

# ETHNOCRITICAL APPROACH AND CROSS CULTURAL ENCOUNTER ON KHALED HOSSEINI'S *THE KITE RUNNER* AND KAMILA SHAMSIE'S *BURNT SHADOWS*

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## ABSTRACT:

The scars of war and violence were transmuted through literature to express the pain of the victims. Diaspora writing is the famous genre prevails in today's literature. Diasporic writers are the combination of victims who write about their personal experience from a foreign nation. In this paper, an Afghan novel, *The Kite Runner* and a Pakistani novel, *Burnt Shadows*, are chosen to highlight the identity crisis, marginalization within a country and politics, in a nation. Both the novels share some invisible threads which at some point overlaps each other, exhibiting the intended themes. In both the novels, the common overlapping themes are racism, migration, violence and politics. The paper strongly argues that identity is not a fixed thing and it alters as time changes. It also attempts to highlight how the central characters of the novel always find a way to get adapted to the new environment. They never condemn either the social set up or the fate instead they search for ways to explore their lives.

Majority of diasporic writings throws light on the fragments of culture resulting from displacement, forcibly often. Finding reason for these forced displacements many a times point historical events and at times political issues. In recent times, the degree of attention given to cultural multiplicity has increased. Culture is the thread that holds the tradition. But, in the situation of migrating to a foreign place with completely different tradition, the tradition of the victims literally suffocates.

Instinctively the dominant tradition takes hold of the power with or without consciousness. It is more important to study about how far culture is fluid. Many interpretations and analysis is proposed on this topic. The two novels opted for the research is adorned with a lot of cultural encounters and provides a vast area to research on multiplicity of cultures. There are many scenes in both the novels that highlight the cross cultural encounter.

Memories play a prominent role in diverse cultural encounters. When an individual undergoes forced displacement or dislocation, they could not let their native culture to breathe freely in a foreign land where there is a dominant culture. In this scenario, any individual would

leave their native culture to suffocate within their internal space. Their culture is rooted only in their memories. Though people seem to try hard to cope with the foreign culture, they never would give up their native culture. This idea about culture could be seen in many writings including the novels which are taken for the research.

Along with the characters, the situations and incidents also becomes the representation of change in cultures. Beyond the simple concept of migration, whether forced or not, the purpose of the research is to examine the goals and achievements, when put in a place with diverse culture.

One's reception to the changes and difficulties in different culture becomes the challenge that an individual or any community as whole have to face. It is important to analyse the point where any individual transcends cultural barriers. Yet another idea that is prevalent in the field of cultural multiplicity is that people who are subjected to this shift is flexible enough to face the challenge rather than the native people who are comfortable being in their home.

There are so many entities present within the shell of displacement. These entities are the ones that either paves way for a new change or the refusal of mind to accept a new culture. It includes exile, nostalgia, experience of migration and also the resistance. The literary works may be fiction with imaginary characters but the experience holds the power in spite of the slight gap between the fiction and reality.

The ethnocritical attitudes of culture are vividly portrayed in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*. The protagonists of the novels, Amir and Tanaka, shifts to an alien country, resulting from some political issues. They carry their culture and its tradition along with them. At once they enters the strange land, they tends to adapt to the new culture as a survival technique. They know the very condition of the minority voice and its significance. In the first part of *The Kite Runner*, Amir belongs to a major ethnic community in Afghanistan. He does not experience the cultural taboos which are exercised upon the inferior groups. He undergoes a contrast situation in the last part of the novel, where he becomes the 'other', yearns to live in a foreign land.

In *Burnt Shadows* the platform for cultural encounter is formed by a historical event, which creates permanent problems to face throughout the lives of the people. It becomes clear by taking a look on Kamila Shamsie's previous novels. In every novel she gives sufficient space for culture related issues. Moreover, she is an immigrant, lives in London at present and in her works she records her past cultural experiences comparing with the present.

Shamsie, in this novel focus on the cultural mixedness and how it leads a positive cultural growth. She purposely chooses area like Delhi, Nagasaki, Pakistan, America, etc, where there is a possibility of occurring major political controversies. In this novel, both the achievement and tragedy, that happens to the characters during the process of encountering a new culture is vividly portrayed by Shamsie.

