

Exploring Social, Political and Cultural Issues in Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner

Dr. Anupam Soni

Associated Professor

Dept. of English

Bundelkhand College, Jhansi

Abstract

Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner* presents before the world a realistic picture of Afghanistan. In this paper, I would like to draw a picture of a war-torn country and how it has affected the social, political and cultural fabric of a glorious past. The novelist does not hesitate to present before us the social issues of Afghanistan such as turmoil of war, the Burka tradition, ethnic tension, patriarchal society, child labor, illegitimate children, extramarital relationships. The culture, social makeup of the east has always fascinated the western readers. Literature dealing with the Orient helps to demystify and understand various ethos, customs of compelling ideology.

Key words: Afghanistan, Social, Political, Cultural, Patriarchal, Burka

Khaled Hosseini is a prominent name in the present scenario of English literature. All his novels are set against the backdrop of war in Afghanistan. He gives us a vivid picture of Afghan culture, tradition and ways of society. The social and political conditions of the middle east and the third world countries are different from that of the West. Hosseini excellently blended personal and political dilemmas in the novels. His works are a solid medium to understand Afghan culture and tradition. The Westerners present the Middle East in contrast to them in terms of alnes, culture and society as whole. They are seen as backwards, prejudiced, stereotyped races and consider them as a strange group having different practices and ways. The very term Orientalism is derived from the Latin word 'Orient' which means 'East'. As far as social realism is concerned, we need to know the nuances of the very atmosphere which gave air and water to the imagination of the writer. He did not hesitate to present before us the social tension and turmoil produced as a result of ongoing war in Afghanistan. The Burka-tradition, ethnic tension, patriarchal society, child labor, illegitimate children, extramarital relationship are the recurring themes in the novels of Khaled Hosseini. He takes us to a land in which murder, rape and violence have become a routine of the day. Through his stories, he tries to reflect the psychological and political needs of Middle East people and the Westworld as an ideal place to revive life and humanity.

The cultural, social makeup of the east has always fascinated the western writers. Literature dealing with Orient helps to demystify and understand various ethos, customs of

a complex ideology. Hosseini's novels not only open a window to Afghanistan but to the whole South Asian continent also. Edward Said points out:

“Such as Orient was silent, available to Europe for realization 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 Writings (and it's consequences) and oriental silence, the result of and sign of the West's great cultural strength, it's will to overpower the Orient.”

Cultural sets are fitted in the characters where the novelist describes Baba in masculine perspective as Pashtuns in Afghanistan are considered royal and courageous while Hazaras, on the other hand, are cowardly and submissive like lambs. Amin portrays his father as a towering Pashtun specimen with a thick beard, a way word crop of curly brown law as unruly as the man himself who looked capable of uprooting a will on a tree’ He further establishes the fact that the tradition of storytelling to the children in popular among orientis:

“My father once wrestled a black bear in Baluchistan with his Bare bounds. If the story had been about any one else, it would have been dismissed as a leaf, that Afghan tendency to exaggerate..... I have imagined Baba's wrestling match countless times, even dreamed about it and in those dreams, I can never tell Baba from the bear.”

The novelist tries his best to serve the readers with the characteristics which are special to the Hazaras. The social roles are attributed to them as soon as they are born. The novel provides a peep into the ethnic imaginary integral to them thus: “Hassan would grow up illiterate like Ali and most Hazaras had been decided the minute he had been.....born.....after all, what use did a servant have for the written word.”

From universalisation, the novelist shifts to the individual characteristics of Hassan. Despite being illiterate, Hassan is mentally sharp and sound. Amir wonders how Hassan was drawn to the mystery of words.

But despite his illiteracy or may be because of it, Hassan was drawn to the mystery of words, seduced by a secret world forbidden to him. I read him poems and stories, sometimes riddles.....though I stopped reading there when I saw he was far better at solving them than I was. So I read him unchallenging things, like The misadventures of the bumbling Mullah Nasruddin and his donkeys. (p.,18)

Hazaras minority in Afghanistan had started showing their resentment for Pashtuns, which establishes the fact that their persecution made them rise against them. Nazif has his views on the ethnic crisis in Afghanistan:

“In fact, the sociology of Pashtuns' dominance over that of other ethnic communities in the country.....is taken for granted rather than a subject for injury. Traditionally, their political dominance has been generally explained by reference to certain assumed inherent pasture qualities, such as their warlike behaviors, their love of freedom and individuality,

their lawlessness, fanaticism and pride. It is also often added that Pashtun society is characterized by a high level of internal and external conflict and by weak internal authority patterns. In such explanations, Pashtun society and polity are often presented in monolithic terms which most recent anthropological studies of the Pashtuns in Afghanistan contradict.”

