



CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S 'THE KITE RUNNER'

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Abstract

Khaled Hosseini is one of the most proficient writer in the field of literature. His major literary works 'The Kite Runner' and 'A Thousand Splendid Suns' are categorized under a literary genre called Bildungsroman or novel of transformation. Hosseini's 'And the Mountains Echoed' is about familial bond between siblings. Another novel called 'The Sea Prayer' is about the plight of the displaced population. The common connection between these literary works is familial bond and life during war. This research paper is an attempt to dig deep into the world of the celebrated South-Asian writer Khaled Hosseini and his respective work 'The Kite Runner' to bring out the various cultural facets which hold great prominence. 'The Kite Runner' published in the year 2003 is a story of Amir's search for redemption and it is also about unveiling Afghanistan at the time of war. The novel is also filled with various cultural facets which makes it worth reading. The novel also throws light on the familial bond between a father and son. The paper will begin with a biographical sketch of Khaled Hosseini, his contribution in the field of literature, brief overview of his literary work 'The Kite Runner', various cultural encounters in the respective work and will end with the significance of these cultural values. The cultural encounters will cover language and literature, marriage customs, ethnicities, and religious teachings. This research paper will also throw light on the familial bond between a father and son and between two friends, Amir and Hassan.

Keywords: Culture; Significance of culture; Khaled Hosseini; Kite Runner; familial bond

INTRODUCTION

Khaled Hosseini, born in the year 1965 is an Afghan-American novelist. As provided in his official website, his father was a diplomat in the Afghan Foreign Ministry and his mother taught Farsi and history at a high school in Kabul. The author since his childhood was interested in writing and story-telling. He told Tamara Jones of the Washington Post that he wrote plays as a child, "cajoling his younger brothers and cousins into performing" them. (Stuhr,

02) He in his lifetime has published four novels, all of which are a huge success and are read by many readers worldwide. His literary works are mostly about familial bonds and life at times of war. 'The Kite Runner' is a bildungsroman where Amir, the protagonist of the novel is in a search for redemption and it also unveils Afghanistan during the Taliban regime. 'A Thousand Splendid Suns' is also a bildungsroman about Mariam, an illegitimate child who is forced to marry a shoemaker from Kabul

after a family tragedy. *'And the Mountains Echoed'* is about the familial bond between two siblings, Abdullah and Pari who were separated when their father decided to sell Pari to a childless couple in Kabul. Hosseini's fourth novel, *'The Sea Prayer'* is an epistolary novel inspired by the Syrian refugee crisis and the death of Alan Kurdi. The writings of Hosseini are a reflection of the plight of Afghan people and his homeland and therefore one can say that he is a spokesperson for Afghan values. The author mostly deals with the theme of family, love, life during war, loss, cultural values, and much more to pen down. Hosseini's art of characterization too is remarkable as his characters are multi-layered as well as vivid in nature.

On the basis of these ideas, this research paper will throw light on the cultural aspects and familial bond in the novel *'The Kite Runner'*. It will also focus on the significance of these cultural values. *'The Kite Runner'* is the debut novel of Hosseini which was published in the year 2003. It is a bildungsroman which shows the journey of the protagonist Amir and his quest for redemption. The novel is set in two regions, one in Kabul and the other in California. Khaled Hosseini in the foreword of the novel has mentioned that he wanted to write a story about two boys, "one conflicted, on unsure emotional and moral ground; the other pure, loyal, rooted in goodness and integrity." The former was Amir who was born in Kabul and since his childhood, he had a close bonding with the latter one whose name is Hassan, his childhood friend. He used to spend a lot of time with Hassan. Amir read stories from *Shahnamah* to Hassan and both of them even flew kites. But, there is one thing which kept on bothering Amir-his father's lack of attention. Baba, Amir's father hardly showed any love and care to Amir as he held Amir responsible for his wife's death. There was another reason why Baba had a feeling of dislike for Amir. Amir unlike other children of his age was indecisive and could not take a stand for himself. This has been clearly projected by Hosseini in the novel by mentioning that, "And where is he headed? Baba said. A boy who won't stand up for himself becomes a man who can't stand up to anything." (Hosseini, 22)

Amir was desperate to win his father's love and affection. This is the reason why Amir decided to participate in the Kite flying tournament and win in. He practiced a lot with Hassan and on the day of the tournament, Amir performed extremely well and finally won the tournament making his father proud of him. But, all this happened at the cost of Hassan's sacrifice. When Hassan went to retrieve the lost kite, he was caught by Assef, a bully and his friends. They wanted to seek revenge from Hassan as he once saved Amir by threatening them with a slingshot. Assef was ready to forgive Hassan only on the cost of the kite but Hassan disobeyed. To this, Assef sexually assaulted Hassan and instead of saving his friend, Amir ran away in fear. When Hassan returned with the kite, he barely said a word and two of them went back home. Although Amir was happy seeing how much Baba loved him but he was guilt stricken too. Amir then falsely blamed Hassan of theft and two of them got separated. Soon, Kabul was occupied by the Soviet Union and Baba and Amir was forced to leave their homeland and flee to Fremont, California.