Though political issues also have contributed to the displacement, history occupies a huge part. The main reason for displacement in *The Kite Runner* and *Burnt Shadows* points to the political imbalance. In *Burnt Shadows*, the readers could see a world with multiple cultures. The protagonist travels from place to place where different cultures are practised due to some irrefutable incidents including the Nagasaki bomb blast and India-Pakistan partition.

Hiroka Tanaka, the protagonist, gets exposed to many cultures. In this novel Nagasaki is considered to be a place of cultural mixture which becomes evident from its first part of the novel, *The Yet Unknowing World: Nagasaki, 9 August 1945*. Tanaka is the representation of the people who are forcibly shifts to an alien country and in a trap of encountering different cultures. Although there is no prominent issue arise at any particular place regarding culture, it is not the same when a people of entirely distinct culture tries to reside in a new land enforcing their own culture. The native culture indirectly begins to dominate the other by exhibiting the power. At this juncture the fluidity of culture is questioned. As Bhabha says in *The Location of Culture*,

“The beyond is neither a new horizon, nor leaving behind of the past...we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity” (1)

The conclusion may take any forms like, both the cultures may overlap each other, the dominant one may suppress the nether or the superior culture may give enough space for those people without overlapping, but it has hard probability. This is what Bhabha talks about in his *Location of Culture*, as, in-betweeness, liminality and third space.

In this novel, cultural experience of each character differs. Konrad Weiss, develops passion for Nagasaki, and voluntarily encounters its culture as he has a plan to write a book on Nagasaki. When he enters Nagasaki for the time with all the excitement, he feels a kind of charm in that city. Konrad, entirely out of his desire travels to Nagasaki and admires the symbols of cultural mixedness that presents there. He looks at the photo wall hangings and other architectures which with the touch of European and Japanese art attracts his attention.

“...it was the photographs along the wall captured his attention rather than the mad mixture of Japanese and European architectural styles...the enchantment remains – the glassy loveliness of frost flowers in winter, seas of blue azaleas

in summer, the graceful elegance of the Euro-Japanese buildings along the seafront..."

As Nagasaki is a melting pot, the marriage between Japanese and European is a common thing. He develops a kind of admiration towards the culture in Nagasaki. Though there is a purpose behind his interest, apart from that he loves the place. But the situation does not remain the same for a long time. There breaks the riot that smashes all the excitement and it changes the track of the novel. The story gives an elegant impression about cultural multiplicity in the beginning, soon the picture changes upside down by the succeeding events after the Nagasaki bomb blast. The author indirectly portrays that political situations has much to do with the cultural experience of the people

Any place where numerous cultures exist, exhibit harmony until an unfair political turbulence arises. Once it starts, then the glossy image of multicultural breaks without doing any justice for the people. The exact situation happens in the novel when the bomb blasts in Nagasaki. People other than the natives were shown an unpleasant attitude. At once the situation gets changed, mindsets of the foreigners who lives in Nagasaki too changes, comprehending Konrad. Then a heterogeneous picture of culture is given by the author through the character of Tanaka, who survives the war.

In *Burnt Shadows*, Shamsie, neither gives hope for transcultural relationship nor a negative image of it. Reference for both sort of transcultural relationship is given in the novel. James and Elizabeth, though seems to maintain an even relationship, actually does not. It is obvious when Elizabeth converse with Tanaka about cross cultural marriage, around the time of Tanaka's wedding with Sajjad. She claims that women are expected to enter into the world of men, adjusting things to make them comfortable, eliminating all personal desires. But, her idea is disproved by the kinship that is shared by Sajjad and Tanaka, even after their marriage. They does not fall as victims for cultural tendencies, in such a way that diverse cultural background has nothing to do with familial relationships.

