A Thousand Splendid Suns Resource Pack
Introduction

This resource pack is aimed at students and their teachers, particularly those who are studying A Thousand Splendid Suns as an English text or within Drama and Theatre based courses. It is also a useful resource for those interested in doing further research before or after watching the play. There are sections of the script available that may interest youth theatres and adult theatre companies. There are also activities suitable for schools and theatre companies to use to explore themes and issues covered within the play. The resource pack gives readers further insight into the themes of the play and the process of developing the novel into a stage production.
Synopsis


Laila and her parents are packing. They have come to the decision to leave Kabul and escape to Pakistan where they are hoping to find refuge and possibly reunite with Laila’s childhood friend Tariq, and his family. However, as Laila’s parents are in the house, a missile lands on it, blowing the house to pieces and covering Laila in rubble.

She is rescued by Rasheed, a local man, and his wife, Mariam. Laila is certain at first that she will be able to find Tariq and his family who will take her in, but she is visited by a man who informs her that Tariq died in hospital next to him. Laila is heartbroken and when Rasheed decides to take Laila as a second wife, much to Mariam’s dismay, Laila readily accepts. Though there is initially high tension between the two women, they form a strong and unbreakable bond once Laila has given birth to her daughter: Aziza.

Through a series of flashbacks we learn more about both the women’s lives.

Mariam is born illegitimately in the 1950s to her mother Nana and father Jalil. Mariam idolises her father, much to her mother’s disgust, who tells her that her father will let her down because she isn’t his ‘real’ daughter. Jalil visits Mariam every week in their Kolba away from the main city of Herat. For a birthday present, Mariam asks to visit one of her father’s cinemas to see Pinnochio with all her brothers and sisters. The day comes but her father never arrives. Much to her mother’s desperate pleas and insults, Mariam makes the journey to see her father but he refuses to see her. Sadly, when Mariam returns home, she finds that her mother has killed herself.

Jalil’s wives pressure Mariam into an arranged marriage with a much older man; Rasheed, a successful business owner. We find out that Mariam falls pregnant many times but sadly she never manages to become a mother. After years of miscarriages, Rasheed’s attitude towards his wife becomes harsher and he regularly beats and abuses her.

Laila, on the other hand, grows up in a modern household, where her mother is able to freely express her opinions and her father regularly encourages her to achieve her dreams and go to university. Both Laila’s brothers are killed during the ongoing conflict and this affects her mother greatly. We find out that Laila has a very close bond to a boy called Tariq, and though the two insist they are just friends, they finally realise their true feelings for one another when Tariq and his family decide Kabul is no longer a safe place to live. They spend one night together before he leaves, just a week before her family is killed in a missile attack…

Back in the 90’s, Mariam and Laila are both subjected to Rasheed’s violent temper and outbursts, particularly after a failed attempt to escape. Laila gives birth to a little boy called Zalmai, and whilst this pleases Rasheed, they begin to struggle as Rasheed’s shop is ransacked and drought devastates the country. Rasheed forces Laila to place Aziza into an orphanage. As the women return home they find Tariq standing outside the house; alive and well.
When Rashid finds out about Tariq’s visit, he is overcome with anger and tries to strangle Laila to death. Mariam does what she sees as the only possible option; she hits Rasheed over the head, killing him.

Mariam accepts the responsibility for what she has done and receives a death sentence. This allows Laila, who she views as a daughter, to escape safely to Pakistan with her children and Tariq.
The Author, the Playwright and the Cast

Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan-American novelist and physician, best known for his novels *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And The Mountains Echoed*. Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan in 1965. His father was a Diplomat for the Afghan Foreign Ministry and his mother was a teacher at a High School in Kabul. In 1976, the Hosseini family were relocated to Paris by the Foreign Ministry. Though they wanted to return to their home in Kabul in the 1980s, Afghanistan was suffering after an extremely violent communist coup and was under invasion by the Soviet Army. The family sought and were granted political asylum in the United States and they moved to San Jose, California. After High School, he attended Santa Clara University, graduating with a degree in Biology in 1988. He then went on to earn a medical degree in 1993 from the University of California.

It was while he was a practicing internist in Los Angeles that Hosseini began writing his first novel, *The Kite Runner*, which was published in 2003. Following its huge success, Hosseini decided to quit medicine and focus solely on writing. Each of his books are set, or partially set in Afghanistan and feature an Afghan as the main protagonist. Hosseini took inspiration for his novels from his own experiences in Afghanistan and draws on influences gained whilst in exile in Paris.