Amir completed his education in California and when he grew up, he fell in love with Soraya, General Taheri's daughter. He asked his father to seek the hand of Soraya from General Taheri and Baba agreed. After some time, Baba's health worsened and when they went to see the doctor, they got a bad news. Baba was diagnosed with cancer and he had very little time to live. But, despite of Baba's deteriorating health condition, Amir and Soraya got married to each other. They were living a happy married life but their happiness was short lived as they were struggling to have a child. One day, Amir received a call from Rahim Khan, Baba's friend to come to Pakistan. Amir went to Pakistan and he learnt from Rahim Khan that Hassan was his half-brother. This devastated him and he left with rage. When his anger disappeared, he came back and decided to mend his mistakes from the past by rescuing Sohrab, Hassan's son from the Taliban. Amir went to Kabul and much to his dismay, he found that Kabul has changed a lot. It was no longer that place where Amir had spent his childhood. After the Taliban had taken over Kabul, it was a completely ruined place. All kinds of leisure activities

were banned and restrictions on women were imposed. Amir once attended a gathering at Ghazi stadium where a couple was stoned to death. That incidence was horrific. Amir then spoke to one of the Talibani about his agenda and he was asked to be present before their commander who was none other than Assef. Amir saw Sohrab who was kept like a slave and when Amir asked Assef to let Sohrab come with him, Assef agreed on one condition-a duel between the two. The duel was horrific as Assef was beating Amir ferociously. But, the duel came at halt when Sohrab helped Amir by striking Assef in the eye with the help of the slingshot. Amir then escaped from there with Sohrab.

Amir initially faced difficulty in taking Sohrab to California as he had no legal documents stating that Sohrab's parents are dead. Due to this, he had only one option left which is to let Sohrab stay in an orphanage for a while till he arranges the papers but Sohrab was reluctant to go as he was brutally tortured by the Talibanis when he was initially captured by them. Sohrab attempted suicide by slitting his wrist which made Amir shocked. He immediately rushed Sohrab to the hospital where he was treated and when the doctors were able to save Sohrab, Amir was relieved. Afterwards, Sohrab didn't utter a single word from his mouth. Amir was sad because of this but still he managed to take Sohrab with him to California. Upon reaching California, Soraya welcomed Sohrab in a sweet manner. She had even prepared a very beautiful room for him but Sohrab didn't say anything. Once Amir took Soraya and Sohrab to an Afghan gathering in California where people were flying kites. Amir at first tried to teach Sohrab how to fly a kite narrating about his past experience. Sohrab upon seeing this decided to fly a kite and the story ends with Amir being happy that finally his search for redemption has ended.

CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS IN THE KITE RUNNER

The Kite Runner is a novel which consists of various themes out of which Afghan culture is the most significant one. Hosseini in his masterpiece has dealt with various aspects of culture which has significance of its own. Although, this literary work is a manifestation of the livelihood of Afghanistan yet,

it contains several cultural encounters. The novel apart from being a bildungsroman also shows that it is a part of popular culture. Stuhr (2009) acclaimed that, The Kite Runner was awarded the Penguin/Orange Broadband Reader's Prize as the most popular reading group pick in the United Kingdom in 2006, 2007, and 2008. Hosseini in this masterpiece has delineated about the ethnic groups prevalent in Afghanistan, especially Pashtun and Hazara where the former tortured and suppressed the latter. Hazara community faced racial discrimination, an account of which was narrated in literatures of the Afghan people:

"In it, I read that my people, the Pashtuns, had persecuted and oppressed the Hazaras. It said the Hazaras had tried to rise against the Pashtuns in the nineteenth century but the Pashtuns had 'quelled them with unspeakable violence'."(Hosseini, 08-09)

Racial discrimination can also be seen in the novel when Assef, a bully and son of Mahmood, an airline pilot bullied Amir and Hassan when they were trekking through a barren patch of rough land. Assef took pride in him being a Pashtun and this is why he was furious with the fact that Amir too being a Pashtun was friend with a Hazara. He acclaimed that, "Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns. It always has been, always will be. We are the true Afghans, the pure Afghans, not this Flat-Nose here. His people pollute our homeland, our watan. They dirty our blood." (Hosseini, 38)

Afghanistan is a multilingual country. The main languages spoken in Afghanistan are Dari and Pashto. Dari is the official language of Afghanistan and Hosseini in 'The Kite Runner' has included several words from Dari origin along with its English translation. "You look khoshteeep," Baba said. Handsome (Hosseini, 153). Vaishali (2016) in her research paper stated about Hosseini that, He used some another word of Dari language like Bas, Bachem, Bakhshesh, Bismillah, Chai, Chapan, Inshallah, Jan, Hafez, Kursi etc in his novel.