Through his novels, Hosseini tries to observe and understand “different ethos, tradition, beliefs and the complex ideology not only of Afghanistan but of the South Asian countries as well, the orients constantly served as material for the Western civilization making them superior in every way. In his essay *Orientalism* (1977) Said focused on the academic significance of such literary works and says:

“Related to this academic tradition, where fortunes, transmigrations, specializations, and transmissions are in part the subject of this study, is a general meaning for orientalism. Orientalism is a style of thought based on ontological and epistemological distinctions made between the “Orient” and (most of the time) “the occident. Thus a very large mass of writers, among who are poet, novelist, 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 orients leisure as I study it here deals principally, not with a correspondence between orientalism and orient despite or beyond any correspondence , or lack thereof, with a real orient.”

“The Kite Runner” taken for the discussion is a gateway to Afghanistan’s political, social and cultural life. This novel is narrated in a subjective manner which can provide western readers the glimpse of oriental macrocosm of society. The oppressive agencies make the things even worse when the political system pours milk on the burnt area. Mujahideens and Taliban distort the social and domestic life of the people. Though it is a reality, Hosseini has exaggerated the nuances to some extent to cater to the western readers as well as for sake of argument. The novel for discussion opens up a window for the readers to know the lives of Afghanistan children, adult men and women from a political, social and cultural perspective. Reading Khaled Hosseini is like eating ready-made food as it enables the reader to feel the pulse of this country to the core. The novel also throws light on the stark social realities like illiteracy and poverty. Hassan who grows up impoverished does not have access to education. The combination of poverty and illiteracy shapes the future of Hassan as in lack of this he has low chances of proving his worth to the society. He and his father underwent religious afflictions and disseminated it in every possible way. While the novel’s subject is ethnographic and can be valued as historical. It transcends the boundaries of a particular nation making it universal in its appeal. More than Afghan culture, it is South-Asian in its picturization and above that can typically be evaluated in its universality.

Ethnic conflicts have been widely portrayed by the novelist in *The Kite Runner*. In Afghanistan, the practice of discrimination against the Hazaras is verbally accepted and practised by the Pashtuns. Pashtuns are a majority group in this country and they treat Hazaras with contempt and hatred. The resentment is so ingrained that it has paved the road

for social classes. The common belief is that Pashtuns are superior in face of the Hazaras. The political and social system support the majority group enabling them to receive education and to establish their own business as it is evident in the case of Baba and Amir. Life for Ali and Hassan is not comfortable as they are destined to lead an underprivileged one forever. The racial discrimination between Pashtuns and Hazaras lead to internal clashes between them. The novelist does not leave anything for granted in depicting the gloomy life cycle of Hazaras and the malicious outlook of Pashtuns for them. These clashes are entirely insane and inhumane as well. In this regard M.Benton comments:

“Physical differences between people have been observed throughout human history, all over the world, people have developed words for delineating them. ‘Race’ is a concept rooted in a particular culture and a particular period of history which brings with its suggestion that these differences are to be explained.”

The social realism in *The Kite Runner* is eye-opening. After redeeming Sohrab, Amir promises Sohrab that he will never send him back to the orphanage again; on the contrary, procuring a visa for Sohrab becomes difficult for Amir. Omar Faisal, the lawyer, advises Amir to make arrangements for his return to the orphanage to make the process easier. Sohrab is shocked and makes an earnest appeal to Amir to not to send him back to that horrible place again. He does not want to risk his life again, in hunger, cold and abuse. All these circumstances develop a sense of distrust in Sohrab which he would not be able to get rid of easily in the days to come.

Psychological distress in Afghan refugees is equal to the other studies with the populations. Afghans used to settle in America and in other western countries, at an unprecedented rate with continued exposure to war. Many have not got mental support in their native country. People have lost their rich culture and historical heritage. It has left a permanent scar on the psyche of Afghan people within and outside the country. When they migrate to other countries, the sense of rootlessness and alienation hovers heavily for the rest of their life. The refugees are forced to live in congested and horrible situations. The small alleyways on the outskirts of Afghanistan are filled with trash and dirt winding between mud and brick compounds. The bomb shelters of the people are not safe and can be blown off at any point of time by the Taliban terrorists. The scenes at the roadside are replete with beggars, some of them not even adolescents. The writer is moved at their site :

“The beggars were mostly children now, thin and grim faced, some no older than five or six. They set in the laps of the burka clad mother’s alongside gutters at busy street corners and chanted “Baksheesh, baksheesh!” and something else, something I hadn’t noticed right away: Hardy any of them sat with an adult male - - the war had made fathers a rare commodity in Afghanistan.”(The Kite Runner 214-215)

