

**Drawing the Human Face of a Homeland: A Reading of Khaled Hosseini's
Novels; *The Kite Runner*, *A thousand Splendid Suns*, and *And the Mountains
Echoed***

**Rim Souissi
University of Sousse, Tunisia**

Abstract

*Being the first Afghan-American writer who writes in English, Khaled Hosseini is a relatively new novelist whose literary reputation was established since his debut novel, *The Kite Runner* (2003). His successive two novels; *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) and *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013) have achieved the same worldwide recognition and success.*

The common thread that links Hosseini's novels – apart from them being set in and representative of Afghanistan's multilayered society and complex history – is the fact that each character in these fictional works sets out on a journey that is determined and, to a large extent, linked to the country's turbulent historical and social background. The itineraries that the characters follow intersect with and reveal a lot about the country's social, political and historical complex matrices. Though he hopes that his novels evince an authentic and truthful portrait of his homeland, Hosseini doesn't claim to take on the mantle of "a teacher, a sociologist or an anthropologist" who can fully and adequately teach about Afghanistan, as he states in his interview with Fanny Kiefer. Nonetheless, his novels feature characters and stories that have a worldwide resonance thanks to their representational function of a long-overlooked and relegated country – Afghanistan. My contention is that Hosseini's fiction penetrates the cultural boundaries that set a chasm between the East and the West. In other words, his novels are packed with elements of a culture so much foreign, yet nonetheless very familiar with its themes and characters. That's what makes Hosseini's works stand out in the so-called ethnic literature; his rendering of Afghanistan's culture and history accessible to foreigners.

Keywords: Afghanistan, History, Culture, Ethnicity, Homeland, Individual journey, Identity

Introduction

To make readers cognizant of the fact “that the Afghan people existed before there was a war with the Soviets and before there was a Taliban” can be perceived as one of the premises upon which Khaled Hosseini based his works (qtd.in Bloom, 12). Thus, his novels provide an aperture through which readers can (re)discover Afghanistan prior to its infamous identification as the cradle and sanctuary of terrorists (Bloom 9). As a matter of fact, Afghanistan was, and perhaps still is, tantamount to an unending terrorist threat, likely to cut a swathe through the whole world. In this respect, the erroneous image that pops into mind once Afghanistan is mentioned is restricted to that of mountainous, barren landscapes, ravaged remnants of cities peopled by wretched souls, and American soldiers roaming the deserts chasing Taliban. This proves that the human face of the nation has been shrouded, if not totally obliterated, that we know so little, if nothing, about the way life was before the country entered in the throes of incessant wars and invasions.

In this context, what Hosseini aspires to achieve through his fictional texts is to challenge and subvert this blinkered and narrow outlook towards his native country. This does not mean that his purpose is to paper over the real situation or to conceal the country’s deep-seated conflicts and problems. Conversely, it is rather elucidating an authentic and faithful representation of his nation that the writer hopes to effect. He aims at writing with “honesty and integrity”, Hosseini indicates in an interview with Azad (qtd.in Stuhr, 6). In other words, Hosseini’s works bring to the fore an image of a homeland “lined with trees, [...] where a child can roam the streets and fields without fear of land mines, [...] where kites are flown, and where movies are attended”(Stuhr 35). Accordingly, the novelist avers that Afghanistan was, and still is, graced with a wealth of natural, social and human potentials lodged in the country’s deep-rooted culture and immemorial traditions.

This paper explicates how Hosseini’s fictionalized stories are revealing of and related to his homeland’s recent history, social fabric, and cultural peculiarities.

1. Narrating stories, constructing a homeland portrait

Distinguishing about Hosseini’s narratives, as Ab. Majeed Dar expounds, is the fact that they “are written against a history that has not been told in fiction before”, delineating the cultural richness and splendor of a country heading towards destruction (4). Hence, by mirroring his life-like characters’ experiences -- being enmeshed in the incessant socio-political struggles -- Hosseini draws the human face of the country that has rarely been portrayed before. Put differently, the novelist confers on his characters the prerogative of voicing stories that fictitiously translate his countrymen’s real journeys. Therefore, his characters are archetypes that epitomize and illustrate the life of ordinary Afghans.

