

Re-reading Khaled Hosseini's Works: A Revival of the Lost Afghan

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Courtesy: <http://khaledhosseini.com/>

Abstract

Afghanistan in the 1960s was not the country as it exists today. When the Soviets invaded and pulled Afghanistan into war, which was then followed by the Taliban rule and the US invasion in 2001, the country hardly bears any resemblance to the amicable and prosperous nation that it was once. Khaled Hosseini, the first Afghan-born American writer has established his reputation with reconnecting with Afghanistan in an intimate way by drawing a human face of the homeland. The Afghanistan before the 1970s, wherein gardens bloomed and one could roam in the city streets freely and women wore what they wished, becomes real as well as relevant through Hosseini's evocations. It is against their wholeness the incomplete impressions of the past or present are juxtaposed. The common thread that links Khaled Hosseini's novels – apart from them being set in and representative of society and complex history – is the fact that each character in these fictional works sets out on a journey that is determined and, to a large extent, linked to the country's turbulent historical and social background. Afghanistan lies scratched and skinned by war, local destruction and foreign interference. Hosseini attempts to ascertain that lost Afghan which lies beneath the layers of war, the soviet invasion and the American intervention. This paper attempts to analyze the situation in Afghanistan after four decades of war. It further contends that the political and social events of the last fifty years in Afghanistan appeal a transfiguration in postcolonial studies and a reinvestment in Edward Said's work *Orientalism*. Orientalism did not end with age of Empire, and it is incumbent upon postcolonial researchers to draw attention to and obliterate it in its numerous contemporary forms. This dissertation aims to participate in this narrative.

Keywords: Khaled Hosseini; Postcolonialism; Afghanistan; Orientalism

Introduction

Afghanistan has its historical importance at being an intersection of the ancient human civilizations in the East and West. It has been invaded by foreign legion over a number of times in the recorded history, yet no foreign power has ever been able to establish a successful political regime over the country. Often referred to as the “graveyard of empires” and “land of the warlords” many great empires have fallen to the ground trying to establish their own legitimate government. Afghanistan’s true power lies in its people. But the conquests bring with themselves: wars, destruction, disintegration and subversion. The country’s history suggests that any political administration has thrived in the country only when there is harmony between the local tribal factions and the non-tribal factions.

A large population of the world still believes that Afghanistan has forever been a chaotic place with no governance. British Defense Secretary Liam Fox drew huge criticism for referring to Afghanistan as “a broken 13th-century country” during his last trip to the country (Shackle, 2010). The common ground for the criticism was not because it was counterfactual, but because he was overtly blunt and certainly not the first European who has labeled Afghanistan as archaic. Contrary to his view, a deep dive into the history of the country reveals that the course of modernization in Afghanistan took a turn in the 1970s when it was plunged into war and it has been trying to recoup ever since.

Immense measures were taken towards a more liberal and westernized lifestyle in the 1950s and 60s, alongside supporting the local conservative factions. Though it may sound astonishing, the period was a peaceful era, when factories were being established in Kabul alongside older traditional houses, when burqas became optional, and the nation appeared to be on a path towards a more liberal society. Afghan women were pursuing their careers in science; men and women could be seen hanging out together at theatres and universities in Kabul and the countryside factories swirled out fibers and other goods. There was a convention of peace with utmost respect for law and order, and an administration equipped with undertaking huge national ventures like construction of hydropower stations and streets. The people believed in education, that it would bring new opportunities for all. There was faith in people that a bright future lays ahead.

But, the path to that bright future was swerved in the 1970s, set apart by progression of bloody coups, invasions, and civil wars, which continue to this day, switching almost all of the steps toward modernization took in the 50s and 60s in the opposite direction. Though real it was, remembering its sanguine past after four decades of war only makes its present misery more tragic. What calls for approach are the “unsymmetrical power structures” and the differed distribution of ‘economic’, ‘political’, and ‘social’ power between the orient and the occident.¹

The contemporary hegemonic imperialism exercises violence through fire and sword as well as its ability to control minds and fears. A critical approach is required to contextualize the

¹ Orient being the Eastern countries and Occident, the West.

present day historical, political, social, and ideological power structures. Since it has become a fashion nowadays, attributing terrorism or savagery to religions or nations, Afghanistan has long been associated with turbulence but the country had its share of tranquillity which was completely ruined by the foreign for their own political gains.