His books, *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and *And the Mountains Echoed*, have been published in over seventy countries and sold more than 40 million copies worldwide. Today, Hosseini is recognised as one of the best selling authors in the world.

Ursula Rani Sarma is an Irish/Indian playwright, screenwriter, and poet. She first found a passion for directing and playwriting when attending University College Cork. Her first major breakthrough as a playwright came with *Like Sugar on Skin*, which received critical acclaim and multiple awards and attracted attention from Traverse Theatre in Scotland, The National Theatre and the BBC, who were all keen to commission new material.

Sarma founded Djinn Theatre Company in 1999, where she still remains Artistic Director. To date, Sarma has written thirteen plays, three radio drama, several screenplays, and has also had her poetry published.

In 2013, she was approached by the American Conservatory Theatre (A.C.T.) to adapt *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The strong female characters appealed to Sarma’s own mission to bring more female-centred stories to the stage. Sarma read the novel several times and met with Khaled Hosseini to discuss the historical and political background of Afghanistan from that time, as well as doing her own personal research to fully understand the context of when the story was set. When asked why this story is particularly suited for the stage, she answered, “the
theatre is one of the best mediums with which to explore complex human relationships like the ones at the center [sic] of A Thousand Splendid Suns.”

Cast

Pal Aron – RASHEED
Mollie Lambert – ZALMANI AFSOON/GIRL/WAKIL’S WIFE/ENSEMBLE
Sujava Dasgupta - LAILA

Lisa Zahra – NANA/FARIBA/DOCTOR/ENSEMBLE
Amina Zia - MARIAM
Shala Nyx – YOUNG MARIAM/AZIZA/KHADIJA/NURSE/ENSEMBLE

Naveed Khan – BABI/MULLAH FAIZULLAH/ZAMAN/MILITIAMAN/ENSEMBLE
Munir Khairdin – JALIL/ABDUL SHARIF/INTERROGGATOR/ENSEMBLE
Waleed Akhtar – TARIQ/WAKIL/DRIVER/ENSEMBLE
Interview with the Associate Director – Madeleine Kludje

What drew you to working on this play?

I wanted to be a part of this production because it’s a story about women and the struggles they had in Afghanistan in that time. It’s also a play about love, about violence, about war. It’s a story about two women who had to go through so much and come out the other side. It’s about a deep friendship between women and how they have to ‘endure’. It’s not necessarily a happy ending but we feel for these characters and you love them and you want the best for them.

What has the rehearsal process been like?

We have a fantastic group of actors, and there’s been a lot of research: learning the history of Afghanistan, its culture, religion and looking at the way men and women of that time think- the play spans over 20 years; the 70’s, 80’s and 90’s.

We have two main characters: Mariam and Laila. Mariam’s mother commits suicide when she is a young girl so she goes to live with her father. Her father, through his choice, marries her off at the age of 15 to a man of 45. Mariam has to quickly learn how to manage and her life has not been easy so a big focus was exploring what it would be like to be a young woman of that time in Afghanistan, being out of the city and then moving into the city of Kabul.

We have spoken to people about the affect of the Taliban and the Mujahideen and how they coped with their rules ie. The women having to be covered from head to toe. We have explored at how those kind of rules would have affected people in their every day life and their struggles.

So we have done a lot of researching, reading and trying to speak to people. It has proved difficult as well in terms of getting access to people from the Afghan community. We have been lucky that we have had Mahmood, from our sound team, his wife and another young lady called Ameena, who were happy to share their experiences of what it was like to be young in Afghanistan at that time.

Was it important to you and your team to try and cast people who had some sort of understanding of the Afghan culture?

It was really important and it proved difficult to find Afghan actors. So many actors who play Afghan characters are actually Iranian, Pakistani or Indian but have some knowledge and understanding of the culture.

So it was hard but everyone involved in the production to some extent has some understanding of that culture. Our Assistant director is half-Afghan half -Scottish and Mahmood from our sound team is Afghan so they had really valuable insight into the cultural background.
Have you had much contact with the author of the novel?

