



The Politics of Representation: A Call for Regeneration of Postcolonial Studies and Reinvestment in Said's Work

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Abstract

This paper contends that the global, political, and cultural events of the last fifteen years call for a regeneration of postcolonial studies and a reinvestment in Said's work. The dissolution of the age of Empire does not herald the end of orientalism. In fact, it has become incumbent upon postcolonial scholars to draw attention to it and to dismantle its many contemporary forms.

Keywords: stereotypes, defamation, misogynistic, victimised, universality

Following the Sept 11, 2001 attacks in USA & the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq a "NEW ORIENTALISM" has been identified by critics who believe that people of those and surrounding countries are being classed once more as "DIFFERENT" by the western propaganda surrounding the conflicts.

In 'New Orientalism in Popular Fiction and Memoir', Fitzpatrick raises the issue of two problematic themes in contemporary Muslim/Islamic literature: (1) perpetuating negative Muslim stereotypes; and (2) the promotion of Western values. Character defamation with 'Muslim' traits such as misogynistic, violent Islamic men and helpless victimized women are described by Fitzpatrick as typical portrayals of the Far East in classical Orientalist scholarship and to have continued in recent popular Islamic fiction (Lee Melissa).

In my response, I plan to show that Khalid Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, contrary to Fitzpatrick's argument include many characters that read against these predominant media stereotypes. The novels of Khalid Hosseini work against this trend by giving the people of Afghanistan a human face. The universal themes found in Hosseini's novels help to bridge cultures.

One of the popular authors discussed in Fitzpatrick's article is Khaled Hosseini. He is examined in regards to the individual character depictions and overarching themes which, Fitzpatrick argues, promote American foreign diplomacy and Western stereotypical conceptions of the Middle-Eastern 'Other'.

The famous work of Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is narrated by Miriam and Laila, who are the two female protagonists. Miriam is Rasheed's first wife and Laila is his second wife.

Fitzpatrick's understanding of male misogyny is centred on the character of Rasheed who is violently abusive towards his two wives for what he interprets as their household disobedience. Fitzpatrick accurately depicts Rasheed as 'violent, brutal, sexist, domineering and irrational' character, but reading into the text further, one can discover many other characters. In fact, a majority of the leading male characters in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* are not inclined to misogynistic brutal tendencies.

Jalil, Miriam's father who is responsible for Nana and her daughter's exclusion in the larger community, although depicted as a womaniser is somewhat likeable. Jalil is a wealthy businessman, he builds Miriam and Nana's house himself. 'His idea of penance' scoffs Nana', but Jalil also takes the time to visit Miriam, his illegitimate daughter, once every week and constructs a relationship that leads Miriam to develop a strong bond with Jalil. It is at the end of the story that Jalil's character is redeemed. Before his death Jalil regrets for the way he has treated Miriam. In his will, which is read posthumously, he leaves a large sum of money to Miriam. Mullah Faizullah's son informs that Jalil died penniless (Hosseini 2007).

Mullah Faizullah, a local Sufi Imam is another positive masculine character in the novel. He is Mariam's teacher who teaches her to read and write using lessons from the Quran. Mullah Faizullah becomes a source of comfort and strength for Mariam with the passing of time. He acts as a spiritual guide and instils in her the love for the Quran, which she regularly consults during her tragic sojourn with her husband Rashid and later passes the same religious teaching to Aziza, Laila's daughter. Miriam begs to be allowed to live with Mullah Faizullah after her mother's death, but Jalil refuses (Hosseini 2007, 318).

Zaman, the director of the orphanage where Laila's daughter stays during hard times is hospitable and gentle and believes in the education of the children who live in the orphanage (Hosseini 2007, 338). Finally, Tariq, the central male character, stuns the expectation of the violent misogynist Islamic man. Tariq who is Laila's childhood friend and eventually sweetheart and husband is the

antithesis of Rasheed, her first husband. Tariq is not physically violent, cruel or brutal, he is crippled and kind. His character resists masculine stereotypes. He is not overtly masculine, sexist and physical. He is progressive in thought, accepting Laila's marriage to Rasheed and loves his own daughter Aziza and Rasheed's son equally. In spite of many trials and tribulations, Tariq returns back to Laila and proves his loyalty and love unlike Rashid, her first husband. He shares Laila's desire for justice and supports her decision to return to Kabul to help rebuild the city. Fitzpatrick's charge that Hosseini 'represents the masculine other in a particularly problematic way' does not take into account the plethora of other male characters in the text that are respectful and run against Muslim stereotypes (Fitzpatrick's article).