Hosseini's Roots in the Lost Afghan

Among the few who have tried to portray the effect of war in Afghanistan, Khaled Hosseini has emerged to be a pioneer in doing so. He was born in Kabul, Afghanistan in the year 1965, critically acclaimed as one among the best Afghan-American writers. Hosseini has tried to depict the plight of the native Afghan in his works by reconnecting with Afghanistan in an intimate way wherein he portrays a human face of the homeland through his characters. Hosseini feels at home when he discusses Afghanistan. He has survived the time of government, the presentation of republic period, and the early years of Daud Khan's run the show. In discussion with Razestha Sethna of Newline, he acknowledged the phantom of war, landmines, and starvations" (Azad, 2004). For the Taliban segments of the story, he has talked with Afghans who saw the brutal lead of Taliban yet later moved to the United States. Hosseini has likewise utilized the data from media and continuously tried to compose a story which can legitimize the status of Afghan individuals. He has displayed to his readers another point of view to take a gander at Afghan individuals. In a meeting with barnesandnoble.com, Hosseini remarked:

“For some individuals in the West, Afghanistan is synonymous with the Soviet war and the Taliban. I needed to remind individuals that Afghans had figured out how to live in a serene namelessness for the decades that the history of Afghans in the twentieth century has been to a great extent pacific and agreeable.”

Hosseini has composed much about Afghan history prior to the Soviet attack, which is generally overlooked. The period before the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan is known as the brilliant period of the nation. He feels sorry for the stories that distort Afghanistan and its kin. A little is said about the general population of Afghan, their way of life, their convention and how they oversaw abroad as an outcast. As an author, Hosseini introduced his youth universe of Afghanistan as a foundation in his books. He mirrors the standards, culture, custom, and rituals of his country in his fiction. His fiction seems, by all accounts, to be the microcosm of Afghan culture. His books grandstand the social and chronicled setting of Afghan culture in an anecdotal world.

Revisiting Khaled Hosseini's Works

Revisiting Khaled Hosseini's works by critically examining the journey of the characters in his works, depicts the alteration that took place in the last 5 decades in the country with a glorious past and culture. The existing biased hierarchy needs to be challenged and Afghanistan needs to be revived again as the time has come for the lost Afghan to finally find itself.

Hypothesis

Afghanistan's identity, culture, and history lies in shatters and it is still perceived as a country which has not been able to break out of the medieval period because of the various events² that took place in the country in the last fifty years.

Research Objectives and Question

- To analyze the situation of Afghanistan after three decades of war.
- To provide knowledge to the readers who are unfamiliar with the historical background of the country.
- To analyze the concept of colonialism in a war-stricken Afghanistan by applying the postcolonial theory.
- To explore the ever constructing and reconstructing postcolonial rhetoric in relation to the political and elite powers of Afghanistan.

Why is Afghanistan still living in a medieval period-whether the country has not come out of the colonial clutches or the elite powers in the form of war lords do not want it to be progressive; and which are such factors that are obstructing the part of progress and peace, and who is responsible for that?

Theoretical Background

Afghanistan has changed drastically over the last couple of decades. The rhetoric of Afghanistan has always shifted in relation to the power and political structure of the country. Ashcroft(1998) defined the terminology of Postcolonial as “to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” over the fact that “there is preoccupation throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression”.