We have had more contact with Ursala [Rani Sarma] who wrote the adaptation. She came in and we got to meet her and her new baby who is 4 weeks old. She has been in constant discussion with Rox [Roxana Silbert- Director] so if any little things in the script that we had questions about or needed changing, she was always available and she’s been very much ‘in the room’ without being there.

We didn’t have contact with Khaled [Hosseini- Author] as it was Ursala’s adaptation but we have continually used the book as a reference; all the facts, the knowledge and the history are pulled from the book, which we used to guide us a lot.

Does the play differ greatly from the book?

Because it’s a novel and it’s so big there is so much that we weren’t able to cover. The novel concentrates on the political aspects of Afghanistan as well as the story of family and relationship between the two women.

I would say the play concentrates more on the relationship of the women and the way Ursula has written it is really quite beautiful.

Why is the play relevant to its audience now?

We have sat and spoken about this. I really liked an example Roxana brought up; think about how Brexit is happening now. Imagine it has happened and then one day the government say ‘All women have to cover themselves up’ or a drastic rule like ‘If you weren’t born here or from here you have to leave’. How drastic is that? So in a political landscape it’s so close and relevant because anything can happen. So in that sense it’s really relevant.

Also it’s about overcoming; about women’s struggles everyday in so many different ways. It’s about coming together to overcome them. That’s always going to be relevant and always going to be important so that’s why I feel that this play is for this time and for today.

Three words to describe the play?

I think it's: heartbreaking, inspiring, freedom.
Set Design Imagery for the Production

Model box designs

Electronic Scenic Finish

- Pipe for Box
- Reel for CD
- Green for Mesh and concrete, covered by grass in the final act.
- The shapes of the areas need to be organic. This document is not to designate areas.
Set being created
Sections of the Script

These sections of the script are suitable for GCSE and A level students to explore in lessons. They are equally interesting for any adult drama group to perform as they are challenging scenes exploring themes of control, resentment, politics, motherhood, oppression, abuse, unity and more. They give a good insight into the play and could also be used as stimuli to devise theatre.

Scene Four is taken from the first act and comes shortly after Rasheed has married Laila. Rasheed treats Laila as if she is the malika, the queen, and he expects Mariam to serve Laila’s every need. The tension between the women is rife and it creates an interesting scene to explore, especially as Laila’s child is not Rasheed’s and she has married to avoid her child being disgraced. Mariam does not know this and to her it appears that Laila has chosen to shame her into a life of servitude.

Scene Three is taken from the second act and Laila and Mariam have formed a friendship and care for one another deeply. They have shared the parenting of Aziza and they are coming to terms with what it means for women living in a country under Taliban occupation.

Scene Four

(Laila, Rasheed and Mariam are eating. Rasheed is delighted; giddy even, eyes on his new bride. The tension between Laila and Mariam is obvious. 1992.)

Rasheed: What is this? Have I married a pair of statues? Go on Mariam, say something to her…(Mariam continues to eat) Though you mustn’t blame her, she hasn’t got much to say. We are city people but she is a village girl, she has had no education, she knows nothing of books or politics, not like us. She grew up with her crazy mother in a kolba made of mud outside the village. Her father put her there. Have you told her Mariam? Have you told her you are a harami? That your mother hung herself from a tree? No?

(Laila looks at Mariam in shock, she didn’t know)

Well that’s who she is, but she is not without qualities. She is sturdy, a good worker, and without pretensions. I’ll say it this way, if she were a car she would be a Volga. But you…you on the other hand would be a Benz. A brand new first class shiny benz…Wah Wah. (beat, worried Laila might take offence) I’m not saying you are cars I am just making a point. But one must take certain precautions with a Benz…and I am your husband now and it falls on me to guard not only your honor but ours. And you Laila, you are the queen, the malika, and this house is your palace. Anything you need done you ask Mariam and she will do it for you. Won’t you, Mariam? And if you fancy something, I will get it for you. You see, that is the sort of husband I am. And all I ask in return is that you avoid leaving this house without my company and that when we are out together you will wear a burqa. Where I come from, it is a man’s duty to protect his wife’s honor and her reputation and there is something sacred in that. I want to keep you safe Laila, to protect you, this is how I was raised. Do you understand? (beat) And Mariam will be my eyes and
ears when I am away, not that I am mistrusting. But you are still a young woman, and young women can be prone to mischief. Anyway, Mariam will be accountable and if there is a slip up...well...on her head be it.