To unravel the concealed, yet subtly visible side of Afghanistan’s life, culture, struggles, customs, traditions, hopes and possibilities, Hosseini chronicles the differing yet convergent journeys of his characters. The latter’s fate, concomitantly interweaved with the fate of the nation, conveys the intermittent political unrest underpinning and channeling the stories’ lines. By the same token, Dar contends that “the dreary and violent politics of

Afghanistan over the last half-century” are “constantly intersecting the characters’ personal narratives” (1). In effect, all Hosseini’s works feature characters that are caught and hemmed in vicious circles. They struggle in face of different hardships and calamities; be it personal, familial, social or economical. This thematic quality lends his novels the distinctive uniqueness and commonplace universality that capture, on the one hand, the distinguishing ethnic, sectarian and regional struggles, and on the other hand, the ubiquitously individual, familial and gender-related issues.

In the same vein, *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed* are set against the backdrop of wars that played havoc with a country suffering under the heavy toll of destruction -- Afghanistan. The author infuses his stories with a voice/voices that articulate(s) the unutterable experiences of a nation unsettled by decades of penetrating commotion, societal unrest, political turbulence and sectarian feuds. In fact, Hosseini’s novels unveil what lies behind closed portals, thereby “[throwing] the doors of his country wide open so that the world could see firsthand the real Afghanistan and the great Afghan people who are suffering for being Afghans” (Dar 4). Being an indigenous writer, Hosseini feels it incumbent upon him to bridge the chasm between his country and the rest of the world (qtd.in Stuhr, 6).

In *Modern Afghanistan; A history of Struggle and Survival*, Amin Saikal maintains that “rare is the country that has sustained as many blows, and such hard blows, as has Afghanistan since its foundation as a distinct political unit in 1747” (1). This highlights the fact that Afghanistan has been marked by perpetual turmoil resulting from the perennial and “numerous wars and invasions and swings between extremist ideological dispositions, ranging from tribal value systems to Marxism-Leninism and Islamic Medievalism (Saikal 1). This bears testimony to the country’s unique and steadfast endurance. Nevertheless, the novelist discloses that he “[thinks] of the strength of the Afghan people, [...] their humility [and] their astonishing grace” (qtd.in Bloom, 14). Therefore, he vows to translate his country’s muzzled and muted voices into articulate, well-turned and vivid stories that capture the multifaceted and kaleidoscopic fabric of Afghan culture. In so doing, the writer furnishes his readers with untold and unprecedented historical accounts emanating and conveyed from the vantage points of his characters.

In this light, though Hosseini charts and records the periods during which Afghanistan witnessed political stability and social plateau, the subsequent political mayhem and its attendant societal anarchy still bulk large in the novels. Thus, the novels’ narrative lines are inextricably structured and molded against the background of these “periods of both remarkable stability and violent turbulence, which have succeeded one another in a seemingly haphazard manner” (Saikal 1). This bears out that the fictitious events in the novels are interlaced with the real historical moments and periods that Afghanistan underwent.

2. The historical, social, and ethnic background of the novels

Central and preliminary to the study is a brief foray into Afghanistan’s modern history. Examining the different events that influenced and shaped the country’s socio-political matrix helps determine the way the writer implemented these time periods in his texts as well as the

significance of these historical moments in the novels. Of equal importance is to delve into the nation's social, ethnic and religious composition to gain the fundamental background knowledge needed to adequately understand the novels.

2.1 Afghanistan's history in relation to the novels

The southern Asian country's modern history can be encapsulated in the transition from being "a buffer state [to] a Cold War battlefield, and finally to a mere hideout conveniently pocked with caves offering refuge to international terrorists" (Tanner 1). This means that the landlocked country served as a buffer zone avoiding the clash between the world's superpowers, namely the British Empire and the Soviet Union. Then, during the 1950's, the country was sucked into the cyclone of the Cold War and events climaxed "with the Soviet invasion in 1979 and its withdrawal ten years later" (Barfield 1). In fact, these time periods are very significant in relation to the novels' narrative plots.

2.2 Pre-Soviet occupation period

The period predating the Soviet invasion is marked in the novels by a sense of political and social stability. Though the characters go through various hardships, life for them was not all the more complicated yet. In *the Kite Runner*, for example, the protagonist Amir and his father Baba lead a stable and settled life before the Soviets invaded the country. The same thing goes for the other two novels.

2.3 The Soviet Occupation era

In *The Kite Runner*, the Soviet invasion and the ensuing unrest that pervaded the country were the reasons why *Amir* and *Baba* leave Afghanistan to seek refuge in the United States. The Soviet occupation era is also prominently present in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. *Laila*, the protagonist, is born the night of the April 1978 coup. Her two brothers left Kabul in 1980 to join the Jihad against the Soviets; the fact that made her mother carry a lifetime grudge against the Soviets for killing her beloved sons. On the other hand, *Laila's* father admits that women during that period were privileged to have their basic rights. He tells his daughter that "it's a good time [The communist period] to be a woman in Afghanistan". *Laila's* school teacher, a staunch supporter of the Soviet Union, tries to foster in her students the loyalty to the Communist nation. She forbids them from covering their heads and calls for equality between men and women. Unlike *Laila's* mother, she is a pro-Soviet, calling the Mujahedeen "anti-progressives" and "backward bandits". In this context, the novel displays differing perspectives towards the Soviet rule, ranging from devoted loyalty to utmost opposition.