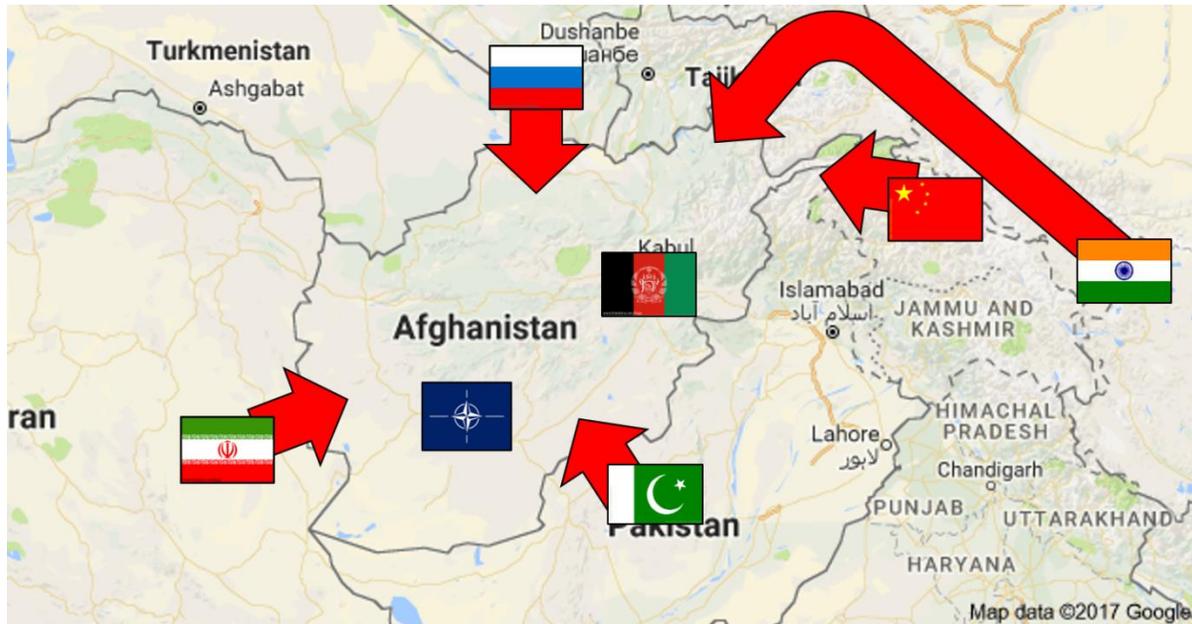
The west rides on the tides of development and civilization. They claim to do whatever they have done as necessary. The colonized is subjected to the resistance or assistance it provides to the colonizer. Its degree of contempt is categorized on the basis of its cooperation with the colonizer. For instance, Naim (2011) infers that “When Emir Dost Muhammad intended to go to war against the British to recapture the city of Peshawar in 1837, he was called a “drug-addict, ignorant, and filthy man.” However, when he surrendered to the British with no fights, prior to the first Anglo-Afghan war in 1840, he was portrayed as a “Great Emir” who “possessed some of the genius of a born administrator” (Naim, 2011).

Land and Political Geography

The geography of the land was an important factor for nineteenth-century orientalist and colonialists. The land's beauty was the means to interface with it for the Europeans. It was the wellspring of seeking after going more profound into it; it was inciting them to vanquish it, to claim it, to reshape it. Henceforth, the early colonial explorers to Afghanistan continually focused on the beauty of the land. Mountstuart Elphinstone was one of the British officers from the East India Company who visited Afghanistan in a pursuit to the Afghan Emir's court in 1809. He made an account of his trip to the country wherein he described Kabul as “the views up the east and west walls were beautiful, and each was closed by high mountains; but that of the space

² The soviet invasion in 1978, followed by the Taliban takeover in 1996 and the American invasion in 2001.

which runs from north to south, far surpassed everything that I have seen in an Asiatic garden. ... The fountains were sparkling with the sun, whose rays shone brightly on the trees, shrubs, and flowers on one side, and made a fine contrast with the deep shade of the other”(Elphinstone, 1815). But the history of the country validates that no political power had a successful regime without the support and cooperation of the local tribes.



Map 1: Geography of Afghanistan

Afghan History in Relation to the Novels

Hosseini has employed auto-ethnographic narrative style in order to portray Afghan history. This method, according to Ellis & Bochner(2000), is used when the author “utilizes the ethnographic research methods and is concerned about the cultural connection between self and others representing the society”. The chronology of the texts can be divided into six parts which occur simultaneously with the six main phases of the country’s history; 1- King Zahir Khan’s monarchy, 2- End of monarchy and Daud Khan’s defeat, 3- The Russian Invasion, 4- The Rabbani government, 5- Taliban rule and civil war, 5- American intrusion. Enzenberger(1994) described the life in Afghanistan as:

“As long as the country was occupied by Soviet troops the situation invited interpretation along cold war lines: Moscow was supporting its surrogates, the west the mujahedin. On the surface, it was all about national liberation; resistance to the foreigners, the oppressors, the unbelievers. But no sooner had the occupiers been driven off then the Civil war broke out. Nothing remained of the ideological shell...the war of every one against everyone else took its course...what remains is the armed mob. (p.22)

Table 1: Phases of Political changes in Afghanistan

Phase 1- 1933- 52	King Zahir Khan's monarchy	Zahir Khan becomes the King and Afghanistan remains a monarchy for next 3 decades.
Phase 2- 1953-78	End of monarchy and Daud Khan's defeat	Daud Khan becomes prime minister and introduces various social reforms. Overthrown and killed in 1978
Phase 3- 1979-89	The Russian Invasion	The soviet army invades in 1979 and sets up communist government. Troops left in 1989 but Afghanistan remained in a state of civil war
Phase 4- 1996	Taliban rule	Taliban seizes control and introduces adamantine version of Islam
Phase 5- 2001	American Intrusion	Us led bombing of Afghanistan following the attack on the world trade center.