(Rasheed stands and walks away leaving Mariam and Laila at the table. Mariam is barely containing her fury, her pride straining at breaking point.)

Laila: Mariam I -

Mariam: (exploding) I won’t be your servant, I won’t.

Laila: No. Of course not.

Mariam: You may be the palace malika and me a dehtie, but I won’t take orders from you. He can slit my throat but I won’t do it, do you hear me? I won’t be your servant.

Laila: No, I don’t expect –

Mariam: If you think you can use your looks to get rid of me you’re wrong. I was here first. I won’t be thrown out. I won’t have you cast me out.

Laila: It’s not what I want.

Mariam: I see your wounds are healed up now, you can start doing your share of the housework.

Laila: Yes of course...and I wanted to thank you for taking care of me.

Mariam: Well I wouldn’t have fed you and washed you and nursed you if I’d known you were going to turn around and steal my husband.

Laila: Steal!

Mariam: And one more thing. I have no use for your company. I don’t want it. I want to be left alone and I will return the favor. That’s how we will get on.

(Mariam stands and returns to the sink)

Laila: You know I didn’t ask for this, for any of this...

Mariam: (looks at her scathingly) And you think I did? (she goes back to the sink)

From offstage Rasheed calls.

Rasheed: (offstage) Laila!

(Laila is frozen, afraid of what he wants. She goes to find Rasheed listening to his radio. He watches her, beckons her closer, she comes. He reaches out for her
stomach, she struggles not to recoil) Swelling so quickly, it's going to be a big boy, a Palawan like his father. (gestures to a bag) The bag...see what's inside... (Laila takes out a little suede winter coat) He'll need a coat, the winters here are harsh, we can't have him getting sick.

Laila: Or her...

Rasheed: And we will need to do something about that stove, it's dangerous as it is and find a new place to keep the knives, little boys are reckless creatures.

Laila: It may not be a boy...

Rasheed: What do you think of Zalmai? It's a good Pashtun name.

Laila: And if it's a girl?

Rasheed: If it's a girl, and it isn't, but if it is a girl, then you can chose whatever name you want. Do you know how happy you have made me? (she looks away) And you? Are you happy here? (Laila doesn't respond) Are you?

Laila: Yes...

Rasheed: You have everything you need?

Laila: Yes...

Rasheed: And Mariam? She is making you feel welcome?

Laila: (hesitates) Yes

(Mariam walks in, ignores Rasheed who is oblivious to this memory)

Mariam: What have you done with my wooden spoon?

Laila: I didn’t touch it, I hardly come into the kitchen.

Mariam: Yes I noticed.

Mariam: So you’re saying it grew little legs and walked out? Teep teep teep. Is that what happened?

Laila: I’m saying maybe you misplaced it.

Mariam: I’ve lived in this house for nineteen years, I have kept the spoon in the same drawer since you were shitting your diapers.

Laila: Still it’s possible you put it somewhere and forgot.
Mariam: And it’s possible you hid it somewhere just to irritate me.

Laila: You are a sad and miserable woman.

Mariam: And you are a whore. A whore and a dozd. A thieving whore, that’s what you are…

(Mariam turns and marches off)

A thieving whore!

(Rasheed turns to look at Laila)

Rasheed: No fighting then?

Laila: No, no fighting…

Rasheed: Good good…

Lights down. In the kitchen Mariam scrubs dishes. She begins to take her frustration out on them, banging them together. Lights down slowly on her.

Scene Three

(Aziza, 9, reads from the flyer. Mariam listens nearby attentively. Laila, pregnant is kneading bread and listening also. Aziza stumbles over some of the words. Aziza is excited, as if this flyer might bring exciting news)

Aziza: Our watan is now known as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. These are the laws that we will enforce and you will obey: All citizens must pray five times a day, if it is prayer time and you are caught doing something else you will be beaten. All men will grow their beards. All boys will wear turbans. Singing is forbidden. Dancing is forbidden. Playing cards -

Laila: Cards?

Aziza: Shh Mammy…I’m reading

Laila: Sorry…

Aziza: Playing cards, chess, gambling and kite flying are forbidden.

Laila: Kites? This is ridiculous

Aziza: Mammy…stop interrupting

Mariam: Go on Aziza…
Aziza: Writing books, watching films, and painting pictures are forbidden. If you keep parakeets, you will be beaten and the birds killed.

Mariam: What did parakeets ever do to the Taliban?