Tanaka acts as the representation for cultural fluidity. She learns language at once she enters a new place. It is apparently clear when Hiroko wants to learn Urdu, the local language, when she is in Delhi. Though Elizabeth and James assure her that there is no need to learn the language immediately, she refuses and learns the language quickly. This attitude of Tanaka clearly elaborates two things. In one hand, she is always liable to accept the any place and culture she is put in. On the other hand, she wants to be one with the people of that specific region. As it is a known fact that language unites people, she never likes to be a stranger. Likewise, she always forges with her ability of multilingual skill.

In *The Kite Runner*, Afghanistan is the place of different cultures. Resembling Nagasaki, it holds diverse ethnic groups along with its culture, beliefs and attitudes. In both the

novels there comes a point where occurs a collision between the dominated culture and dominant culture. In *The Kite Runner*, the character of Amir undergoes different cultural situation, through which the author presents the different cultural attitude of people.

Several internal ethnic groups are seen in Afghanistan. Even Amir and Hassan do not belong to the same ethnic group. Amir is the Pashtun whereas Hassan belongs to the Hazaras, an inferior community in Afghanistan. Hassan is referred as, “A loyal Hazara. Loyal as a dog” (68), by Assef. The friendship between Amir and Hassan is not encouraged at many situations because Hassan belongs to a minority group. Hassan and his father are kept on discriminated by the privileged ethnic classes. But, in the later part of the novel when Amir lives in America, he gets a chance to adopt Hassan’s son. Amir, out of guilt he decides to look after Hassan’s son. American society does not discriminate Sohrab as he belongs to different ethnic group. It gives Sohrab the space to live, the same space which is given for Amir. Here, in America, both Amir and Hassan acquire the same status.

Rather than cultural clashes that occur between two different nations, cultural imbalance within the country marks more cruelty in *The Kite Runner*. The only reason that Hassan belongs to a minority ethnic group happens to be a curse for him. Right from his childhood, he suffers from cultural domination within the Afghan society. When Amir and Hassan is caught playing together by ‘the blue-eyed’ Assef, belongs to the Pashtun community, he barks at Amir for palying with a low class Hazara. He indicates,

“Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns. It always has been, always will be. We are the true Afghans, the pure Afghans, not this Flat-Nose here. His people pollute our homeland, our *watan*. They dirty our blood” (38)

Many practices in Afghanistan at times resemble the Western culture. Through the relationship that exists between the leading characters in the novel, Afghanistan and American cultures is illustrated and distinguished. Amir and Hassan, lives in the same house but with distinct economic and social background. Both Amir and Hassan grow without the shelter of mother, therefore utmost importance is given to the father-son relationship, that is, between Amir and Baba, and Hassan and Ali.

Although possessing shelter in an alien place, the people give importance to their own culture. Here, the general stands as the representation for the native Afghan culture. He says that adaptation does not work out well with Afghan culture. In Afghan culture, it is a pride in tracing the ancestral history of any person. By adopting a child whose origin is not known at times brings complications. Child who is adopted may belongs to an inferior class and that would stain their family’s reputation.

In both the novels, the central characters do not reserve any ardent stress over their culture and develops a mind to cope with the other culture. Tanaka and Amir, opens their mind

to face the foreign culture, carrying their native culture in their memories. It is seen in both the novels, when Amir and Tanaka recall their memories they had in their native, though they inherit a different place at the moment.

Cultural encounter is an inescapable thing for anyone who migrates to other country with or without their accord. In *Burnt Shadows* and *The Kite Runner*, many characters get into a foreign environment, letting their native cultural attitudes be inside. Usually people are dare not to voice against any culture in its native place. They seem to have adjusted to the new culture so that their place in that country may get assured. Rarely, character like Raza resists, when he feels uncomfortable with the other culture. It is not always a feasible thing to resist a culture in its native land. Many a times people act like Tanaka, Harry, Amir and Baba, only to survive in the new environment, retaining their native culture aside.

At some situation, people could not catch hold of their emotions and express their nativeness. There arise the cultural encounters and sometimes clashes. Characters like, the Tahib, the general Taheri and Elizabeth, stands as the representation for their culture. But, within their representation there is a fear of losing livelihood in the new place, along with guilt and superficial stance of culture. Hosseini and Shamsie, at many places coincide in their opinions about cross cultural experiences.

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