



HEALING WITH NATURE: AN ECO CRITICAL STUDY OF KHALED HOSSEINI'S A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS

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Abstract: Literature scholars evaluate writings that highlight environmental issues and look at the various ways literature approaches the subject of nature as part of the multidisciplinary field of ecological criticism. Contemporary writers have provided in-depth depiction of nature and its impact on human life in their literary works.

Khaled Hosseini is a well established Afghan American writer, who loves to write about his country. The present paper strives to evaluate Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) from an eco-critical stance, set in the back-drop of war torn Afghanistan. This research is important and worthwhile as it is an effort to raise human awareness about the damage caused to nature especially in the beleaguered country like Afghanistan. Thus the paper, with textual references also offer a deep insight into the role nature plays in healing and providing solace to the person affected especially women during the time of war.

Key words: Ecocriticism, Ecological destruction, Ecological degradation, Ecofeminism, spiritual Ecology.

INTRODUCTION

Nature and literature have always shared a close relationship as is discernible in the works of poets and other writers down the ages in almost all cultures of the world. But the worry for our ecology and the threat caused by the abuse of the environment have caught the attention of critics, which ultimately led to the emergence of a new area of literature called Ecocriticism, sometimes referred to as "Green Studies". Ecocriticism is an umbrella term that includes anything associated to the relationship between nature and culture. It is an interdisciplinary field that takes into contemplation ecology, geography, cultural studies, environmental science, anthropology and, religion in the study of literature. The fusion of literature with environmental themes and issues forms Ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism as a branch is considered a recent addition to literary theory (mid to late 20th century) that emerged in the USA, moved to Europe and, then spread to the third-world countries within a very short span of time. The environmental writings can be traced back to 18th century and early 19th century in the works of William Wordsworth and Coleridge. They saw the beauty of nature, flowers, and mountains as something very powerful and inspiring that could uplift them. Ecocriticism originated as an idea called "literary ecology" (Meeker 1972) and was later coined as an "-ism" (cited under General Overviews, *Ecocriticism*, Derek Gladwin). After the publication of American laureate William Rueckert's, *Literature and Ecology: an Experiment in Ecocriticism*, 1978, he defined Ecocriticism, as the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature. American transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau wrote confidently about nature and its influence on spiritual and intellectual growth. The most powerful work in American Ecocriticism is Lawrence Buell's, *The Environmental Imagination* (1995). John Muir came up with more than any other single writer to the initiation of wilderness as a touchstone of American cultural identity and the basis for conservation activities. Ecocritics, suggests Rachel Carson's, *Silent Spring* (1962) as signaling the start of modern environmentalism and obviously being the stimulant for Ecocriticism (Garrard, 1). Ecocriticism as a term came into use after Cheryl Glotfelty, a graduate student at Cornell University encouraged the use of the term "Ecocriticism" instead of "the study of nature writing". In this regard, some critics acknowledge Glotfelty, as the founder of American Ecocritics. Cheryl Glotfelty analyses "Ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (1996: xviii).

Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan in 1965 and later moved to Paris during the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1980 and finally settled in the United States. He is the author of *The Kite Runner* (2003) *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) and *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013). He is also a Goodwill Envoy to the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees. His all books have been partially set in Afghanistan and depicts Afghanistan as largely beautiful but in conflict- war torn. He in one of the books depict his experience as an immigrant based on the difficulty that Hosseini and his parents experience in California. His writing about the crisis in the country has made him a global literary triumph. Hosseini's novels are primarily set in Afghanistan and depict the violence and environmental degradation inflicted upon the country.

A Thousand Splendid Suns, is Khaled Hosseini's one of the spectacular novel set against the eruptive affairs of Afghanistan's thirty years of war. The imagery and landscape are used aptly to highlight the women's interiority and Afghanistan's noxious patriarchy. This novel takes us through the lives of two stunning and very strong Afghan women- Mariam and Laila whose life is determined by a savage and heartless world, and as such, they try to find solace in the lap of nature. This book is divided into three parts. The first part introduces us to a girl Mariam, who is also named *harami* (bastard) by her mother, which is a term used to describe a child born out of sin. She is a daughter of a wealthy, prominent man, Jalil, and his maid named Nana. Their marriage is not accepted by Jalil's family and Nana is disallowed to stay at Jalil's residence by her other wives.