(Aziza giggles at this, as does Mariam, a secret smile between them. They adore each other)

Laila: I see you don’t tell your Khala Mariam to stop interrupting

Aziza: If you steal, your hand will be cut off at the wrist, if you steal again your foot will be cut off.

Mariam: If people are stealing it is because they are starving

Aziza: (over the following Aziza becomes more somber as she reads. Laila and Mariam more concerned) Attention women: You will stay inside your homes at all times. If you go out you must be accompanied by a male relative. If you are caught alone you will be beaten and sent home. You will not, under any circumstance, show your face. You will cover with a burka when outside. Cosmetics are forbidden. Jewellery is forbidden. You will not wear charming clothes. You will not speak unless spoken to. You will not make eye contact with men. You will not laugh in public. You will not paint your nails, if you do you will lose a finger. Girls are forbidden from attending school. All girls’ schools are to be closed immediately. (Aziza looks at Laila upset now) No school Mammy? Why?

Mariam: They can’t do that, Aziza has to go to school, she has to…this can’t be right…you read it Laila

(Laila wipes flour from her hands and takes the flyer herself)

Laila: Women are forbidden from working. If you are found guilty of adultery you will be stoned to death. Listen. Listen well. Obey. Allah-u-akbar…

Mariam: (Taking this in) Lets hope that baby in your belly is a boy…

Laila: Why?

Mariam: Because this country has declared war on women…

(Rasheed enters. He no longer looks at Laila with adoration but with cynicism, his guard is up. Laila turns to him in desperation, the flier in her hand.)

Laila: They can’t make half the population stay at home and do nothing?

Rasheed: Why not?

Laila: This isn’t some village. It’s Kabul. Women here used to practice law and medicine, they held office in government –
**Rasheed:** Spoken like the arrogant daughter of a poetry reading university man that you are. How urbane, how Tajik, of you. *(Mariam leads Aziza off stage, never sure what Rasheed will do next)* You think this is some new, radical idea that the Taliban are bringing? Have you ever lived outside of your precious little shell in Kabul? Ever been to visit the real Afghanistan in the South, the east, along the tribal border with Pakistan? No? I have. And I can tell you that there are many places in this country that have always lived this way, or close enough anyhow. Not that you would know.

**Laila:** They are savages.

**Rasheed:** Compared to what? The Soviets killed a million people. The Mujahadeen killed fifty thousand in Kabul alone over the past four years. Fifty thousand. Is it so insensible, in comparison, to chop the hands off a few thieves? It's in the Koran after all, an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. If someone killed Aziza wouldn’t you want to avenge her… *(Laila glares at him)* I’m just making a point… *(Rasheed comes closer to Laila)* You know, if the fancy should strike me – and I’m not saying it will – but it could – I would be well within my rights to give Aziza away. How would you like that? Or I could go to the Taliban one day, just walk in and say that I have my suspicions about you. That’s all it would take. Whose word do you think they would believe? What do you think they would do to you? *(Long beat, Laila tries to force herself not to look at him but she can’t help herself. He sees the fear in her eyes and smiles)* Not that I would. Nay. Probably not…

**Laila:** You’re despicable.

**Rasheed:** *(Comes even closer)* That’s a big word. I’ve always disliked that about you. Even when you were little, when you were running about with that cripple, you thought you were so clever… *(he picks up Babi’s book which is lying somewhere nearby. Laila watches him, worried)*

**Laila** Give it to me…

**Rasheed:** What for? What good are books to you now? What’s keeping you off the streets your smarts or me? I’m despicable? Half the women in this city would kill to have a husband like me. They would kill for it…you like big words? *(He tucks the book into his jacket)* I’ll give you one. Perspective…
Activity 1 - Exploring Cultural Differences

Explain to the students we all have a shared culture but we also have cultural differences due to family, upbringing, religion and other factors. Firstly, place a chair in the middle of the room and establish that the chair represents British culture. Ask the students to stand in relation to the chair depending on how much they can relate to British culture, i.e. the closer they are the more British they feel.

Following on from the first exercise, encourage the students to be open-minded so you can have a mature discussion about what they think might be shared culture and what could be cultural differences that impact their lives and decision-making. You could use the following statements to begin discussions or you could get students to move on a scale of how much they believe this statement to be true to them. Some of the statements may need a further explanation, depending on the age of the students. You will know your students and you will know how far to challenge them with some of the questions below.

