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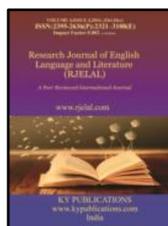
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DEPICTION OF AFGHANISTAN IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Hosseini as a writer has presented his childhood world of Afghanistan as a background to his novels. He reflects the norms, culture, custom, traditions of his motherland in his fiction. His fiction is reflection of Afghan society. Through the life of his characters he cleverly presents to his readers the society of his time and after he left his country to settle down in America. The present study will analyze his novels namely *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed* with reference to social and historical conditions which gave rise to his fiction. The study is devoted to contextualizing Hosseini's works by placing it in the historical and social context of late twentieth century.

Key Words: Reflection, Reminiscent, Misrepresentation, Longing.

Khaled Hosseini is, by critical and popular acclaim, one among the famous Afghan-American novelists. Born on March 4, 1965 in Kabul, Afghanistan, he is eldest son of the family. His father worked as a diplomat with Afghan foreign ministry, and his mother as a school teacher who taught Farsi and History in one of Kabul's high school. His father belongs to a very small village near Herat, Afghanistan. It was the no place to live a comfortable life as there was no electricity, no running water and no education facilities. Living in a small village with meagre assts seemed difficult to Hosseini's parents. Therefore they moved to Kabul in search of better conditions for life. In 1970, when Hosseini was five years old the whole family moved to Iran as his father was transferred to Afghan Embassy in Tehran. Later due to some upheavals in Iran, Hosseini's family moved back to Kabul. But after invasion of Soviet Union in Afghanistan, the Hosseini secretly started the arrangements to get political asylum for himself and his family in United States. He left Paris to start his new life in San Jose, California with the awareness that they might never return to their homeland- Afghanistan. In words of

Hosseini there was the anxiety of learning new language, adjustment, and above all of earning livelihood. He had to start from scratch which was much harder, especially for Hosseini's parents. They had left established careers, lives, and identities in Afghanistan.

Though being reminiscent of his past, Hosseini depicted the picture of Afghanistan with all his precision of love, nostalgia, attachment, longing, for his country in his novels. Khaled Hosseini has written three novels, *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and *And the Mountains Echoed*. Other than these books, he has published a photo journal named *The Silent Exodus: Portrait of Iraqi in Exile* with photographer Zalmai. Ha has also written the introduction chapter of the book *The Patience Stone* by Atiq Rehmani (author), Polly MacLean (translator). In his works he, himself ridicules the upper Afghan society of which he himself is a part. He has created the portraits of characters deeply affected by their social and physical environment. His ability to generate such irony and compassion for human suffering elevates his characters struggle

against restrictive conventions and circumstances to pathos, and even to tragedy.

Hosseini considers himself to be a story teller. He has used the elements of literary fiction genre writing to tell his stories. He has always emphasised on the fact that his style of writing is rooted in Western style of writing prose. As he said while talking to Farhad Azad, an interviewer:

Afghanistan is full of story tellers, and I was raised around the people who were very adept at capturing an audience's attention with their story telling skills. I have told that there is an old fashioned sense of storytelling in *The Kite Runner*. I would agree it's what I like to read and what I like to write. (Azad 2004)

Hosseini feels at home when he talks about Afghanistan. He has lived through the period of monarchy, the declaration of republic period, and the early years of Dud Khan's rule. In conversation with Razestha Sethna of *Newsline*, he admitted that his memories of Afghanistan are, "untainted by the spectre of war, landmines, and famines" (Saethna 2003). For the Taliban portions of the story he has interviewed Afghans who witnessed the barbaric rule of Taliban but later migrated to United States. He has also used the information from media. He always wanted to write a story which can justify the status of Afghan people. He has presented to his readers a new perspective to look at Afghan people. In an interview with *barnesandnoble.com*, Hosseini commented:

For many people in the West, Afghanistan is synonymous with the Soviet war and the Taliban. I wanted to remind people that Afghans had managed to live in a peaceful anonymity for the decades that the history of Afghans in 20th century has been largely pacific and harmonious. (2007)

He has written much about Afghan history, before and after Soviet invasion, which is largely forgotten. The period before Soviet rule in Afghanistan is known as the golden era of the country. He feels sorry about the stories that misrepresent Afghanistan and its people. He remarked in an interview that writings about different writers centre around the various wars, the opium trade,

and the war on terrorism. Precious little is said about the people of Afghan, their culture, their tradition and how they managed abroad as exile.

As a writer, Hosseini presented his childhood world of Afghanistan as a background in his novels. He reflects the norms, culture, custom, traditions of his motherland in his fiction. His fiction appears to be the microcosm of Afghan society. His novels showcase the social and historical context of Afghan society in a fictional world. Hosseini started writing his first novel, *The Kite Runner* in 2001. The novel is somewhat autobiographical in nature. He deliberately chooses the theme for his novel which helps him to slow down his own sense of guilt. The novel is about the friendship, love, suffering and ultimately salvation of characters. It focuses on the guilt of its main protagonist, Amir who suffers all through his life for his act of betrayal. Amir, a young boy betrays his own friend Hassan, which results in generation of guilt that clutches him and never leaves until he initiates a path of redemption. But in the backdrop of the novel, Hosseini dexterously explained the sufferings, devastation, and brutality of Taliban rule. Not only the beautiful city of Kabul is converted into wasteland, but the university lecturers have been reduced to beggars. Hosseini says in *The Kite Runner*:

The beggars were mostly children now, thin and grim faced, some no older than five or six. They sat in the lap of burqa clad mothers alongside gutters at busy corners and chanted "baksheesh, baksheesh!"...any of them hardly sat with an adult male- the war had made fathers a rare commodity in Afghanistan. (214-215)

Hosseini has used imagery to create realism. There is vivid sensory imagery to capture the appearance and the atmosphere of his childhood home, the flea market and the devastated city of Kabul. The novel is full of barbaric, cruel and non-humanistic actions of Talib officials. He explains that the laws and rule which Talib have imposed on Afghanistan. The public executions, full pants for soccer players, prohibition on making noise, compulsion on wearing burqa are the common among all.