Therefore, it is from the vantage points of the different characters that the writer contextualizes this historical period, offering insight into their daily lives, thereby describing the ramifications of the Soviet occupation on the individual, familial, and social levels.

Contrary to Hosseini's first two novels, in *And the Mountains Echoed*, there are only some references to the Soviet era in Afghanistan. Still, the novel features an important by-

product of the Soviet war in Afghanistan – The Mujahedeen, turned into what is known as “Warlords”. *Adel*’s father is one of them and he serves as an exemplar of an affluent warlord wielding power and influence among the Afghan villagers.

2.4 The civil war period and Taliban’s ascent to power

Another landmark in the country’s history is also palpably present in the three novels; Taliban’s reign of Islamic extremism. In 1996, and after four years of civil war, Taliban seized power over the government and declared the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Subsequent to the cataclysmic ascent of Taliban to power, the country became a tinderbox due to the repressed freedoms, oppression and despotism. During Taliban’s rule, *Amir -- The Kite Runner*’s protagonist -- returns from the United States to Afghanistan to rescue *Sohrab*. It is through his eyes that we see the destruction and subversion brought about by this fundamentalist militia. He actually comes face to face with a “Talib”, only to find out that he is his childhood nemesis. It is also through Rahim Khan’s account of events that Amir learns how Hassan -- his servant, childhood companion, and also Sohrab’s father -- was killed by Taliban.

In addition to the events that illustrate the Taliban’s rule in Hosseini’s debut novel; his second novel is also laden with references to this very time period. Since the two protagonists are women, the writer zooms in on the Taliban’s treatment of women at that time. Characterized by harsh and tyrannical bans and restrictions, Taliban’s rules ordered women to wear burkas covering their whole bodies, otherwise they “were beaten for showing even an arm” (Feifer 273). *Laila* and *Mariam* epitomize the oppressed women who had to suffer the atrocity of a patriarchal society without the right to claim an identity, let alone a voice.

As for Hosseini’s third novel – *And The Mountains Echoed* -- the section set during the period predating Taliban’s control is depicted from the perspective of *Nabi*; a servant living with his employers in Kabul. He provides a first-hand experience of an old man being terrorized by the constant raids of militiamen on his employer’s house. During the civil war and prior to Taliban’s arrival, Kabul underwent massive destruction, *Nabi* reports. He also maintains that during Taliban’s time the situation was no better, given Taliban’s oppression of young people and especially of women.

2.5 The post 9/11 period

The post 9/11 period, together with the succeeding Taliban’s ouster, is also depicted in the novels. “Soon after the attacks, America bombed Afghanistan, the Northern Alliance moved in, and the Taliban scurried like rats into the caves” (*The Kite Runner* 362). In *Afghanistan; A Cultural and Political History*, Thomas Bartfield indicates that the 9/11 attacks resulted in the US invading Afghanistan in return. He further adds that “Since that time, a new Afghan government has struggled to bring stability to the country in the face of an Islamist insurgency” (1). With the ongoing fighting, the road towards rebuilding the nation seemed rocky and long, as the country struggled (and still does) to reconstruct itself and to fend off terrorist attacks. It required the united efforts of both domestic and international communities to reconstruct the war-stricken country. *Amir* is one of the Afghan Diaspora who

helped rebuild Afghanistan. On the other hand, in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, it is *Laila* who assumes her responsibility of educating the new Afghan generation. Together with her husband *Triq*, she helps rebuild an orphanage with a classroom for the children to carry on their education. Hosseini's third novel offers an idea about the international efforts in bolstering the ailing country. The characters of *Mr. Markos* and *Amra Ademovic* – the two foreign aid workers who live in *Nabi*'s house – illustrate the humanitarian benevolence that Afghanistan received in the post-9/11 era.

3. Afghanistan's ethnic, religious and cultural varieties as represented in the novels

As mentioned earlier, Hosseini frames his novels based on the country's significant and decisive historical events. Nonetheless, it is not just to chart or to repeat what has "been well documented" before, as *Nabi* tells *Mr. Markos* when describing Taliban's era. It is rather to explore "the fundamental tension involved in forming an identity rooted in a multifaceted culture and an always-developing historical experience" (Bloom 61). In fact, Hosseini's novels involve characters whose identities as well as journeys are, to a large extent, tied to and determined by the country's complex culture and history.