Ethnic clashes resulting in inhuman treatment is the significant theme which allows the non-Afghan readers to efface themselves into it. Assef’s childhood disliking for Hazaras establishes the Taliban’s notion of supremacy justifies execution by the Taliban and molestation of Hassan by Assef. White being raped, Hassan throws looks of resignation as

Amir Imagines him as a lamb who would be stained to win the favour of Baba. Baba's secular and otherwise approach goes hand in hand. He is portrayed as conflicted, showing modern, western ideologies. His contempt for Mullahs is evident at many places and ridicules what Amir learns in the school. His cosmopolitan fervor for life is idealized in his choice of coca-cola and playing "cops and robbers". Amir is torn between two worlds as his father discourages him from reading poetry and playing racers instead. He, at times, finds himself incapable of performing masculinity. On the other hand, Assef mocks at him calling him a traitor to his ethnicity and religion for his allegiance to Hassan. Amin's maltreatment for Hassan roots from his father's liking for Hassan. It is primarily not due to any social and religious reasons, it is a sense of insecurity more than anything else which provokes Amir to trap Hassan in money-stealing and in those moments, he seems like a divided self :

"But he's not my friend ! I almost blurted He's my servant ! Had I really thought that " of course I hadn't. I hadn't. I treated Hassan well, just like a friend, better, even, more like a brother, but if so, then why, when Baba's friends came to visit with their kids, didn't I ever include Hassan in the games? Why did I play with Hassan only when no one else was around?"

Amir's agony is so deep rooted that it keeps haunting him until he rescues Sohrab from Assef's tyranny. Standings witness to Hassan's rape made him sick for the following years. Hassan's presence took away his peace of mind and perpetually tormented his conscience. It proves that Amir is basically a truthful human being having a fatal flaw. Which determines the further course of his life:

"In the end, I ran,I ran because I was a coward. I was afraid of Assef and what he would do to me. I was afraid of getting hurt. That's what I told myself as I turned my back to the alley, to Hassan. That is what I made myself believe. I actually aspired to cowardice, because the alternative, the real reason I was running, was that Assef was right : Nothing was free in the world. Maybe Hassan was the price I had to pay, the lamb I had to slay, to win Baba.....He was just a Hazara, wasn't he?"

He wished that his migration to America would help him recover his tormented soul.America was different, America was a river, roaring along, unmindful of the past, I could wade into this river, let my sins drown to the bottom, let the waters carry me. If for nothing else, for that I embraced America.

Instead of bringing relief, his migration makes his life more painful with each passing day. Amir's present is always shadowed by the richness and mirth of his childhood. For him "America was a place to bury his memories' ' but despite innumerable efforts, he could not shed his memories of Kabul.

All the events in the novel revolve around the political upheaval that dates back from the withdrawal of the Soviet's from Afghanistan. The entry of mujahideen against the Soviet puppet Government. The city of Kabul turned into a war zone between 1992-1996 with the

help of the Northern Alliance, leaving a trail of destruction. After the mujahideen, the Taliban proved themselves to be more cruel, turning Afghanistan into a wasteland. It became a lawless place where warlords and various groups aided by foreign power preying on women, girls and boys.

Female characters' prolonged absence from the main narrative strand of the novel though not by any conscious decision of their own rather it is Afghan society itself that marginalizes them and impedes their personal development. Amir's mother Sofia Akrami, "hemorrhaged to death during childbirth". Hassan lost his mother "to a fate most Afghan considered for worse than death: she ran off with a clan of travelling singers and dancers." In the case of Amir's mother the neglect of women's reproductive health and poor access to life saving medical care turns pregnancy into a possible death sentence. The suggestion that death would have been a better fate, Sanaubar then running away with a lover, signals the restricted sexual freedom of Afghan women in the 1960s who were unfairly stigmatized as promiscuous at the same time that countless western women were eloping with counter-culture transients in the democratic ideas like individual freedom, feminism and sexual liberation.

Works- Cited:

Said Edward: "Orientalism" 25th anniversary Ed. New York, Random House Inc. 2003, Print

Hosseini, Khaled. The Kite Runner, New York: Penguin, 2003

M. Nazif Shahrani, "State Building and Social Fragmentation in Afghanistan: A Historical Perspective" in Ali Banuazizi and Myron Weiner (eds) *The State, Religion, and Ethnic Politics: Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan* (Syracuse; Syracuse university press, 1986)

Said, Edward: "Orientalism" 25th anniversary ed. New York : Random House House Inc. 2003 Print. :-

M. Banton, "The Idiom of Race : A critique of Presentism" research race and ethnic relations, P.39, 1980 :-