Edward Said (1994) described these conflicts as “Residue of Imperialism” wherein he argues that the colonizer didn't just create a chasm between tribes but grooved “divide to rule” policy. Huntington (1996) ratifies Enzenberger:

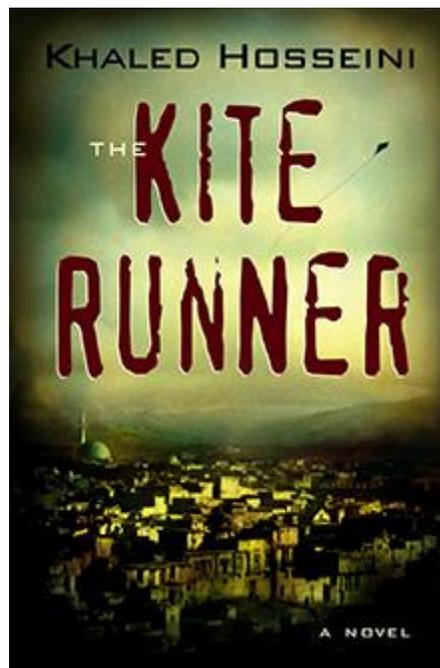
“The first was the Soviet-Afghan War of 1979-1989. Both wars began as straightforward invasions of one country by another but were transformed into and in large part redefined as civilization wars. They were, in effect, transition wars to an era dominated by ethnic conflict and fault line wars between groups from different civilizations.”(p.246)

Pashtun-dictated Taliban rose as a dominant threat to the Rabbani government who was apparently a Russian stooge government, which is a strategy of indirect administration utilized by the ex-colonizer soon after the autonomy of the ex-colonized nations. In 1996, Taliban seized control of Kabul and presented hardline form of Islam which safeguarded the ethnic purifying, particularly against the Hazara for the sake of Sharia. After the annihilation of Russia, Taliban's psyche was uplifted, as per Todorov, so they needed to crush USA who on its part blamed Afghanistan for the 9/11 assault. USA, therefore, proclaimed the war on fear, what was known as a "Just war" albeit as conferred by Tzvetan Todorov (2010): “No war is just or good, but it is sometimes impossible to evade war- either because war has been imposed by an invader who threatens your most

cherished values..., or because our consciousness as human beings, will not leave us in peace, given the intensity of the suffering imposed on other peoples” (p.205).

Afghan Diaspora

As a matter of fact, over 5 million Afghans relinquished their homes and went into ousting in different nations and near 1.5 million lost their lives. The Afghan diaspora was a noteworthy point as of late as a result of the tremendous number of individuals escaping the relentless wars in their nation of origin. A war of "All against All" one against the "Other" was occurring between individuals who are distinct yet live in the same geological zone.



The Kite Runner

The Kite Runner is a flawlessly created novel set in a nation that is being decimated. The novel specifically connects its plot to the Afghan history, geology, ethnic gatherings, the Soviet invasion, the ascent of the Taliban, 9/11 and the US intrusion. It traverses the period from before the 1979 Soviet intrusion until the point when the remaking following the fall of the Taliban. The book evokes Afghans as free and pleased individuals, who for a considerable length of time have safeguarded their nation against one intruder after another. Hosseini bewilders whether the West will ever rise above the tribalism that it proceeds to undermine Afghanistan's history.

To disentangle the obscured, yet noticeable side of Afghanistan's life, culture, battles, traditions, conventions, expectations and potential outcomes, Hosseini narrates the contrasting yet concurrent adventures of his characters. Amir is the first person narrator of the text who recalls these events from his past, how his whole life changed amid the winters of 1975. If we ponder upon Amir's life in a chronological order from when he was just a child of 12 years to his and Baba's migration when he was 18, to his life in California and his return to Afghanistan in 2001, we wade through Afghanistan's cultural and political history just before the turning of

