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AFGHANISTAN: HISTORY, CULTURE, AND TRADITION IN  
A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS

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Abstract

Afghanistan is a land of multi-cultural diversity, rich tradition with a dominant historical and political background. Hosseini describes the captivating beauty and the traditional values of Afghanistan, also the foreign influences that reform the rich diverse long-established values on the political, religious, or cultural grounds. We are given to understand that Taliban forces people to follow tenants of Islam but they fail to do so and on the contrary, they involve in sexual exploitation of women, brutal murders, human trafficking, and much more. The cultural beliefs of Afghanistan were intermixed with the fundamentalist ideology of the Taliban and modernity of the West which resulted in multi-culturalism and loss of traditional ethos. War and invasions dragged Afghanistan down to sub-normality instead of development. Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* portrays historical, cultural, and social aspects of Afghanistan through the story of Mariam, Laila, Rashid, and Tariq while tracing the cultural change there by civil war and invasions. Also, Hosseini's narrative style in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* voices his western influence in which he upholds the West in the novel and portrays the East as downtrodden.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Taliban, Tradition, Hosseini

1

Afghanistan, land of war and invasions, a country full of alluring landscapes dotted with high mountains and deep narrow valleys separated by regions and people of different cultures and lifestyles. It is enclaved in central and West Asia, surrounded by Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan in the north, Iran to the west, and Pakistan to the southeast. The country has a population of about 25 million, half of them belonging to Pashtuns who live in the south around Kandahar province. There are many other groups in

the country as well – Pashtuns are correlated to the Persian people of Iran. Pashtuns comprise 2/5<sup>th</sup> of the population which includes two larger groups – Durrani and Ghilzay, Tajkis account only for 1/4<sup>th</sup> of the Afghans, Hazara and Uzbeks represent 1/10<sup>th</sup> and other ethnos account for small portions. Religious affiliations are Sunni Muslims 84%, Shia Muslims 15%, other (Hindus, Christians) 1%. Hazara tribe is considered to be the most discriminated group in Afghanistan and their victimization antedates decades.

Afghanistan as a country remained unknown, however in the 1980s it emerged from obscurity to international recognition when the Soviets tenanted the country from December 1979 to February 1989, the vicious civil war that emanated after the Soviet Union left Afghanistan and the consecutive interference by the U.S led forces that overturned the scoundrel Taliban regime in late 2001. For most of its times in history, Afghanistan has been in modulation and settled around in 7000 b.c. In 330 b.c Alexander, the great conquered Afghanistan and introduced Greek culture to the region. Mongols of Genghis Khan invaded the country in the 13th century. The 1747 year witnessed a council meeting called Loya Jirga and established the kingdom of Afghanistan.

The British and Afghans fought three wars in the nineteenth and twentieth century but in 1919 British witnessed their defeat which resulted in the formation of an independent monarchy in 1921. The Soviet Union invaded Afghan land in 1979 and the Afghan fighters known as Mujahidin were aided by the United States, Pakistan, China, and Iran. In 1996, Afghanistan witnessed the withdrawal of Soviet forces and control of the Taliban over Kabul. After the major incident of the September 11, 2001 attacks, the United States began searching for Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan who was believed to be the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks and invaded Afghanistan along with an international alliance to pull out the Taliban. A Loya Jirga put down a new constitution in 2004, and the people of Afghanistan elected Hamid Karzai as their first president. In September 2014, Ashraf Ghani was elected as the new president.

Afghanistan is rich in its traditions and customs and has been a crucible of multiculturalism as it is geographically positioned at the meeting point of four cultural areas: the Middle East, Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and the Far-East. These major impacts can be depicted in the cultural practices across the country. The people of Afghanistan have strong institutional values, beliefs, and rules encompassing the family and its member's behavior. These family roles are labyrinthine and they shift depending upon ethnicity and region. The most important institution of Afghan society

remains the family. In an Afghan family that is sacrosanct, an act of enquiring about any female relative or expressing any interest is considered to be an intrusion of manners and privacy among liberal Afghans, and among conservatives, an act called for revenge. It is due to this cultural sense of privacy that was reinterpreted by the Taliban that women should be fully covered from head to toe when in public so that no non-mahram can see her. Afghanistan has been at the intersection of many cultures, traditions, and civilizations, inhabiting a unique position in the cultural geography of the Middle East and Central Asia. Invasions and wars that Afghanistan faced not only influenced the culture and tradition but also the way of living in the country, these invading tribes and forces progressed through primeval Afghanistan and left their mark on customs and culture. Nevertheless, the tribulation of war eradicated the country's economic, political, and cultural system.

