

Recreation of Distorted History in Khaled Hosseini's Selected Novels

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Abstract

Recreation of Distorted History in Khaled Hosseini's selected novels attempts to study in detail and analyzes critically the agonizing and harrowing experiences of the Afghan society under the monstrous regime of the Taliban. Curious enough, invariably all the Afghan writers focus upon contemporary Afghan society in their writing. Hosseini is one of the leading literary writers of Afghanistan who explores the Afghan psyche and brings forth the unknown facts about the Afghan history and cultural behavioral patterns. Being a diasporic author, Hosseini from USA looks at his country with a nostalgic fervor to reconstruct the country's history in cultural patterns and records the suffocations of their life in the homeland. As a committed writer, Hosseini firmly believes that his writings will bring positive changes in the miserable life of Afghan people and the entire world outside will understand the notable aspects of Afghan history. The present study is a serious attempt to analyze Hosseini's novels *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* from the perspectives of History, Culture and Gender.

Keywords: Khaled Hosseini, Taliban, history, terrorism, military coup, PDPA, Mujahedeen.

Introduction

Literature is not a lonely island; instead it has close proximity with other branches of knowledge. It is a well-known that History and literature are closely related. Talrish Khair rightly remarks in his essay, "*The Death of the Reader*", that there is "an intricate relationship between facts and fiction, between history, autobiography and creative writing" (4). It is vindicated that literature is not limited to the imaginative world, but through a literary work the author presents the social realities.

Among various themes, history is a dominant one in fictional narratives. Historical fiction frequently portrays the manners and racial conditions of the people or the ages. An author may fictionalize a historical event to complement his narrative against the historical background in which characters thrive. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is an apt example for historical fiction.

Khaled Hosseini's novels are not a mere record of the history of Afghanistan in order to understand his novels, relevant historical background need to be analyzed. Afghanistan suffered tyranny for over two hundred years. Under the rule of King Nadir Shah since 1993, he instituted constitutional monarchy that was in effect for about ten years. It was a very stagnant era. Eventually, the people of Afghanistan became disillusioned with the false promises of reforms which never became a reality. Under these circumstances the King was overthrown in a bloodless coup in 1973. Under the guise of medical treatment, he was exiled to Italy. Afghanistan's era of monarchy was over and it became a republic.

FOR THE NEXT COUPLE of years, the words *economic development and reform* danced a lot of lips in Kabul. The constitutional monarchy had been abolished, replaced by a republic, led by a president of the republic. For a while, a sense of rejuvenation and purpose swept across the land. People spoke of women's rights and modern technology. (KR 40)

The Kite Runner deals with Afghanistan from the 1970s to the year 2002. Afghanistan's long complicated history came to international attention only after the coup of 1973. This nation, located in Central Asia is made up of thirty four provinces. Afghan being the name used to denote the Pashtu community the people before 1000 AD. It is bordered by Pakistan, Iraq, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and for a short distance China. The novels *The Kite Runner* and *The Thousand Splendid Suns* depict the socio-political setup of Afghanistan during the reign of Taliban, which brought an exhaustive change in the lives of the Afghan people individually as well as collectively. Rebecca Stuhr has rightly said that:

Hosseini writes compelling stories through which he questions assumptions and breaks apart stereotypes through the strengths and weaknesses of his characters. He interweaves into the action of his stories the details of history, culture, and daily life in Afghanistan. He challenges his readers to reflect on discrimination and political abuse within their own experience in light of instances of such abuses in a different and unfamiliar country. (77-78)

General Mohammad Daoud Khan overthrew Mohammad Sahir Shah, the King of Afghanistan in 1973, which brought an end to Afghan monarchy and the formation of the republic of Afghanistan, and Daoud Khan governed for five years. The author accurately infuses history into the novel. He writes: "In 1933, the year was born and the year Zahir Shah began his forty-year reign of Afghanistan. . . .Kabul awoke the next morning to find that the monarchy was a thing of the past. . . .Daoud Khan had ended the king's forty year reign with a bloodless coup" (KR 34). In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* presents Afghanistan's history through three generations of women: Mariam, Laila and Aziza. The first generation woman Mariam was born in the year 1969. "Anyway Afghanistan is no longer monarchy, Mariam. You see, it's a republic now, and is no longer a monarchy" (TSS 23).

The military coup was nearly bloodless, as seen through Amir's story. It was still frightening time for people of Kabul who heard constant riots and shootings in the streets. Even though Afghanistan had long insisted on maintaining its independence from Russia, the PDPA was a communist Party and hence held close ties with Soviet Invasion. Amir remembers the war in pathetic way manner as follows: ". . . then in December 1979, when Russian tanks would roll into the same streets where I and Hassan played, bringing the death of the Afghanistan I knew and marking the start of a still ongoing era of bloodletting. . . ." (KR 34).