1) Is education a privilege?
2) Should everyone have the right to vote?
3) Do you believe in democracy?
4) Does religion affect culture?
5) Are some jobs better suited to certain genders?
6) Do you believe that there is an ideal family structure?
7) Do you think you should have children outside of marriage?
8) Do you have your own language or way of speaking that you think people from a different generation would struggle to understand?
9) Is it important to know your neighbours?
10) Are you proud of your cultural heritage?

Depending on your group, you may want to explore these issues further through drama. These questions could be a really interesting starting point for a piece of improvisation, Theatre in Education piece or a piece of forum theatre.
Activity 2 - Receiving a Political Flyer

Read and discuss:

Aziza and Laila read aloud a flyer they have received from the Taliban in Act Two Scene Three. It is a list of rules that have to be obeyed by all the people living in Kabul and it reads as follows:

*Our watan is now known as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. These are the laws that we will enforce and you will obey: All citizens must pray five times a day, if it is prayer time and you are caught doing something else you will be beaten. All men will grow their beards. All boys will wear turbans. Singing is forbidden. Dancing is forbidden. Playing cards, chess, gambling and kite flying are forbidden. Writing books, watching films, and painting pictures are forbidden. If you keep parakeets, you will be beaten and the birds killed. If you steal, your hand will be cut off at the wrist, if you steal again your foot will be cut off.*

*Attention women: You will stay inside your homes at all times. If you go out you must be accompanied by a male relative. If you are caught alone you will be beaten and sent home. You will not, under any circumstance, show your face. You will cover with a burka when outside. Cosmetics are forbidden. Jewellery is forbidden. You will not wear charming clothes. You will not speak unless spoken to. You will not make eye contact with men. You will not laugh in public. You will not paint your nails, if you do you will lose a finger. Girls are forbidden from attending school. All girls’ schools are to be closed immediately. Women are forbidden from working. If you are found guilty of adultery you will be stoned to death. Listen. Listen well. Obey. Allah-u-akbar...*

Imagine you were to receive this flyer in your home today. Discuss what rules (if any) you can understand and discuss what rules would be the hardest to keep. Spend 5-10 minutes discussing the rules and then feedback your thoughts to the wider group.

Write:

Imagine the UK were to create a flyer today that would seriously oppress young people. What sorts of things might they include? In groups, write your own flyer. You can make it as comical or as serious as you like and you could use satire to comment on society, for example, ‘any young person expecting to get a job after school will lose a finger,’ or ‘any young women expecting to be paid as much as young men in the future will be stoned to death.’

Devise and Perform:

Once you have your flyer written, devise a scene where young people living in the UK receive this flyer for the first time. Devise how they might react to reading it and the dialogue and action that would follow. Perform these to each other within the class or group setting.
**Activity 3 - Key Moments**

**Discuss:**

What are the key moments in the story? Why are these key moments? What is their significance to the story? Does this moment say something particular to the audience?

**Devise and perform:**

Decide on some key moments in the play. Create a montage of pictures detailing the lives of the women. They can be in chronological order, or in the play’s order with flashbacks.
Activity 4 – Mariam Responding to Nana

Read:

Read the extracts from Act 1 Scene 5 to learn more about the character of Nana, Mariam’s mother.

Nana’s response to Mariam asking to learn:

(Nana enters carrying a pail of water in each hand. She’s a hardened and bitter woman, a work horse.)

Mullah Faizullah: Mariam tells me she would like to go to school.
Nana: What for?
Mullah Faizullah: To learn.
Nana: Learn what Mullah sahib? What is there to learn?
Mullah Faizullah: If it’s what she wants then why not let her have an education?
Nana: What would be the point? It would be like shining a spittoon, there is only one skill women like us need and they don’t teach it in schools.
Mullah Faizullah: You should not speak to the girl like this my child.
Nana: Look at me Mariam. Only one skill you need, and it’s this: tahamul. Endure.
Young Mariam: Endure what Nana?
Nana: Oh don’t you fret about that, there won’t be any shortage of things.