Taliban, the ultra-conservative Islamic radical organization ruled Afghanistan from 1996-2001 over roughly three quarters and implemented an authoritarian exposition of Islamic law. In 1994, the Taliban turned up as one of the eminent groups in the Afghan Civil War and mainly comprised of students living in the eastern and southern Pashtun areas of Afghanistan and bravely fought during the Soviet-Afghan war. The American-led invasion of Afghanistan in December 2001, after the 9/11 attacks, created an agitation in the west. Taliban were internationally condemned by the west for harsh rules and strict implementation of their interpretation of Islamic Sharia law, which resulted in the barbarous treatment of Afghans. Taliban during their rule from 1996-2001 carried out ruthless massacres on Afghan people and even denied any kind of supply from world organizations leaving their people dying with starvation. During their rule, they even banned activities like kite flying and keeping birds as pets and even perpetrated many minority groups of Afghans including the Hazara tribe. Cultural genocide, destroying Afghan art and architecture including famous monuments like Buddha's of Bamiyan. They banned entertainment and recreational activities like the popular one among children's being kite flying.

Television, VCR, music, and other entertainment programs were also banned. In one law, the Taliban eliminated opium-poppo cultivation from almost 85% of Afghanistan. They forced women to wear Burqa to protect themselves from the gaze of non-mahram in public. Women suffered more during Taliban rule, they were raped and in the 1990s, Taliban rights were recognized by crime against women, cruel punishments, and suppression of the right to freedom, justice, and education to people of Afghanistan. Taliban rule ethically altered the original cultural values of Afghans under the banner of Islamic radicalization and their main focus was to defeat rivals which resulted in the lack of many socioeconomic reforms and basic needs of Afghan people. They used American textbooks but scratched the human faces out of them given their strict fundamentalist identity. The history of Afghan wars and invasions are so complex that it influenced the traditions, beliefs, and moral values of people. West continues to have a great influence on the political, social, cultural, moral, and most importantly jingoistic impact that resulted in the historical growth of Afghanistan as well as economic reforms. The U.S affected the Afghan society in incidental ways, exuding into its culture and language. The Taliban and U.S invasion left Afghanistan and its people exhausted and vulnerable. With such a historical, political, and cultural background, Afghanistan and its historical background is written by many writers including natives to provide insight into Afghanistan and how people faced these wars and invasions through their narrative stories.

Khalid Hosseini, an Afghan-American writer talks about Afghanistan, its people, their sufferings because of war with the help of characters in his novels. His novels such as *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, *Kite Runner*, and *And the Mountains Echoed* belong to postcolonial literature with their reference to the social, political, and historical context. The title of his novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is derived from the poem of a Persian poet Shams-e-Tabrizi, who used this phrase 'Thousand Splendid Suns' to express the beauty of Afghanistan and its cultural attainment, therefore the title is ironic as the novel deals with the destruction of Afghanistan and of its culture

when Taliban and invasive forces took over. Through the stories of Mariam and Laila along with Rashid and Tariq, Hosseini speaks about the resistance of Afghanistan to the wars imposed by internal and foreign groups and how it influenced the cultural and traditional values of people. Hosseini offers the patriarchal, patrilineal ideology of Afghans in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and also ridicules the upper Afghan society of which he is a part. The characters in his novel are deeply affected by the social and physical environment and also appears to be the microcosm of Afghan society. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* being a novel of love, friendship, sufferings set amidst war in Kabul, Herat, Afghanistan talks about two women who are different from one another and how their lives lead to absolution. The story evolves with the never-ending sufferings of Laila and Mariam on their end caused by Taliban rule and their challenge to the traditional notions of the society in the major backdrop of Afghan culture and society. In an interview with *barnesandnoble.com*, Khalid Hosseini talks about the new perspective of Afghan people that readers should look upon:

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

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* offers a realistic image of the Afghan culture, it includes the three phases of Afghanistan, and the vast changes in cultural, political, and religious aspects over these three periods. Hosseini introduces Afghanistan with royal tombs, mosques, buildings, monuments, shrines, and Herat as one of the most influenced regions of the country as it was the center of Sufism because of its strong alliance with Iran. Jalil, Mariam's father narrates her the stories of Herat with its tradition and literature, "He was fond of telling her the stories, like the time he told her that Herat, the city where Mariam was born, in 1959, had been once the cradle of Persian culture, the home of writers, painters, and Sufis" (Hosseini 4). Jalil narrates the story of art and architecture and the history of Herat with the magnificent beauty of the landscape.