In his second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, he talks about his childhood experience and

the knowledge about Kabul complemented by the knowledge from his revisit to Afghanistan in 2003. His two-week visit to Afghanistan provided him much of the material for his second novel. This book is all about the story of two women, their friendship, sufferings, and how love brings redemption to them. The book is fictional in nature though interlaced with historical events, with the time line ranging from about 1975 to America's invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. This novel is written by keeping in mind the condition of women in Afghanistan. Most of the subject matter and themes of his second novel are influenced by and product of his own experiences in Afghanistan during his visit. This is clear indication that literature is the reflection of society and vice versa as Lucien Goldman called as "categorical structure". The concept as evolved by Goldman is the means of an essential mediation between literary text, social consciousness and historical force. These categorical structures try to seek inner ideological structure of the work and to expose its relation to both what we call literary form and to an actual history.

The title of the novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* can be interpreted at two levels. Firstly, Hosseini has used it to present before his readers the natural beauty of Kabul which he has used as a backdrop for the novel. On the other hand it means the shining light of women of Afghanistan which is hidden beneath the burqa (veil) and is waiting for permission to enlighten the world. The title of the novel which is suggestive to the theme of the novel is taken from the poem "Kabul" written by the poet, Saib-e-Tabriz of seventeenth century. The poem praises the natural beauty of Kabul and its loss with the passage of time. He writes:

Every street of Kabul is enthralled to the eye

Through the bazaars the caravans of Egypt pass

One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs

And the Thousand splendid suns that hide behind her wall. (13-15)

The novel is the story of love, friendship, suffering, endurance and redemption set amid the war and famine over three decades in Kabul, Herat,

and Afghanistan. There is first and foremost the love between two women namely, Mariam and Laila, supporting each other in their marriage to the same man, Rasheed. Mariam and Laila are quite different from one another because they were brought up in completely different worlds, still sharing a common lot. On reading the novel, one can remark that the author has written an interlaced and intersecting story of two women- Mariam and Laila and the tale of two cities- Herat and Kabul. The theme of the novel is about redemption. Actually the novel, explains the different paths of life of the protagonist which lead to redemption. The restriction on the freedom of Mariam, Laila and the other characters in the novel give rise to the urge of search for freedom. The freedom is not available on its own and it requires a redeemer who has to strive hard to earn the freedom. Hosseini has portrayed Mariam as redeemer of herself and Laila, where as Laila in the end tries to redeem her own motherland. The ransom which Mariam has to pay is her own life to restore the original state of freedom which is characteristic of each individual. Laila sacrifices the lives of her dear ones to gain redemption from her guilt and sufferings. And when we talk about Afghanistan as a country in search of redemption, it has given its hundred percent to gain freedom from turbulence and chaos. Freedom here does not mean only the physical freedom from all worries of past's guilt and sufferings.

The novel is all about the story of redemption and reunion of Mariam's illegitimate and loveless life being redeemed by the love of Laila, Aziza and Zalmai and the reunion of the stars cross lovers. Mariam, an illegitimate child always craves throughout her life for love and acceptance from her husband's second wife, Laila. After the arrival of Laila in her life, she finds someone to share her feelings with. With the birth of Aziza and Zalmani life becomes happy. But sufferings never ended for them, with the Taliban rule in the country life became miserable for them. The Taliban rule goes for women as:

Attention women:

You will stay inside your home at all times...

If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a mahram, a male relative.

If you are caught outside alone on the street, you will be beaten and sent home. (248)

Hosseini has used Afghanistan as a background, when the country suffers, every native of it suffers. In the year 2000, the country was badly hit by the drought and famine. Through compare and contrast with the situations prevailing in Afghanistan before and after Taliban Rule, Hosseini draws the picture of his dream Afghanistan with everywhere fragrance of purity dwelling and the real picture after rule with foul smell of hatred, suffering and agonies.

In the end of this novel, Mariam redeems herself and Laila from the bondage of Rasheed by killing him. The ransom which Mariam has to pay is her life. Afghanistan too gains freedom from years of oppression and war as United States helps the local armies to fight against Taliban power. So, Hosseini has successfully presented the tale of redemption through suffering of its characters—symbolic of the sufferings of the people of Afghanistan.

Even in the novel *And the Mountains Echoed*, Hosseini has presented the modern day Afghanistan, with the touch of the toil and struggles of the last thirty years that the country has gone through. The mountains in the title are symbolic of the topography of Afghanistan. Again, they act as a sole bearer witness to a couple of pivotal events. On one level they stand for the natural entity, but on the other act as a hard barrier who bear all the atrocities that befell on the people of Afghanistan.

Thus, in his novels *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed*, Hosseini has depicted the tale of friendship, love, suffering and ultimately the salvation of his characters. His novels, although rooted in Afghanistan, have branched out across generations, time periods, and the globe. He has played with style and structure so immensely in his novels that they can no longer become the tale of the characters but the story being the microcosm of the macrocosm (Afghanistan).

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