

Level II Alternate 2016 LAL Nebraska

Julia Briones, Lexington High School, 705 W 13th St, Lexington, NE 68850

Teacher: Melanie Chesley, Book: *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini

Julia Briones

705 W 13th Street, Lexington High School

Lexington, NE 68850

November 19, 2015

Dear Mr. Hosseini,

Before I read your book, I had never really asked myself what the Abduls and Mohammeds of America thought of all the hateful stereotypes associated with their culture. (I realize that statement, in and of itself, is a stereotype, but I am not meticulously censoring my phrasing, as I've recently concluded, after an in-depth conversation with a diverse group of people, that by censoring oneself, one quickly loses transparency and depth in conversations.) I never asked myself if they felt compelled to shout, "No! No, you've got it all wrong!" I *am* Hispanic, I *am* a first-generation Mexican American – I know what it feels like to have my culture dissected and gossiped about. I know what it feels like to have America harvest achievements and qualities from my culture, rejecting those deemed as unfit contribution to the nation's "melting pot." It should have run across my mind much sooner than it did, but I was ignorant, and blissfully so by choice.

Reading *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was...a bucket of arctic-cold water dumped over my sleeping, oblivious body, droplets hitting my bare skin. While one is taught about the Middle Eastern countries by teachers, news anchors, websites, and parents, there is a difference between hearing about noteworthy events and figures, and fully comprehending a culture, in all its glory, cringe worthy flaws and all. All I needed to know about the Middle East was common knowledge; it was an Islamic region, it had a surplus of extremists and terrorists, and was in a perpetual cycle of chaos, as the news constantly showed. I thought, "*Unfortunately, some innocent lives are affected, perhaps even killed, but, at the end of the day, it is those people's fault for not taking control of their futures, of their nation. Right?*"

I was wrong, so wrong, and the truly depressing part of that fact is that I knew I was. Deep down, at my core, I felt a confliction with those thoughts, and that led to me wondering whether I could actually say that to someone who was a mother, just like mine, struggling in the Middle East. In a way, that was why, when my older sister brought home a copy of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, I closed my copy of Sarah Dessen's newest chicklit novel, and curiously eyed your book. With some encouragement from my older sister's enthusiastically positive review, I picked it up and meticulously examined the cover: a figure that appeared to be a woman, with her back to the reader, looking out over a town set in a barren, dry setting. It was a depressing sight, to see a lonesome figure contemplating such a dreary view, under the hope-inducing words, a thousand splendid suns, printed in capital letters, read, and bold. Just like that, I was hooked. I finished to book that day, and started rereading my favorite parts after dinner. For weeks, I sneaked to my sister's desk, and took it out, reading through certain chapters, again and again, like a former beer addict who had been introduced to fine wine and thirstily, freely indulged himself in his new drug of choice. Without knowing it, I was also filling a gap in myself, one that was both intellectual and primitively human.

Through Mariam's words and descriptions, I saw the Middle East through a different lens. No longer was it the barren war zone I had been conditioned to know it as, but a place with rich diversity in landscape (sometimes desert-like, sometimes with rolling green hills) and communities (sometimes ridiculously affluent, sometimes dirt poor and desolate). It had mansions, suburbs, theatres, hair salons, farms, country homes, tiny towns, and booming metropolises. The inhabitants had families, hopes, jobs, relationships, and (healthy) religious beliefs. This picture forced me to address the fact that I needed to know more about this culture that I had written off as "different" and "irrelevant to me." Moreover, my heart, reformed and won by Laila, went out to this culture's people. This began my research and interest in the Middle East, and my discoveries left me astounded. Stories of traditions and religion helped me comprehend the Middle Eastern culture's attachment to religion, as well as appreciate the simplicity in a life guided by family, religion, and duties. However, terrifying accounts of abuse at the hands of the Taliban, the never-ending corruption in governments, and the utter lack of opportunities made my heart ache and bleed for the Middle East – so much potential hindered before it could even reveal itself to the world, so many lives and relationships torn apart – for nothing! Simply for the whims of powerful men and women who knew nothing of courage, values, and love, despite their deadpan claims of being religious beings who strive for the upholding of morals.

It was after all this digging up of information that I realized it was because of those types of people that a whole culture, a whole group of people are given such a bad rap. Their reputation is stained in front of the whole world, and, because we buy that image and concept, the cycle continues. The Middle Eastern people are then deemed conniving and evil, sentenced to being labeled as a bunch of crazy terrorists and extremists who know nothing of order, and *their voices are silenced*. No one will give them the time of day, so there is no one to watch over those powerful men and women who make the lives of those silenced a living nightmare, much less protect the silenced.

Mr. Hosseini, you, however, are one of another group of powerful few; you belong to the select group of humans who have become the voices of those who cannot speak. For that, I thank and commend you. I am, undoubtedly, forever in your debt for having expanded my world, and opened my eyes and heart to the Middle East. I just want you to know that you are changing the world one book at a time, one reader at a time, one day at a time. Today, I want you know, there is one more mind, heart, and soul changed.

Sincerely,
Julia Briones