel of the same name. Find a copy of the book at your local library.



## WHO ARE THE TALIBAN?

The Taliban is an Islamic militant organization. Mohammad Omar, its future leader, was disappointed that Islamic law did not govern Afghanistan after communist rule fell. He began to recruit young men who shared similar beliefs to join his movement. Starting with just 50 students, the group’s mission was to spread their fundamentalist version of Sharia law (Islamic principles) and protect Afghanistan from warlords and criminals.

Soon the group had more than 15,000 student members and, in 1996, took control of the government after several violent attacks throughout the country. They established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, a Sharia-governed state.

According to the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University, by 1998 the Taliban controlled 90% of Afghanistan and had spread to Pakistan as well with more than 25,000 fighters. The group faced international criticism for their human rights abuses, such as the abuse of women and children and denial of food and aid to Afghan citizens.

Although the Taliban government was only formally recognized by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the group feuded with the U.S. and other countries by refusing to surrender criminals like Osama Bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaeda.

After the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001, the Taliban lost control of the government. However, violence continues to impact the area. In 2015, leaders of the Taliban and the new Afghan government began peace talks. As of 2018, the Taliban still fully controls 14% of the country and is actively present in 66% of the total districts (Center for International Security and Cooperation).

## EXPLORE

The current war in Afghanistan is considered the longest in United States history. Look at this interactive timeline that highlights key events in the war from 1999 until now.

<https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan>

“The Taliban took four years of my life, when I was very young ... I should have had time to study and enjoy my life, but they didn’t allow me to even leave our home. I will never get those years back.”

Excerpted from “The Taliban Took Years of My Life” from The Guardian.

## WOMEN UNDER TALIBAN RULE

When the Taliban controlled Afghanistan from 1996-2001, they imposed laws and bans that restricted the activities of all Afghan people but most harshly affected women. These included:

- Forcing women to quit their jobs
- Banning women from studying at schools, universities or any other educational institution
- Banning women from leaving the house without a male chaperone
- Banning women’s presence in radio, television or public gatherings of any kind
- Banning women from playing sports or entering a sport center or club
- Banning women from wearing brightly colored clothes, high heels, or perfume
- Requiring that women wear a long veil (Burqa), which covers them from head to toe
- Permitting whipping, beating and verbal abuse of women not clothed in accordance with Taliban rules
- Banning women from laughing loudly

Source: Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan

## “MY HEART WILL GO ON”

Although film, television and the internet were strictly prohibited under the Taliban rule, the 1997 blockbuster film *Titanic* became a black-market phenomenon in Afghanistan. Businesses took advantage of the film’s popularity and began to sell everything *Titanic*: *Titanic* vest, belts, flip flops, pants, rice, wedding cakes and even *Titanic* chewing gum. Taxi drivers would adorn their vehicles with *Titanic* posters because they would attract more customers.

## WATCH ▶

While the story of Laila and Mariam takes place in the 1990s and early 2000s, many of the struggles they faced as women in Afghanistan are still prevalent today. Watch this clip from the documentary *Girl Rising* that explores the experiences of an Afghan girl and her quest to challenge the status quo. How does her story compare to *A Thousand Splendid Suns*?

<https://youtu.be/LI3XHW051T0>

## THREE BIG QUESTIONS

1

What does it mean to be a part of a family?

2

How do you fight for what you believe is right when others believe it’s wrong?

3

What impact does war have on culture and community?

## HELPFUL HINTS FOR THEATER AUDIENCES

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

- Arrive at least 15 minutes early.
- Visit the restroom before the show starts.
- Sit in the exact seat on your ticket. Ask the usher for help finding it.
- Before the show begins, turn off your phone, watch alarms and any other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, turn it off immediately.
- Do not use your phone for texts, calls, games or pictures.
- You cannot take pictures or make recordings in the theater, even before or after the play.
- There is no food allowed in the theater.
- Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum, unless invited by the performers to do so.
- Keep your feet on the floor and off the seat in front of you.
- Avoid getting up during a show. If you must leave, wait for a scene change and exit quietly and quickly.
- Respond to the show; you can laugh, cry and gasp. However, don’t repeat lines out loud or talk to the performers on stage.
- Be sure to applaud at the end!

## RESOURCES

“Afghans aboard ‘Titanic’ fad” – Robyn Dixon  
<https://bit.ly/2O7H7KA>

Rules - Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan  
<http://www.rawa.org/rules.htm>

Afghanistan Country Profile - BBC  
<https://bbc.in/2Qn7194>

“A Glossary of Islamic Clothing” – Learn Religions  
<https://bit.ly/2OcV1ei>

Afghanistan – National Geographic Kids  
<https://bit.ly/2CHjMKp>

Islam: An Overview – Oxford University Islamic Studies  
<https://bit.ly/2CDgNmp>

The Afghan Taliban – Center for International Security and Cooperation  
<https://stanford.io/2NIQtgY>

Afghanistan Since 1973 – Britannica  
<https://bit.ly/33Ln0sl>

“Q&A: Khaled Hosseini” – Andrea Sachs  
<https://bit.ly/2NO4iuF>

“An Extraordinary Journey...” – Simon Hogson  
<https://bit.ly/2XaUo9m>



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