

Reading Khaled Hosseini's novels through the lenses of Orientalism

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ABSTRACT

Khaled Hosseini, a critically acclaimed writer of America wrote three novels which got instant popularity became bestsellers. The novels are prescribed in American curriculum as the texts have historical realism, present the true picture of political situation, crisis in the Middle East countries as well as define the complex human relationships. Hosseini excellently blended personal and political dilemma in the novels. His works became a medium to understand Afghan culture and tradition. This paper attempts to examine his novels through the lenses of Orientalism.

KEYWORDS - Orientalism, Post-Colonial study, Cultural Study, Afghanistan Culture

The theory of Orientalism developed in the changing socio-political scenario introduced in the discourse having a contrast and different picture in late 19th century. With rise of translation and cultural studies in the field of literature, Raymond Schwab's 'The Oriental Renaissance' (1950) encouraged the study of Orientals. The Western writers tries to define the Orientals, Middle East countries like Arab, Iraq, Iran, Turkey etc. which are unlike to them. They meditate on the study of 'the orientals' as distinct as 'the other'. The Orientals are presented as contrast to them in terms of values, culture and society as a whole. The writers interpret orientals as backward, prejudiced, stereotype race and consider them as a strange group having different practice and ways. The very term Orientalism derived from Latin word 'Oriens' which means 'East'. Defining Orientalism as an interest –

“Orientalism is a term that is used by art historians, literary and cultural studies scholars for the imitation or depiction of aspects in Middle Eastern, South Asian, and East Asian cultures (Eastern cultures). These depictions are usually done by writers, designers and artists from the West. In particular, Orientalist painting, depicting more specifically "the Middle East" was one of the many specialisms of 19th-century academic art, and the literature of Western countries tool a similar interest in Oriental themes. (Wikipedia)

Writers used the orient as subject of fascination and sometimes as a subject of venerability and terror. Literature about orient opens the door to discover and understand different ethos, traditions, beliefs and the complex ideology. The orient constantly served as material of comparison for the Western Civilisation making them superior in every way. Edward Said a significant figure in post-colonial studies and a great scholar of 90's gave away the theory of Orientalism in 1978. Said points out in 'The Scope of Orientalism' -

“Such an Orient was silent, available to Europe for realisation of projects that involved but were never directly responsible to the native inhabitants, and unable to resist the projects, images, or mere descriptions devised for it. Earlier I called such a relation between Western writing (and its consequences) and Oriental silence the result of and sign of the West's great cultural strength, its will to power over the Orient.”(Said 98)

The West or The Occident projects the Orient according to their perception and observation. So basically, Orientalism is a western construct. Further, adding to the relationship between The West and The East he points out, The Occident presented as superior authority and utopian place and The East as backwards and conservatives. He argues that Orientalism which can be easily found in western depictions of Arab cultures is irrational, anti-western and more importantly prototypical. Orientalism in literature is not a narrative style but a vision. The Orient cannot be studied in a non-oriented manner. Orientalism is a complex phenomenon. It should be given voice and should not be judged. Edward Said informs-

“Unlike the Americans, the French and British--less so the Germans, Russians, Spanish, Portuguese, Italians, and Swiss--have had a long tradition of what I shall be calling Orientalism, a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western Experience. The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. Yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative. The Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles”(56)

In 21st century the presentation of the Orient in literature based on the political and social circumstances of the countries. Texts for example 'The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf' by Mohja Kahf, 'A case of Exploding Mangoes' by Mohammed Hanif, 'Amina's Voice' by Hina Khan and many memoirs such as 'I am Malala' by Malala Yousafzai, 'Letters to a Young Muslim' by Omar Saif Ghobash, 'The Arab of the Future' by Raid Sattout etc. are reflects the crisis of middle east countries and dystopian conditions prevailed due to political unrest. These works have socio political concerns over the rage, violence and war which are continuing more than a decade in the Middle East. The literature about the Orient proved to be voice exposing the terrible conditions of human in such countries. More over these works speaks about basic human rights, taboos, violence against women, human trafficking, child labour, sexual exploitation and terrorism. In his essay *Orientalism* (1977) Said focused on the academic significance of such literary works and says-

"Related to this academic tradition, whose fortunes, transmigrations, specializations, and transmissions are in part the subject of this study, is a more general meaning for Orientalism. Orientalism is a style of thought based upon ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident." Thus a very large mass of writers, among who are poet, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind," destiny, and so on. . . . the phenomenon of Orientalism as I study it here deals principally, not with a correspondence between Orientalism and Orient, but with the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient . despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a "real" Orient.(Said,122)

Khaled Hosseini is a prominent name in present scenario of English literature. He is an incredible story teller. He has written three best seller novels. *The Kite Runner* (2003), *'A Thousand Splendid Suns'* (2007) and *'And The Mountains Echoed'* (2013). He was born in Kabul, Afghanistan then he moved to Iran, Paris and finally to United States of America. He is now a citizen of America. All his novels are set against the backdrop of Afghanistan. He gave us a clear picture of Afghan culture, tradition and ways of society. He did not hesitate to write about social issues such as The Burkha tradition, Hazara, Patriarch society, child labour, Human Trading etc. All these issues are depicted with the consequences.