Jalil told her the story of Queen Gauhar Shad, who had raised the famous minarets as her loving ode to Herat back in the fifteenth century. He described to her the green wheat fields of Herat, the orchards, the vines pregnant with plump grapes, the city's crowded, vaulted bazaars. (Hosseini 4-5)

Religion played an important role in the radical change in the cultural land of Afghanistan and was directly or indirectly connected to the political upheavals, war, and violation. Taliban implemented strict inhuman laws to preserve the so-called tradition. Farhana Yeasmin in her research paper, "Khalid Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns: A Saga of Afghanistan*" says there was a peaceful ambiance and people were free in practicing religion during Daoud Khan's rule, gender policy was even liberal and there were no strict religious forces in Afghanistan. The people of Afghanistan practiced their religion freely and there was no bondage to them. The burqa was something of the women of upper status and for the urban society of Afghanistan but due to political upheaval of Taliban history changed. Mariam learns Quran from Mullah Faizullah in her childhood and enjoys her freedom in religion, however she is forced to wear a burqa after her marriage. Rashid brings a burqa to Mariam and says:

But I'm a different breed of man, Mariam. Where I come from, one wrong look, one improper word and blood is spilled. Where I come from, a woman's face is her husband's business only. I want you to remember that. Do you understand? (Hosseini 69)

The freedom that was enjoyed gradually declined as it was considered to be a deviation from the principles of Islam. A large number of people especially young men joined Mujahidin in name of jihad to fight against the government instigating modernism, they misused their power and started massive killing. In the novel Rashid refers:

They're forcing young boys to join.... The Mujahidin are. In plain daylight at gunpoint, they drag the boys right off the street. And when soldiers from a rival militia capture these boys, they torture them. I heard they electrocute them – that they crush their balls with pliers. They make the boys lead

them to their homes and break in, kill their fathers, rape their sisters and mothers. (Hosseini 248)

Initially, people supported the radical group of Mujahidin with the hope for betterment in the country. However, the situation proved contrary and restrictive laws were passed, women were banned from working in public, health services, and education. The clash between the radicals and modernity gave rise to civil war and then to the Taliban. Laila's teacher supported modernity and believed men and women are equal, if women are forced to cover, men, should too. "She did not cover and forbade the female students from doing it. She said women and men are equal in every way and there was no reason women should cover if men didn't". (Hosseini 111) Taliban implemented several laws in the country, public hangings, torture was common. They destroyed the pre-historical art and heritage of Afghanistan, they didn't allow any book except the Quran, art, and culture was lost in the country due to their restriction. They destroyed many schools, buildings, and historical monuments in the name of war and Islamic rule. Laila recalls:

Men wielding pickaxes swarmed the dilapidated Kabul Museum and smashed pre-Islamic statues to rubble – that is those that hadn't already been looted by the Mujahidin. The university was shut down and its students were sent home. Paintings were ripped from walls, shredded with blades. Television screens were kicked in. Books, except the Koran, were burned in heaps, the stores that sold them closed down. The poems of Khalili, Pajwak, Ansari, Haji Dehqam, Ashraqi, Beytaab, Hafez, Jami, Nizami, Rumi, Khayyam, Beydel, and more went up in smoke. (Hosseini 273)

The traditional music of Kabul called 'Kharabat' was silenced and musicians were beaten and imprisoned, their instruments rubabs, Tambora, and harmoniums were destroyed. They even fired bullets into the grave of the famous singer, Ahmed Zahir. Taliban destroyed the historical monuments thus affecting the old cultural legacy of Afghanistan for which it was known. Taliban blew the giant Buddhas in Bamiyan by planting TNT in the cervices and there was a huge cry around the world and

many organizations wrote to the Taliban not to demolish but they didn't listen.

There was an outcry around the world, from the U.S. to China. Governments, historians, and archeologists from all over the globe had written letters, pleaded with the Taliban not to demolish the two greatest historical artifacts in Afghanistan. But the Taliban had gone ahead and denoted their explosives inside the two-thousand-year-old Buddhas. (Hosseini 306)