One can also argue that the women in the novel, seemingly victimized, are actually more subversive in their actions to elude and conquer the violent and inextricable situations that have developed in their lives. Laila willingly agrees to marry Rasheed after finding out secretly that she is pregnant with Tariq's child. Laila manages to remain safe for several years and survive by using her first husband Rasheed's household as a safeguard and shield for her child and herself. In one particular incident, she accumulates money that she steals from Rasheed in order for her and Miriam to run away in an active state of defiance (Hosseini 2007, 263). Miriam is violently abused throughout her marriage but eventually has the courage to kill Rasheed in self-defence. These incidences of the main female protagonists demonstrating survival and cunning read against the stereotype of Muslim women being helpless victims to their men, the aggressors. The women in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* go through periods of extreme trauma and war time but their survival is not dependent on luck or chance but intelligence and coercive agency. (Lee Melissa)

Another work of Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* interweaves the familiar with the foreign, which allows readers to identify with universal themes. At the same time contending with the details of a society which is largely different from their own. This universality reveals Hosseini's ability to deconstruct common stereotypes about Afghanistan, terrorism,

and Islam. Positive qualities such as forgiveness, caring and mercy are demonstrated by several male characters like Hassan, Ali, Baba and Rahim Khan in *The Kite Runner*. Baba's best friend, Rahim Khan, supports Amir's writing as a child encouraging him by saying, "my door is and always will be open to you...I shall hear any story you have to tell" (Hosseini 33). Unconditional loyalty is demonstrated by Hassan towards Amir many times, most significantly when he does not give away the Kite, he had run for Amir even in the face of adversaries, eventually paying a heavy price for it. Ali does not scold the children who call him names and make fun of his disability.

Baba is willing to risk his life confronting a Russian soldier to protect the modesty of a woman. These are few of the many examples in the novel that do not fit the negative perception of the West about the typical Afghan man. Characters like Rahim Khan and Hassan in *The Kite Runner* are easy to relate to by the reader and endorse the tapestry of universality in the novel.

An important example in the novel is the depiction of the relationship between Amir and Baba by Hosseini. The complicated father son relationship is nothing new for the audiences and literature across the world. Readers can relate to Amir and even understand his feeling of guilt, inadequacy and naivete in taking an extreme decision to gain Baba's love. It is common for children to feel they are living in the shadow or legacy of their parents, failing to meet their expectations. Thus, regardless of their background, recognition of the universal quality of their relationship is vitally important to the authors ability to connect with the readers.

The characters in *The Kite Runner* also represent a diverse people who consider themselves to be Muslims. For instance, Baba is a secular Muslim. When Amir confronts him about drinking when he comes to know from his school that it is a sin, Baba tells him that he sees he has "confused what you're learning in school with your actual education" (Hosseini 16) and that Amir would "never learn anything of value from those bearded idiots" (Hosseini 17). In contrast, Ali and Hassan are devout

Muslims. They pray five times a day and a piece of tapestry with a religious inscription is the only decoration in their simple home. This confuses Amir, who finds this conflicting as a child. Through his characters Khalid Hosseini shows the experience of being a Muslim indicating there is no one way of experiencing Islam, just as the reader will see the same in case of Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Atheists, etc. There is no need for Hosseini to proclaim this outwardly in the novel. Instead, in the background it quietly breaks apart the stereotype of Islam as a religion of violent extremists.

As in life, religion also fluctuates in *The Kite Runner*, with the devoutness of the characters changing in either direction. When Sohrab is in critical condition after attempting suicide, Amir turns to God for the first time in fifteen years. He prays that God will "forgive that I have betrayed, lied, and sinned with impunity only to turn to Him now in my hour of need" (Hosseini 346). As Amir prays for Sohrab's life, he promises God, to be faithful, to fast, to memorize the Qur'an, and to adhere to all the requirements of Islam in return for Sohrab's life. Amir's desperation is palpable in this passage. He is hurting two-fold, for his transgression with Hassan and now for Sohrab. When people regret their mistakes and are at their lowest ebb, they seek out help. Many of them, like Amir, turn to religion for help, forgiveness and guidance.

Unfortunately, these instances are often portrayed in news as violent images of terrorism in the region. These portrayals are often the only exposure that individuals have of the region and are instrumental in creating dangerous misconceptions. Such perceptions create an image which stereotypes all Afghans as terrorists targeting the Western countries, their people and their ideals. Hosseini in his literary writing, skilfully deconstructs stereotypes of Islam and Muslims in several ways. Perhaps most significantly and as Hosseini states in an interview "the faith of [his] characters is essentially incidental to the reason why they're in the story" (Beliefnet). Most importantly, although Hosseini's characters are Muslim, but unlike portrayals of Muslims in popular media, their character is not defined by their religion but they rather "serve some [other] kind of purpose in the story" (Beliefnet).

Our lives, our cultures, are composed of many overlapping stories. Novelist Chimamanda Adichie tells the story of how she found her authentic cultural voice -- and warns that if we hear only a single story about another person or country, we risk a critical misunderstanding. She argues that inherent in the power of stories, is a danger—the danger of only knowing one story about a group. “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” African literature (Adichie names Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye as examples) helped to reinforce what she knew to be true about her homeland – Nigeria and Africa were places of rich diversity, complexity, culture, and history – that another, more simplified and problematic narrative about Africa and Africans was the one told around the world. Through multiple experiences in the west, she learns about the ‘single story of Africa’ as a place of violence, poverty, hunger, and despair – images, she claims, comes from western literature and its colonial roots.

Reading *The Kite Runner* is not an end in itself. It will not give anyone expertise in matters relating to Afghanistan, Islam, Taliban or any other subject. A single novel can never be an end all and be all for diminishing stereotypes and understanding of cultures. Nevertheless, it is one work that one can say chips away at the foundation of stereotypes and expose us to new insights. Khalid Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* may be that first Afghan novel or it could be Chinua Achebe’s or Chimamanda Adichie’s from Nigeria. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity (Adichie "The Danger of a single story") When we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise (Adichie "The danger of a single story")

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