The vibrant culture of Afghanistan also include religious festivals. Festival of Eid holds a great significance for Afghan people. They celebrate it with joy and happiness. Hosseini in his novel mentioned about this festival in an amazing manner:

“On Eid, the three days of celebration after the holy month of Ramadan, Kabulis dressed in their best and newest clothes and visited their families. People hugged and kissed and greeted each other with “Eid Mubarak.” Happy Eid. Children opened gifts and played with dyed hard-boiled eggs.” (Hosseini, 41)

Another glimpse of religious festival can be seen in the description of Eid Al-Adha. It is a festival which is celebrated to pay homage to prophet Ibrahim as he had mastered the courage to sacrifice his own son for God. Hosseini has mentioned about this festival as:

“TOMORROW IS THE TENTH DAY of Dhul-Hijjah, the last month of the Muslim calendar, and the first of three days of Eid Al-Adha, or Eid-e-Qorban, as Afghans call it—a day to celebrate how the prophet Ibrahim almost sacrificed his own son for God.” (Hosseini, 71)

Leisure activities too hold great significance in Afghan culture. These activities bring joy in the face of people and they also become stress-free. It includes various sports and fun activities. Kite-flying is one such leisure activity which has been a part of Afghan culture since centuries. Gora (2019) stated that, kite flying has been an integral part of Afghan culture from centuries. This festival is a true representation of pride, history, and freedom irrespective of religion. ‘The Kite Runner’ include description about kite flying as, “EVERY WINTER, districts in Kabul held a kite-fighting tournament. And if you were a boy living in Kabul, the day of the tournament was undeniably the highlight of the cold season.” (Hosseini, 48)

Amir was desperate to win the kite flying tournament to win his father’s love and attention. He along with Hassan gave their best performance on the day of the tournament and everything turned out to be fruitful as Amir won the tournament. His win made his father proud and their relationship softened. Amir was overjoyed to see how much his father loved him and finally he was able to win his father’s affection.

Glimpse of Buzkashi, the national passion of Afghanistan can also be seen in ‘The Kite Runner’. This tournament is played on New Year’s Day where a skilled horseman carries a carcass of a goat or cattle and drops it in a scoring circle while a team of other horseman tries its best to stop him.

“A chapandaz, a highly skilled horseman usually patronized by rich aficionados, has to snatch a goat or cattle carcass from the midst of a melee, carry that carcass with him around the stadium at full gallop, and drop it in a scoring circle while a team of other chapandaz chases him and does everything in its power—kick, claw, whip, punch—to snatch the carcass from him.” (Hosseini, 20)

In Afghan culture, honour plays a very crucial part in a person’s life. People value their honour the most and try to be a part of such deeds which are not a sin. Gora, et al. (2019) notes that The honour and sin are also an inseparable part of Afghan culture. In the novel, Baba undergoes the tumultuous experiences that are considered sin. According to cultural values, extramarital affairs are forbidden. The guilty of the same loses the honour in the society. Baba does not reveal the secret of being in a relationship with Ali’s wife under the pressure of losing the dignified position. This has been highlighted in the novel when Rahim Khan met Amir after a long time and told him about his relationship with Hassan:

“Please think, Amir jan. It was a shameful situation. People would talk. All that a man had back then, all that he was, was his honor, his name, and if people talked... We couldn’t tell anyone, surely you can see that.” (Hosseini, 206)

Another amazing aspect of Afghan culture is rituals in marriage. Marriage rituals hold a great significance in a person’s life. These rituals have a deep meaning and it binds two people as one. Hosseini in his literary work has portrayed several rituals of an Afghan wedding. It includes Shirini-khori or engagement party, awroussi or wedding ceremony, and nika or swearing ceremony. All these rituals has been portrayed in a beautiful manner:

"ACCORDING TO TRADITION, Soraya's family would have thrown the engagement party, the Shirini-khori—or 'Eating of the Sweets' ceremony. Then an engagement period would have followed which would have lasted a few months." (Hosseini, 156)

The Kite Runner truly is one of the finest novels written in the field of literature. It illustrates Afghan culture in an amazing manner. This masterpiece also portrays familial bond in a beautiful manner. The bond between Amir and Baba is of great significance. Initially, Baba had a disliking towards Amir as Amir could not take a stand for himself but when Amir won the kite flying tournament, their bond strengthened and their relationship grew stronger. After Amir's victory, Baba fulfilled Amir's wishes and even gave consent for Amir's marriage with Soraya. Although, Baba didn't stay with Amir for long because of his illness yet they lived peacefully and happily.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, one can say that 'The Kite Runner' is a great masterpiece which is worth reading. It not only portrays Afghan culture in a vivid manner but is also a projection of familial bond and life at times of war. Khaled Hosseini's portrayal of the major aspects of Afghan culture is truly commendable and astonishing. This clearly exemplifies the idea that culture and traditions must be valued as they are a mark of a person's identity and his existence. The familial bond between a father and son is projected in a beautiful manner. It shows the significance of family in the life of a person. The Kite Runner is also about the journey of Amir and his search for redemption which is dealt by Hosseini in an amazing manner. The novel in totality is an amalgamation of cultural values, cultural identity, familial bond, search for redemption, and life at time of war.

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