Nana’s response to Mariam waiting for her father:

(Passage of time, Mariam wraps a pretty scarf about her in anticipation. She waits and waits, the sun begins to drop from the sky. Nana walks forward, bucket in each hand)

Nana: Did you really think he would come? Bring you into the town as one of his own? (Mariam stands) Don’t you realise why he makes us live up here in a hut out of sight? Let me tell you something. A man’s heart is a wretched, wretched thing. It isn’t like a mother’s womb, it won’t stretch to make room for you. I’m the only one who loves you and when I’m gone you’ll have nothing. You are nothing! (Mariam starts to walk away from the Kolba) Where are you going? People will point at you and stare, they will throw rocks, call you a bastard, they will chase you from the town… (Mariam continues to walk) You belong here with me…

(Mariam continues to walk. Nana flies after her now, grabs her desperately).

Don’t leave me. I'll have one of my fits and swallow my tongue and die. (She kneels suddenly, wraps her arms around Mariam, her face pressed to her stomach. she looks up at Mariam) You know I love you Mariam Jo? I'll die if you go…

Mariam having an imaginary conversation with Nana when she finds out she’s pregnant.

(She picks up one of the items of baby clothes from the pile. The wardrobe door opens and the ghost of Nana steps out.)
Nana: You think this is a blessing?
Young Mariam: I’m going to be a mother Nana (she pauses, laughs) A mother. Me. The doctor said it was no bigger than a fingernail, just a tiny thing but with a heart beating already, beating fast. I thought I could hear it all the way home on the bus and everywhere I looked, the city seemed to me to be singing… Mullah Faizullah was right. Allah had a plan for me all along. This good fortune, this blessing, this life inside me –

Nana: You think that is what you were to me?

Young Mariam: I’m happy Nana, can’t you see?

Nana: It will break your heart, that’s all children can do…

(Mariam walks towards her and faces her down. Nana doesn’t know how to react. Mariam opens the cupboard door)

Young Mariam: Enough Nana…let me be…(beat) let me be happy…

(Nana reluctantly backs into the cupboard. Mariam shuts the door on her. Turns and puts her hands on her stomach. Then she suddenly pitches forward in pain, lifts her hands to find blood, panic)

Young Mariam: Nana…Nana…Nana…

(Mariam repeats this into the empty space, rocking, shattered, hopeless, and alone. From the darkness steps Nana, cradling a baby in her arms)

Nana: Tahamul. Endure…

Devise and Perform:

Using the extracts above, devise and perform a scene where Mariam has another imaginary conversation with her mother, reflecting on the choices Mariam has made and how her mother might respond to her. Now Mariam is coming to the end of her life, having gained such life experience, how does this affect her relationship with her mother? Is she more understanding and agreeable to her mother, or does she have the confidence to stand up to her mother once and for all and ask her for respect?
Activity 5: Exploring the Theme of Power

The struggle for power is explored in A Thousand Splendid Suns; generally through the power the government exhibits over Afghanistan and personally through Rasheed’s relationship with Mariam and Laila.

Though Rasheed is acknowledged to have the greater status and power over his wives, there are moments throughout where he clearly feels threatened by their intelligence and later, their allegiance to one another, to the point where he will beat one of them just to cause the other woman grief.

This activity allows its participants to discuss who has the highest status in each scene, as well as considering the personal relationships between each of the characters.

Warm Up:

Split into groups of 3 and decide who is playing Rasheed, Mariam and Laila. Ask each member to write their character’s name on a sticker. They must wear the stickers so all members of the group can see their name visibly.

Imagine we are at the beginning of the play. Make the characters all walk around the room and greet one another. How would they react to one another?

What would the characters say to one another if there were no consequences from their actions?

Main Activity:

As a group, decide the five most important moments for the family within the play’s plot, chronologically starting at the beginning of the play.

Label one side of the room as the highest point of status, with the opposite side of the room acting as the lowest point of status. Still using the beginning of the play as a starting point, ask the characters to stand themselves somewhere between the highest and lowest point of the room, depending on how powerful they are in relation to the group at the beginning of the play. If they believe that they are the most powerful and in the most control of the group, then they stand at the highest point of status, and vice-versa.

Ask each character to give examples of why they have stood where they chose and if they feel as though any other character should be in a different position of power. If the majority of the group decides that somebody should be in a different position, they have to move.

Alternate between the five most important moments, asking the characters to move around the room accordingly. Once the positions for all five moments have been
chosen, repetitively cycle between each moment, seeing which of the characters move up or down on the scale.

Discussion to finish, were there any notable changes in a character's status and if so why?