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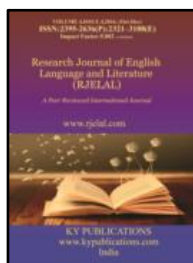
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RESURRECTING AFGHANISTAN: KHALED HOSSEINI'S *THE KITE RUNNER*

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ABSTRACT



'Afghanistan', over the past few decades has had various understandings and connotations attached to it and sadly, everything narrows down to violence, bloodshed and terrorism. The world has gone aloof to the mainland and somewhere forgotten the rich heritage and culture that the country once stood for. With Soviet invasion and Taliban incursion, all that remains are the lost glory and decadence. The world called it failed in every sense of the word. It is in this backdrop that Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan American novelist creates a niche by writing down all three novels with an essential setting of his home land, Afghanistan. This paper is an attempt to showcase how Hosseini demystifies the perception of the West, particularly through his first novel *The Kite Runner*. The novel is also read along Stuart Hall's theory of Cultural Identity in order to bring out the nuances, hidden in the echoes of characters. The paper also underlines Hosseini's attempt to remind or rather inform people that Afghans had managed to live in peaceful anonymity. It also tries to open windows to the land of Afghan, its history and culture by showcasing it in flesh and blood through the characters, thereby resurrecting Afghanistan.

Keywords: Afghanistan, lost glory, Khaled Hosseini, heritage and culture, Cultural Identity

America is a welcome place for all. It has always kept its doors open for immigrants from all over the world. The immigrant reasons are umpteen: some come in for studies, some for work. However, a vast majority seek shelter in America, away from economic or political crisis, religious conflict or warfare in their homeland. But it's never a smooth ride for them. Clothed in one's own culture, they find themselves strikingly different from the host be it name, culture, ethnicity or religion. Nevertheless, they seem to adapt with time and maintain their essential self. Literature stands as a testimony to this. A plethora of writers has spoken about immigrant life and their search for roots and meanings within American continent. Novels, essays and short stories about one's immigrant existence

are seen in writers such as Jumpa Lahiri, Shauna Singh Baldwin and Amir Tan and their works stands as good as the others writers with an American origin. One such prolific writer with an immigrant backdrop is Khaled Hosseini. Primarily from the land of Islam, Afghanistan; Hosseini moved to California during the early 1980s after the United States granted them political asylum pertaining to the political unrest in their homeland.

Born in Kabul, a cosmopolitan city at the time, just as he describes in his first novel *The Kite Runner*. Western culture, including movies and literature, with Afghan traditions, such as kite fighting in the winter formed popular culture of the city. Lavish parties were normal at the Hosseini family's home in the upper-middle class

neighbourhood of Wazir Akbar Khan. As his father served as a diplomat with the Afghan Foreign Ministry, repeated moves marked the next decade of the Hosseini family's life. They found themselves joining dots between Iran, back to Kabul, then to Paris, until their hopes of reuniting with their homeland were thrashed because of military invasion by the Soviet Union. Instead, the Hosseinis moved to San Jose, California after they were granted political asylum in the United States.

However, Hosseini felt a deep connection for his homeland and it was that pangs of separation, or rather a call from the motherland that took him to writing. His first *The Kite Runner* became international best seller which led him to his second *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and then the third novel joined the list *And the Mountains Echoed*. All these novels are peculiar, as it creates a niche around Afghanistan and the storyline develops around the setting of a nation. While *The Kite Runner* perceives the world through the eyes of the protagonist Amir with the backdrop as history of Afghan from the Soviet Invasion to the emergence of Taliban and later its fall, *A Thousand Splendid Sun* takes a more feminine perspective. If the former was a father-son story, then the latter moves from the perspective of mother-daughter duo. Meanwhile, the third novel breaks the conventions of the previous two in telling stories not from a single character's point of view, but is written as a collection of short stories in nine different chapters, each from a different perspective.

Published in 2003, Hosseini's first novel *The Kite Runner* elicits the life of two friends, namely Amir and Hassan, a rich Pashtun and Hazara, an ethnic minority respectively. It also reflects the tumultuous changes to which Afghanistan stands witness. While other immigrant writers dealt mainly with alienation or cultural shock, Hosseini opens our eyes to life in Afghanistan which remained closed to the outside world. Hosseini sketches a largely forgotten Afghanistan before the Soviet war as for many people in the West; Afghanistan is synonymous with the Soviet war and the Taliban. Hosseini wanted to remind or rather inform people that Afghans was at peace once.