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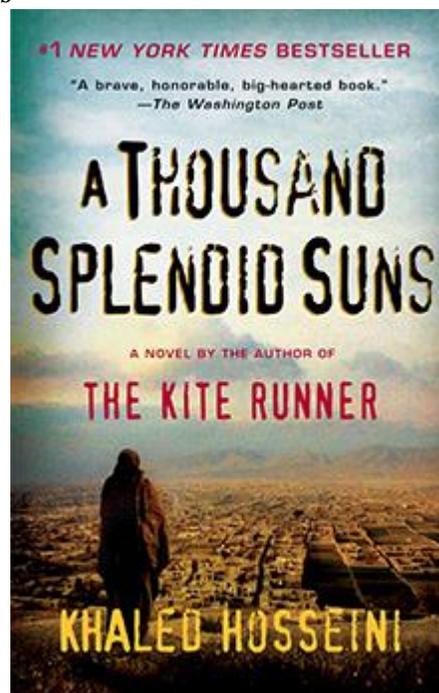
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affairs. Amir relates “in 1933, the year Baba was born and the year Zahir Shah began his forty year reign of Afghanistan” (p.25) to describe the historical background. Later on in the text, Amir comments about the state of the country wherein the new generation would have to get accustomed to the cacophony of the cries and war.

“We stayed huddled that way until the early hours of the morning. The shootings and explosions had lasted less than an hour, but they had frightened us badly because none of us had ever heard gunshots in the streets. They were foreign sounds to us then. The generation of Afghan children whose ears would know nothing but the sounds of bombs and gunfire was not yet born. Huddled together in the dining room and waiting for the sun to rise, none of us had any notion that a way of life had ended. *Our* way of life. If not quite yet, then at least it was the beginning of the end. The end, the *official* end, would come first in April 1978 with the communist coup d'état, and then in December 1979, when Russian tanks would roll into the very same streets where Hassan and I played, bringing the death of Afghanistan I knew and marking the start of a still ongoing era of bloodletting.” (p.34)

A Thousand Splendid Suns



Following his success in *The Kite Runner* which was an international bestseller, Khaled Hosseini wrote *A Thousand Splendid Suns* in 2007 roused by his visit to the country as UNHCR goodwill envoy in 2006. He found Afghanistan entirely different to how it was he used to live there. The whole country was stricken by poverty, violence and terrorism and the reason they were here because of the events that took place in the last fifty years. One thing particularly that generated Hosseini’s interest was the condition of the women in the country. Things were different earlier, men and women used to be

treated equally, they were having education, doing jobs and having all the liberty that any human being could have, just like Hosseini's mother who herself used to teach Farsi and History in a school at Kabul.

A Thousand Splendid Suns is a novel about two female protagonists. The trajectories of their lives form the plot of the book and it unveils the difficult conditions that the women in Afghanistan experience. The political shift of the last fifty years had a major impact on the women's status in the country. Kabul seems to be the most convenient city to retrace the political changes that took place in the country. It also makes the reader familiar with the shifts and alterations of the women's status in Afghanistan. The lives of the two female protagonists decussate at sharing the same fate of marrying a misogynist ruthless man. As Hosseini turns out their destiny, their sharp individual contrasts just serve to show the expansiveness of commonality among Muslim women in Afghani society amid the radical political changes of the 1970's to 2003a King dethroned, a socialist upset, a Soviet intrusion, a common war, a religious Taliban autocracy, an attack by American and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) powers.

While Mariam is being represented as the lowest link of the Afghan social structure, Laila is presented as a contrast to Mariam's character which is physical, social as well as psychological in nature. Although being forced to marry Rasheed and move to Kabul, Mariam experiences an entirely different life in Kabul. She gets astonished by the modern life in the city, especially for women. They could whatever they want to, whether it is modern or traditional, they could roam around the city alone without any fear, they can even drive, work or even hold proficient offices. All of these characteristics could be seen by analyzing Laila's character. Unlike Mariam, she hails from a well-read household in Kabul. Her father gives her the best education because he realizes the importance of educating women. Hakim has a radical attitude towards women and firmly believes that women would play a crucial role in the future of the nation, this could be seen evidently in the novel:

"I know you're still young, but I want you to understand and learn this now.... Marriage can wait, education cannot. You're a very, very bright girl. Truly, you are. You can be anything you want, Laila.... I know that when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, maybe even more. Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila. No chance."(p.63)

This period was known as the most fascinating period of the country, particularly for women. The era provides all sorts of liberties to women as Hakim affirms: "it's a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan." (p.135)