The religious and cultural bondage by introducing new laws resulted in the hypocrisy of people as we see in the case of Rashid, there is an instance in the novel where Mariam finds pornographic magazine in his room. On one hand, he warns Mariam from any male gaze and even forces her to wear a burqa but on the other hand he himself watches provocative pictures of non-mahram. Rashid publicly talks about Islam and beliefs but doesn't fast in the month of Ramadhan, we are given to understand and it is because he becomes angry when he does not eat. "Except few handfuls of days, Rasheed didn't observe the fast. The few times he did, he came home in a sour mood. Hunger made him curt, irritable, and impatient". (Hosseini 77) Therefore, the religious convictions and beliefs he holds in public are different from his private life, portraying him as a hypocrite and how he rather tries to appropriate and enforced code of conduct which he essentially doesn't feel about. Though these Mujahidin were considered to be heroes but they involved themselves in various crimes like human trafficking, rapes, sexual exploitation of women, loots, brutal murders which devastated and troubled the tradition of Afghanistan. Khalid Hosseini even talks about the poverty and starvation of Afghan people due to war which leads them to send their children to orphanages. The war deprived these children of parental affection and in fact scores of children lost their lives. Rashid decides to send Aziza to an orphanage and Laila agrees so that her daughter will not die of hunger. This is an acute insight into how family life suffered, which was the basic institution of society, due to oppressive war policies of the country.

### **Conclusion**

Khalid Hosseini, brought up in the tradition of storytelling, narrates the situation of Afghanistan in his novels. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* harmoniously fuses the narrative of struggling Mariam and Laila, female protagonists of the novel with the intensely disturbing scenario and history of Afghanistan over the past thirty years. Hosseini has used Afghanistan in the backdrop, where the country suffers and inevitably its natives too. Through comparison and contrast with the conditions prevailing in Afghanistan, he talks about the characters and how their lives changed with the situation. Hosseini, in his work, adopts a narrative technique that indicates the ideological disparity between revolutionary Kabul and rural Afghanistan. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* reflects the history of Afghanistan from the 1960s to 2000s when the land of traditions and beliefs witnessed political upheavals from Soviet invasion to Taliban rule that changed the dynamics of the whole nation.

Hosseini in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* revisits the land of Afghanistan and offers the cultural, historical, and traditional background with the more prominent theme of patriarchy in the country. His novel talks about Afghanistan, a country full of diversified heritage, historical monuments, beautiful landscapes which later were distorted by the radical forces of the Taliban and foreign invasions. The Taliban rule and invasions of Soviets and the West reoriented the lives of Afghan people, and all of it became unbearable with the upsurge of anarchy and extremism. The radical ideology of the Taliban forced people to follow the strict fundamentals of religion, which became the order of the day as we see in the novel how Mariam was forced to wear a burqa by Rashid. During the rule of the Taliban, the novel projects people as religious hypocrites who have become like their leaders who used to rape, murder, and publicly hang and torture people and at the same time preach religion. The political scenario in the novel clearly illustrates the negative reforms and the development that Afghanistan underwent from liberalism to extremism. In this novel, we see how Afghan people

particularly women folk suffered at the hands of radicals. The story of Mariam and Laila portray the living of women of Afghanistan, their survival against the odds of the situation, and the patriarchal society.

Afghanistan like other countries of the Indian subcontinent also has a patriarchal setup. The novel explores the saga of two heroic protagonists, Mariam and Laila who suffer from depression in a radical dominated male society. Hosseini narrates in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* that women suffered not only through war and invasions but also were deprived of their gender-based equality, freedom, and rights. They were tortured, abused, humiliated, raped, and even forcefully married without their consent that clearly illustrates how they were treated in a patriarchal society. They were positioned as weak and inferior to men, effectuating tension in the society. Mariam, Aziza, Laila, Nana represent the womenfolk of Afghanistan who suffer at the hands of patriarchy. On one hand, they experience brutal treatment in the family, and on the other, they resist the oppressive dicta of the country.

This research clearly illustrates the cultural, historical, and social conditions of Afghanistan from the 1960s to 2000s and the political structures that led to humiliation, inhumanity, and violence. In addition to this, it also raises the question of Western influence on Hosseini. His narrative style in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* makes the reader conscious of West as superior and benevolent, and east as downtrodden. Hosseini has portrayed the East as barbaric, cruel, and violent while the West as a place of harmony. The novel has been structured in a way that the West and East can be seen as two binary opposites in which "otherness" is associated with East. Hosseini's western mindset is also observable in his work.

Hosseini's novel is a prime example of a classic Afghan story. So, the present research in its entirety pays attention to Afghanistan's culture, history, politics, traditions, and living of people of Afghan in war and during and after invasions, and religious constraints through the stories of Mariam, Laila, Rashid, and Tariq. It is concluded that the novelist has narrated the saga in such a structure

and style that it no longer seems to be a story of characters but a microcosm of the macrocosm i.e., Afghanistan.

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