The Kite Runner is a beautifully crafted novel set in a country that is in the process of being destroyed. The novel directly links its plot to the Afghan history, geography, ethnic groups, the Soviet invasion, the rise of the Taliban, 9/11 and the US invasion. It spans the period from before the 1979 Soviet invasion until the reconstruction following the fall of the Taliban. The book elicits Afghans as independent and proud people, who for decades have defended their country against one invader after another. But the narrator wonders if his people will ever transcend the tribalism that continues to threaten Afghanistan's integrity.

Afghanistan lies blistered and bruised by war, by the ravages of local destruction and international meddling. Without resurrecting the past that it had, it is not possible to see the true dimensions of the tragedy of what Afghanistan is today.

It is through raw characters, that Hosseini brings to us the Afghanistan of forgotten times. The analysis of both the characters in the novel, Amir and Hassan brings us to contemplate on their cultural identities. Hosseini paints these characters as essentially Afghans. These characters effortlessly merge Afghanistan's ethnicity and elicit the very idea of an Afghani Pashtun and Afghani Hazara. This cultural identity mounts from the nation's history. Afghanistan is ethnically a very diverse country, namely Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Aimaq, Turkmen, Baluch, and other small groups. The culture of Afghanistan reflects its ancient roots and position as a crossroads for invading ethnic groups and traditions. The Pashtuns (ethnic Afghans) make up the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, comprising between 42% and 60% of the country's population. The Hazara, on the other hand is the third largest ethnic group in the country. They are Persian-speaking and reside mainly in the Hazarajat region in central Afghanistan. Here, Cultural Identity or character and nation become important as it emerges as the essence of the conflict in the novel. Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity elicits

Cultural Identity is in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective on true self', hiding inside the many other, more

superficial or artificial imposed selves, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. It is called as identity as being. (Hall, 1996)

According to this definition, Amir and Hassan's characters reflect their common historical experiences and shared culture that brings into light their identity as one and the same as Afghans, yet different in many a ways. Their ethnicity is what makes each character stand apart and but the basic strands of national identity can be seen throughout. Although belonging to various groups, they underscore their identity as belonging to the same culture, the Afghan culture hereby resurrecting Afghan from the realm of bruises preconceived by the entire world.

The Afghans who lives in Kabul speak Dari (Afghan Farsi) communicate to others. Amir and Hassan of different ethnic group usually use Afghan Farsi. In this case, Language is being used as one of the sign to describe them as one,

..a word for which a good Farsi equivalent does not exist: .sociopath..(Hosseini, 34)

Although literacy levels are very low, classic Persian poetry plays a significant role in Afghan culture. Poetry has always been one of the major educational pillars in both Iran and Afghanistan, to the level that it has integrated itself into culture. Amir and Hassan are seen having a profound likeness for poetry and other arenas of literature such as the epic Persian heroes at the tenth-century 'Shahnamah' and 'Rostam and Sohrab'. Even though both the characters belong to different ethnic backdrop, both of them follow the traditions of Islam. On the tenth day of Dhul-Hijjah, the last month in a Muslim calendar, and the first three days of Eid Al-Adha, or Eid-e-Qorban, as Afghans call it, a day to celebrate how prophet Ibrahim almost sacrificed his own son for God. Amir and Hassan along with their fathers stand in the backyard to see this ritual every year, irrespective of their differences show their solidarity as Afghans.

In Afghanistan, Buzkashi is a national sport that is similar to polo and played by the horsemen into two teams, each trying to grab and hold of a goat carcass. It takes place on the first day of spring

Buzkashi was, and still is, Afghanistan's national passion (Hosseini, 84)

The kite-fighting tournament is an old winter tradition in Afghanistan. It starts early in the morning on the day of the contest and does not end until the last winning kite sustains in the sky. During the course of tournament, boys from facets of ethnic groups, irrespective of their differences gather on sidewalks and roofs to cheer for them. The streets are usually filled with kite fighters, jerking and tugging on their lines, squinting up to the sky, trying to gain position to cut the opponents line. Besides, every kite fighter had a helper. In the novel, Hassan is Amir's assistant who held the spool and the fed line. It shows the Hazara identity that Hassan carries, thereby accepting the subdued position to Amir, Pashtun. For Amir, Hassan is the greatest kite runner in Afghanistan who always gets the spot, the kite would land even before the kite does, as if he had some sort of inner compass. Perhaps, it is this tradition of the Afghans that Hosseini invokes through the title.