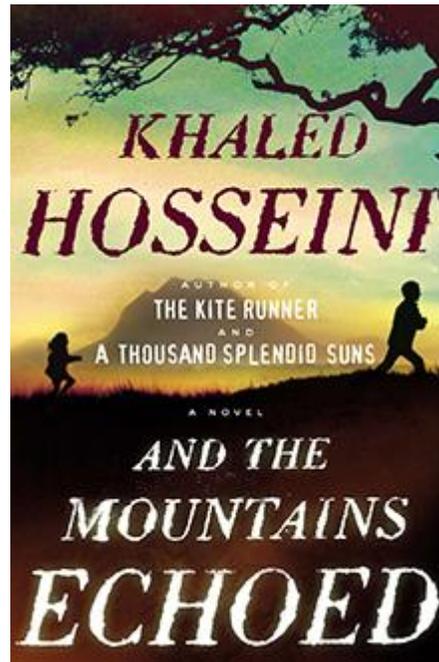
Women had the privilege to study and learn. There was equality in the country, so that women have the same rights to education. Forced marriages were abolished and the sixteen was the minimum age for the likelihood of marriage. Men and women were

considered to be equal in all spaces, so wearing hijab and burqa was discretionary and was most certainly not mandatory for ladies.

Women's liberty and rights were diminished when the country was plunged into war and finally handed over to the Taliban regime in 1996. Women were seriously controlled and their rights were circumscribed. They moved toward becoming underestimated, abused, detainees in their homes as they were required to remain in their homes and not allowed or stroll outside to sit alone unless with a man from their relatives. They were brutally penalized if caught outside alone, as it was clarified in the novel when Laila was beaten a few times because she used to leave her home alone to meet her daughter at the orphanage and this was illegal under the Taliban run the show.

Education for women was abolished and equality dismissed. Women did not have the privilege to learn nor to work. Hence the education kept dissipating and 90 percent of Afghan women are uneducated today.

And The Mountains Echoed



In a similar vein, *And the Mountains Echoed* is set against the background of wars that created chaos in the country enduring under the burdensome toll of obliteration. There are only references to the Soviet war in the novel but features an important outgrowth of the Soviet intrusion- The Mujahideens, who turned out to be the “Warlords”. The character of Adel’s father in the novel serves a standard example of the rich warlords wielding power and domination among the ruler Afghans.

The period depicting the Taliban control in the novel is illustrated by Nabi’s character, a servant who lives with his employers in the novel. He gives a direct affair of

an old man being threatened by the steady attacks of terrorists at his home. Nabi reports that Kabul went under massive destruction during the civil war, before the arrival of Taliban. But the situation got more gruesome after the advent of Taliban, particularly for women.

Hosseini outlines his books in light of the nation's critical what's more, conclusive recorded occasions. In any case, it isn't simply to graph or to rehash what has "been well documented" previously, as Nabi tells Mr Markos while depicting Taliban's period. It is somewhat to shower some light on "the fundamental tension involved in forming an identity rooted in a multifaceted culture and an always-developing historical experience" (Bloom 61). Truth be told, Hosseini's books include characters whose ways of life as well as trips seem to be, to a substantial degree, attached to furthermore, dictated by the nation's perplexing society and history.

Ab. Majeed Dar asserts that Hosseini's narratives "are written against a history that has not been told in fiction before", delineating the cultural richness and splendour of a country heading towards destruction (4). Subsequently, by reflecting his life-like encounters and experiences - being enmeshed in the unremitting sociopolitical battles, Hosseini draws the human face of the nation that has never been depicted previously. Put in an astonishing way, the author gives his characters the privilege of voicing stories that anecdotes his people's journey. In this manner, his characters are prototypes that embody and represent the life of customary Afghans.

Conclusion

The events that make up the novel come from different characters as in the novel. Their experiences in pre-war Afghanistan are set against and representative of the Afghan history, cultural diversity, and ethnic tradition. Hosseini explores the confines of fiction, culture and history by giving us characters promptly affected by the political position of the country, as Omar Sadr(2014) argues "There is a link between war and stability and the political culture and social structure of the country". Through the characters, we rediscover the land of exotic beauty, culture and unconquerable tribes. Hosseini's works sustain an exceptional fictional ordeal for their edifying role about Afghanistan and their literary merit for being the first Afghan-American novels acclaimed all over the world.

Cover images of the novels – Courtesy: <http://khaledhosseini.com/books/>

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