This faction began to challenge the government so rigorously that in 1979, the Soviet Army entered Afghanistan, beginning an occupation that would last a decade. This is the historical event in *The Kite Runner* which forced Baba and Amir to leave Afghanistan. Through the ten years of Soviet Occupation, internal Muslim forces had put up a resistance. The United States was among the countries that supported the resistance; because of its own Anti-Soviet policies. The Soviet troops finally withdrew in 1989, but remained under PDPA for three more years. Mujahedeen are Afghan resistance fighters, waging a holy war against a non-Islamic government. The Mujahedeen in

Afghanistan are a loose alliance of seven Sunni groups and eight Shia groups. After the withdrawal of the soviet troops, the Mujahedeen took over Kabul and declared Afghan as an Islamic state in 1992. Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud was the primary leader in Kabul until the Taliban captured it in 1996.

Mohammad Najibulah was the president of Afghanistan before the Taliba defeated him and come to power. They declared Afghanistan as an Islamic state. The novel *A Thousand SplendidSuns* vividly presents the process by which the Taliban's got hold of the country.

The Taliban had dragged Najibullah from his sanctuary at the UN headquarters near Darulaman Palace. That they had tortured him for hours then tied his legs to a truck and dragged his lifeless body through the streets. . . .He punctuated his words "He killed many, many Muslims!" . . . this is what we do with infidels who commit crimes against Islam! (269)

In 1996, the Taliban took control of Kabul. After so many years of insecurity and violence, the people welcomed the takeover. Rahim Khan in *The Kite Runner* recollects how the ordinary people of Kabul welcomed the Taliban. "We all celebrated in 1996 when the Taliban rolled in and put an end to the daily fighting" (KR 186) in *The Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam witnesses the celebrations held in Kabul to welcome the Taliban. "On it, someone had painting three words in big, black letters: ZENDA BAAD TALIBAN! Long live Taliban! As they walked the streets" (268).But Baba in *The Kite Runner* says, "You'll never learn anything of value from those bearded idiots...God help us all in Afghanistan ever falls into their hands" (16).

The Taliban are a group of Pashtun supremacists who banded together and took complete control of the country. It's an Islamic fundamentalist political movement in Afghanistan. It spread through Afghanistan and formed a government ruling the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan from September 1996 until December 2001 with Kandahar as the capital. The Taliban are condemned internationally for their brutal treatment of women. The majority of the Taliban are made up of Afghan Pashtu tribesman. The Taliban leader are influenced by Deobandi fundamentalism and strictly adhere to the social and cultural norms called *Pashtunwali* which, is a non -written ethical lifestyle code followed by the indigenous Pashtun people. Despite their warm inception, they soon made life in Afghanistan miserable. The Taliban movement started in the autumn of 1994 in a remote village in Afghanistan, driven by the determination of a farmer turned cleric, the one eyed Mohammad Omar. The Taliban were manipulated from the outset by Pakistan's inter-services intelligence which sought to extend the Pakistani influence, building on the links between Pashtun tribes on either side of the boarder. Then the Pashtun movement joined forces with the Al-Qaida for the first time. Their memories of the joint combat against the Soviet invader, their common religious and ideologies conventions; the personal ties that Osama Bin Laden established with Omar, and the influx of funds from Qaida's network in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf were the reasons for their union. It was later found that Taliban supported the al-Qaida in the 9/11 attack. Joseph Collins avers in his book *Understanding War in Afghanistan* as follows:

The 9/11 commission concluded that; through his relationship with Mullah Omar and the monetary and other benefits that it brought the Taliban. Bin Laden was able to circumvent restrictions; Mullah Omar would stand by him even when other Taliban leaders raised objections . . . al Qaeda members would travel freely within the country, enter or exit it

without visas or any immigration procedures . . . and enjoy the use of official Afghan State owned Arianna Airlines to courier money into the country.(144)

Amir, the protagonist of *The Kite Runner*, experiences the bitter taste of the violence and suffering in Afghanistan. One of the most graphic accounts is the stoning of Ghazi stadium. Ghazi stadium, the national stadium of Afghanistan first opened in 1923 could accommodate twenty five thousand people. *Buzkashi* (goat killing) and other events were held there. However, under the Taliban, it became the site of public execution as well as soccer games. The rapes of Hassan and Sohrab, symbolize the devastation of Afghanistan as a whole.

Even though Hosseini has stated that he wants to remind people of a peaceful Afghanistan, he also exposes the sufferings the nation has experienced within a quarter century of conflict. Violence pervades the novel, even in the seemingly sapless activity of kite fighting. Kite fighting is violent because it is a kind of battle where boys injure their hands when they participate. This suggests that Afghanistan has become a place where pain exists behind every happiness. Afghan's memories of their homeland are tainted with agony. The entire novel centers on a single act of violence. Hassan's rape, and the sin Amir commits by pretending that he hasn't seen anything. Ironically, Hassan's rape is echoed by Sohrab's rape decade later which symbolizes continual rape and devastation of Afghanistan by elements of war and terrorism.