‘The Kite Runner (2003) is the first novel of Khaled Hosseini. The story covers the life of a Pashtun boy Amir and Hassan a hazara, the servant boy. Both share a wonderful friendship but Assef a violent boy mocks their friendship. As Amir is rich he is friends with a servant boy who is far more inferior. Assef attacks Hassan rapes him. Amir lives with the feelings of guilt of cowardice act. Amir began to think that Hassan is the reminder of his mistake so he tries to get rid of Hassan. After few years, there was political unrest due to Soviet Union. Amir with his father left Kabul and settled in California. Amir becomes a successful writer. His father dies. From his father’s best friend Amir comes to know that Hassan is actually his half-brother and his father’s son. He further asks Amir to save Hassan’s son Sohrab who is in an orphanage in Kabul after death of his parents. Finally through lot of struggle Amir saves Sohrab and rescues him. He describes the awful situation of Kabul and the Taliban as ‘The red Toyota pickup truck idled past us. A handful of stern faced young men sat on their haunches in the cab, Kalashnikovs slung on their shoulders. They all wore beards and black turbans. One of them, a Dark skinned man in his early twenties with thick, knitted eyebrows twirled a whip in his hand and rhythmically swatted the side of the truck with it. His roaming eyes fell on me. Held my gaze. I'd never felt so naked in my entire life. Then the Taliban spat tobacco stained spittle and looked away. I found I could breathe again. The truck rolled down Jade Maywand, leaving in its trail a cloud of dust.’(211)

The novel speaks of enduring relationship between father and son the friendship between two boys. Simultaneously, it presents the dark social and political tension of Afghanistan. Hosseini made the novel both personal and political. It explores issues like socio economic difference, discrimination, violence and violence of Taliban. One can find Amir’s growth in America. He became a changed Man and has courage to amend his past mistakes. This suggests that a foreign country other than Afghanistan provides ample opportunity to make a successful life. In this case Hosseini presented America as a land of prosperity and peace. The game of flying kite is symbolic. Kite is symbolic of freedom. Hassan and Amir had to play kites. Hassan catches kites for Amir. They enjoy their freedom of childhood. At the end of the novel, Amir runs to catch the kite for Hassan’s son and Says “for you, a thousand times over”. Finally, Amir get rid of his guilt. Hosseini comments on the theme of The Kite Runner -

“Because its themes of friendship, betrayal, guilt, redemption and the uneasy love between fathers and sons are universal, and not specifically Afghan, the book has been able to reach across cultural, racial, religious and gender gaps to resonate with readers of varying backgrounds “(Hosseini,2003)

Khalid Hosseini’s second novel ‘A Thousand Splendid Suns’ portrays the miserable life of Afghan women. The story centres on the lives of two Afghan women. The novel is

divided into four parts. The first part covers the pitiable childhood of Mariam, in the second part we are introduced to Laila, and the third as well as the last part deals with their relationship. Women of middle class never enjoy equal rights and privileges as their men do. They are forced to cover themselves. They are suppressed under circumstances. Men are allowed to have a number of wives as well as disown wives. Both Mariam and Laila are tortured physically, emotionally and sexually by their husbands. Rasheed always threatens Laila and left her to street. At the end of the novel Mariam publicly executed. Laila left for Pakistan and starts a new life with Tariq.

And *The Mountains Echoed* has nine chapters having nine characters' perspective. *The Kite Runner* was based on the relationship between father and son and *The Thousand Splendid Suns* is about relationship between mother and daughter and in the third novel Khaled Hosseini sketched the story with sibling relationship. He reflects-

“Having three brothers and a sister of my own, this specific aspect of family sibling ship is one that I find thematically rich. The landscape of sibling ties is peppered with love, volatility, envy, and a host of other and often conflicting emotions that make it such fertile ground for fiction. I am interested in the manifest complexities of the relationship, its contradictions, its tensions, its inherent push-and-pull nature, and the early-life experiences that either rupture or intensify bonds between brothers and sisters. I am always drawn to these indelible and often transformative experiences that siblings share.”(Hosseini 2013)

Saboor, a poor farmer sells his daughter Pari to a wealthy rich man, Abdulla. Pari's brother was divested by his decision. Wahdatis left Afghanistan due to Soviet invasion. After death of Nila, Pari got married. After few years her husband dies. She tries to find her own identity and resolve her past. The novel serves as an irony of life which has universal implications. She finds herself lost in her life. She has lost her own existence. The novel deals with the lives of Afghan people who have to face poverty, exile and disappointments. Their helplessness clearly reflected in the every chapter.

Hosseini takes us to a land in which murder, rape and violence are not crime. He showed a world of cruelty, barbarity and political extremity. On the other hand, he presented Western world as an ideal place to restore life and humanity. The stories also reflect the psychological and political need of Middle East people. It also brings out significant relationship between The East and The West. In the scope of the study of the Orientalism

Khaled Hosseini 's novels enables the two opposite realms come together and focus on accepting the 'Otherness' .

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