3.1 Ethnic and religious groups as depicted in the novels

The country's rich ethnic and cultural fabric and its resulting social stratification are well depicted in Hosseini's novels, and especially in his debut novel – *The Kite Runner*. The writer places the accent on the ethnic and religious differences in Afghanistan, and this is symbolized by the characters of *Amir* and *Hassan*; the former being an ethnic Pashtun and Sunni Muslim, while the latter an ethnic Hazara and Shi'a Muslim. While *Amir* enjoys the comforts of a luxurious life, a prerogative of being a Pashtun, *Hassan* has to toil, serve and be the protective companion of *Amir*. This also holds true for their fathers, for *Amir*'s father is an affluent man while *Hassan*'s father is his loyal servant. Ethnic discrimination is even better illustrated by the character of *Assef*, *Amir*'s childhood bully and later "Talib". He claims that he wants to cleanse the country of the Hazaras, just like Hitler did with the Jews.

3.2 Afghanistan's cultural and social portraits as conveyed in the novels

While Hosseini's first novel paints the ethnic Darwinism, and the religious extremism in a negative light, his second novel gives an even bleaker picture of the social and gender-related biases that women were victim of. The novel explores the status of Afghan women in a patriarchal society. Through the example of *Mariam*, a "harami" being denuded of her right to have a father, the right to say no to a suitor nearly twice her age, and the right to be treated properly by her spouse, Hosseini establishes an archetype of the bereft Afghan woman. It is rather in her inability to bear a child that her suffering transpires the most. This is also the fact that incurred the wrath and maltreatment of her husband. While *Mariam* epitomizes the rural, uneducated girl that has to contend with the cruelties of an unjust society, *Laila* symbolizes the urban, educated and ambitious girl. Both of them end up under the same roof, sharing the same husband, the same plight, and eventually the same dream -- to break free from *Rachid*. The female protagonists of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* bring to the fore the dilemmas of

Afghan women, whose voices are drown and whose identities “burqa-clad”, to use Hosseini’s words.

The writer’s third novel also features female characters whose journeys are no easier than those of *Mariam* and *Laila*. *Parwana* is the young girl whose sense of jealousy makes her push her twin sister off the oak tree. She is also the grown-up woman who has to spend years paying for her mistake and nursing a crippled sister. *Parwana* is representative of the rural, dignified Afghan women who live an uneasy life without complaining or breaking down. Liberated and emancipated Afghan women are also presented and illustrated by the character of *Nila Wahdati*; a wealthy socialite and poet living in Kabul.

As for the social portrait that the novels highlight, it is characterized by a huge difference between the rural and urban areas in Afghanistan. Since the three novels partially take place in Kabul, Afghanistan’s capital city, the novelist accentuates the social disparities between the city and the countryside. While the city dwellers are living a comfortable life, the villagers bear the brunt of grinding poverty. This has a ripple effect on their destinies and the paths that their journeys undertake.

Conclusion

Hosseini has become renowned for his faithful representation of his homeland, basing his aesthetic premise upon stories that are set against and emblematic of Afghanistan’s recent history, ethnic diversity, rich culture and traditions. His works, however, transcend with their universal themes the confines of one country, culture, or experience, as they encapsulate struggles, hardships, and journeys that are worldwide and common between diverse countries and cultures. Yet, his novels maintain an unprecedented fictional rigor thanks to their informative role about Afghanistan and their literary merit as the first Afghan-American novels received by a worldwide acclaim.

References

- Barfield, Thomas. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010.
- Bloom, Harold. *Bloom's Guides: The Kite Runner*. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009.
- Dar, Ab.Majeed. "A Feminist Perspective in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*." *DJ The Dawn Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 2, (2013): 651-660.
- Feifer, Gregory. *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc, 2009.
- Hosseini, Khaled. *The Kite Runner*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2003.
- . *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2007.
- . *And The Mountains Echoed*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2013.
- Hosseini, Khaled. "Bestselling Author Khaled Hosseini". Online video Clip. *Youtube*. Youtube, 31 January. 2014. Web.
- Saikal, Amin. *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival*. London: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 2004.
- Stuhr, Rebecca. *Reading Khaled Hosseini*. Philadelphia: Greenwood Press, 2009.
- Tanner, Stephen. *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of Taliban*. U.S: Da Capo Press, 2002.