Through Babi, Laila's school teacher and father in *The Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini informs the history of literary tradition of Afghanistan. Babi takes Laila and Tariq to see the two giant Buddha statues in Bamiyan. Many maybe familiar with the story of these ancient structures, but Hosseini makes sure that the reader knows that there is a living history associated with these statues. They are not mysterious remnants of the past like the sphinx. They represent religious tolerance, hospitality to the strangers and a place of learning. The knock down of the Buddha of Bamiyan hurt the Buddhist throughout the world. To highlight how the country is torn, Rahimullah Yusufzai depicts the heartbreaking incident:

The ill-timed and unwarranted Taliban decision to demolish the giant Buddha statues in Bamiyan in March 2001 led to worldwide condemnation and angered the Buddhists. It was the last straw on the camel's back and the Taliban lost their remaining few friends in the world after blowing up marvelous pieces of Afghan heritage. (114)

Due to war, many Afghans became exiles and migrated to other lands. The civil war in Afghanistan left thousands of families homeless, more than two thousand civilians died, around one lakh wounded. Nearly two million Afghan s have taken shelter in Pakistan and Iran. To show the painful migration of innocent people, Hosseini describes the migration and the scattering of Laila's friends: Laila hardly recognized anybody on the streets anymore...Giti's parents and her siblings left in June, shortly after Giti was kill (TSS 177).After the war, people were put in reservation camps. Amir, the protagonist in *The Kite Runner*, comes to Afghanistan through Pakistan from San Francisco, California. He has witnessed the sufferings of Afghan refugees in Peshawar camp. "People living under scraps of cardboard, TB, dysentery, famine, crime. And that's before winter...people turning to icicles. Those camps became frozen graveyards . . ." (KR 209). A *Thousand Splendid Suns* too picturizers the Afghans who were put to hardships in refugee camps.

“Refugees lying about in the sun...my father didn’t survive the first winter . . . he died in his sleep . . . that same winter, he said his mother caught pneumonia and almost died” (327).

The Taliban rule became very strict after they announced that they would be following the Islamic ideology. It was announced through radios and loud speakers that Afghans must follow Islamic rules strictly and if they fail to do so they would be punished seriously. They were compelled to wear Islamic clothes that are turban for men and burqa for women. They forbade girls from attending schools and women working outside their homes. During the Taliban regime, the nation had no growth or development. Hosseini lists out the Taliban’s rigid activities:

- *Singing is forbidden*
- *If you keep parakeets, you will be beaten; your birds will be killed.*
- *Attention women:*
- *You will not wear charming clothes*
- *You will not speak unless spoken to*
- *You will not laugh in public. If you do, you will be beaten.*(TSS 270-71)

The Taliban used God’s name for all their cruelties. Prostitutes were stoned to death. They render cruel and inhuman punishment for crimes. Kabul had only one hospital for women, with few doctors working there and they had little or no medicine or means to anesthetize the patients. In her book, *Women of the Afghan War*, written while the Taliban were in power, Deborah Ellis wrote of the non availability of health care of women:

The war and the chaos that comes with it have crippled the health care delivery system . . . women who are trained and could be of use and largely forced to remain at home. Although, some women are permitted to provide health care for other women, the hospitals and clinics set aside for female patients are few and ill equipped.(97)

Terrorism is another monster that spread its wings in Afghanistan quickly. The Taliban, having the moral and material support from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, sought terrorism to achieve their ends. The Pashtun Islamist rebels have gathered automatic rifles, rocket launches and explosives. Rasheed in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* says that, “I had heard rumors that the Taliban were allowing these people to setup secret camps all over the country, where young men being trained to become suicide bombers and Jihad fighters” (TSS 300).

The 9/1 attack and its aftermath are described at the end of *The Kite Runner* after the events of September 1, 2001. The United States invaded Afghanistan and overthrew the Taliban when a provisional government was put in place. Along with these political turmoil’s and terrorism, Afghanistan witnessed a lot of natural disasters which are recorded in the novels of Hosseini. In 1998 there was a drought, “All over the country, farmer were leaving behind their parched lands...roaming from village to village looking for water . . . nothing in it but human waste and rubble” (TSS 287). Then in the year two thousand again there occurred drought.

Afghanistan is the third world country where famine is the bitter reality. The novelist touching description of the starvation in Afghanistan is fit to be quoted here: “Rice, boiled plain and

white, with no meat or sauce, was a rare treat now...dried bread that tasted like saw dust...death from starvation suddenly became a distinct possibility”. (TSS 299)

A non-Afghan reader can get a fair picture of the Afghan history by reading these novels. Using Dickens way of storytelling, Hosseini narrates the historical events in Afghanistan. What is more fascinating in the novels of Hosseini is the perfect blend of history with the quotidian experiences of characters. Even from the perspective of New Historicism, the novels of Hosseini are highly significant as they reconstruct the history of the trouble –torn country.

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