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, 43-44)

Conflict forms the essence of novel; the surmising envy in Amir for Hassan distances himself from a Hazara ethnic and there develops a stance of the superiority and inferiority. A Pashtun himself, Amir finds ways to wipe Hassan off his life completely; thereby eliminating the idea of cultural identity. Amir, a superior ethnic accuses his loyal friend of stealing, and Hassan like every other Hazara finds solace in the command of their master. It can be seen that, Hassan is always at the receiving end of matters especially from the superior ethnic- Amir. Nevertheless, Hassan accepts it and remains obsequious to his master, as he belongs to the Hazara community; a minority ethnic group in Afghanistan. It is interesting to note that The Hazara kinship is organized in lineages; descent is traced through the male line. The male in specific areas consider themselves descendants of common ancestor. A Hazara has physical appearances that are very different with a true Afghan; the

Pashtun. This can be very evidently seen in Amir's descriptions of Hassan.

I can still see Hassan up on that tree, sunlight flickering through the leaves on his almost perfectly round face, a face like a Chinese doll chiseled from hardwood: his flat, broad nose and slanting, narrow eyes like bamboo leaves, eyes that looked, depending on the light, gold, green, even sapphire. (Hosseini, 3)

Also being a Hazara in Afghan has negative connotations to it-low class, poverty and with some physical disabilities; for instance Ali, Hassan's father has a polio leg and Hassan, a harelip. In addition to this, Hazaras are illiterate and end up in mediocre jobs like waiters or servants, the people have stereotyped Hazaras henceforth are called poor and illiterate

On the contrary, Amir has inherited his identity as an ethnic superior, Pashtun following patriarchy.

Never mind any of those things. Because history isn't easy to overcome. Neither is religion. In the end I [Amir] was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara, I [Amir] was Sunni and he was Shi'a, and nothing was ever going to change that. Nothing. (Hosseini 2003, 22)

Perhaps it is the Pashtun blood in him that makes him sweep Hassan from the country, as the Pashtuns have a general notion that Hazaras are dirty blood. They are blinded by a strong conviction that they are the true Afghans rather than people like Hassan, an ethnic minority.

Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns. It always has been, always will be. We are the true Afghans, the pure Afghan, not this Flat-nose here. His people pollute our homeland, our watan. They dirty our blood. He made a sweeping, grandiose gesture with his hand. Afghanistan for Pashtuns, I say. That's my vision.. (Hosseini, 35)

Through the course of the novel, Hosseini helps alter the world's perception of Afghanistan, by giving out the first real sense of what the Afghan people and their daily lives actually look like. A war land as people call Afghanistan today, the author informs

the world of an incredibly rich culture that saw its demise with Soviet intrusion and Taliban incursion. Although the novel talks about the past actions that engulfed the protagonist's life and his subsequent search for redemption, it also carves Afghanistan as a character. Hosseini tells a story within a story, the tumultuous story of nation. The major events of the novel, while framed in the context of Amir's life, follow Afghanistan's transitions as well. In Amir's recollections of his childhood, Hosseini paints the calm state of Kabul during the monarchy, the founding of the republic, and then watch as the Soviet invasion and infighting between rival Afghan groups ruin the country. These events have a hand in dictating the novel's plot and have significant effects on the lives of the characters involved. The establishment of the republic gives Assef an opportunity to harass Amir, simply because Assef's father knows the new president. Later, Kabul's destruction forces Baba and Amir to flee to California. When the Taliban take over after that, they murder Hassan and even give Assef a position that lets him indulge his sadism and sexual urges without repercussions. Both of these events factor into Amir's mission to save Sohrab and his redemption by confronting Assef, subtly implying that Afghanistan will similarly have its own redemption one day.

Hosseini demystifies the Western perception that Afghanistan is still stuck in the 12th century and also removes the idea that Afghans hate the West. Through Amir and Hassan, he tries to draw different cultural identities that prevail in the country- the dominant and rich Pashtuns and subservient Hazaras, of whose origin or history the world hasn't heard of. Hosseini breaks open the stereotyped voices and creates an awareness about Afghanistan other than the memory of 9-11 and finally moves beyond discussions of the war on terror, the Taliban, and a narrative often associated with death and graveyard.

It is undeniable that Hosseini touches down memory lane while writing. Being an exile, his immediate reality is not living on the streets of Kabul where on every corner he can see a living reminder and living relic of the tragedy of the past 30 some-odd years. His reality of living in the U.S. is different

and that distance affords him a compulsion to write about that is not as powerful as writing from ground zero in Kabul. The enormity of what's happened to Afghanistan is far too powerful; a black hole a vortex and a looming presence in the daily life of Afghan writers living there. But it still remains a powerful and authentic account of country that's largely forgotten. *The Kite Runner* stands as a complete work of literature that succeeds in exploring the culture of a previously obscure nation, a reminder that there was an Afghan; a land of rich culture, diversity, religion and history before Soviet invasion, thereby resurrecting Afghanistan.

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