Women are denied opportunities to learn, earn, and lead and are subjected to violence, abuse, and unfair treatment at home, at work, and in their larger communities. Nana is pregnant with Mariam, so she without any violence takes a rutted, steep dirt road with knee-high grass and splotches of white and bright yellow flowers lined either side of the track, where no one would raise any questions against her, also none would stare at her belly out, point at her, snicker, or, worse yet assault her with insincere kindness (8). She claimed that she wished to reside someplace distant, secluded place. So, she takes a path that would follow uphill to a flat area with towering poplars, cotton trees, and clumps of untamed shrubs. The path ended perpendicular to a broad creek that poured from the Safid - koh mountains that bordered Gul Daman and were filled with fish. 200 yards upstream, there was a little grove of weeping willow trees facing the mountains. Under the cover of the willows, the clearing was in the center of the area. And In midst of this was the Kolba, where Mariam was born and raised (9). Being in midst of those woods and natural landscape would at least lessen Nana and Mariam's pain of injustice that life has inflicted on them. On Thursday Jalil would come to visit Mariam and she could finally do as she wished to go along with her father to Herat. This yearning to leave Kolba and go to her father ends with Mariam leaving the village one day as she crossed the brook, rolled up her pants to the knees, and proceeds down the hill toward Heart for the first time in her life (30). Nature seems to be part of her journey. Tulips, lilies, and petunias are among the many blooms she observes, their petals bathed in sunlight. These objects of nature were asking her to stay; lesser she had the idea that this will mark the beginning of her new journey into a life full of miseries. After she reaches her father's home, she is again, like her mother disallowed to enter the premises. She spends the night outside Jalil's house and she listened to the crickets chirping from the gardens (33) and this sight captures her heart.

This act of betrayal by Mariam is not tolerated by Nana, so she hangs herself. This increases Mariam's suffering and within no time she is forcefully married to Rasheed after her mother's death and both travel to Kabul following the wedding. She cleans the floor to remove the cobwebs that were flying in the ceiling corners. She aired out the place by opening the windows (64). She has realized and accepted this place and this man to be her. When both begin to plan a family, Mariam is pregnant and this marks a new beginning in her life, a ray of hope for the better days in her life. She was unable to stop her hands from falling to her stomach. Happiness swept in like a burst of wind pushing a door wide open as she thought of what was blooming there. Her eyes were wet (87).

Nature is always associated with human happiness. This freshness in Mariam's life marks the arrival of a new season, its season's first snowfall. For Mariam, the snow like her own self was trampled and tainted and this new snow that has begin, is a good sign of purity and good days that will follow. This happiness doesn't last long as she suffers from abortions and with every snowfall she waits and hopes again for the restart. But with every misery, Rasheed develops hatred for Mariam, and his love for his wife also vanished. He starts scolding and hitting her.

Hosseini introduces Laila, a nine-year-old girl who is the sole child and youngest of Fariba and Hakim, as a new female protagonist in the second chapter. She is also a neighbor of Mariam and Rasheed. She is raised with love and compassion by her well-educated father, who places a high priority on his daughter's education. Laila aspires to finish her degree so she may improve the world. When she is fifteen years old, she falls in love with Tariq for the first time. However, the violence forces Tariq and his family to flee to Pakistan. She wishes for a better and more promising future, but the war has ruined all of her expectations. Laila is hurt, and a missile kills her parents, and now she is all alone. Rasheed brings, wounded and distressed Laila home and desires to marry her. Laila being pregnant with Tariq's child accepts to be Rasheed's second wife. Between all this trouble and miseries one thing remains constant in Laila, that gives her a positive vibe and that is a pastoral aspect of Afghanistan's nature, which pose a soothing effect on her psyche. It would act as a balm to all those bruises that the world had put on her. Hosseini through Laila recalls her visit to Bamiyan valley, carpeted by lush farming fields (146)

Laila on getting separated from her lover is extremely heartbroken but the elements of nature make her heart gentle. She dreams of Tariq, sitting on a beach, on a quilt. The wind makes her eyes water and buries their shoes in the sand, hurling knots of dead grass from the ridges of one dune to another. The wind whips up another spray of sand off the shallow, windward slopes. There is a noise then like a chant, and she tells him something Babi had thought her years before about singing sand (185). While Laila is lost in her old memories of her parents, a happy home, her siblings, and most importantly her lover, a sudden news brought up by a stranger, confirming Tariq's death

leaves Laila in an utter shock. She could hardly move but managed to connect to Nature for comfort and support. She saw him at a place, where the barley fields were green, where the water ran clear and the cottonwood seeds danced by the thousands in the air (223)

Nature and human beings are closely linked to each other and it is impossible for human beings to separate themselves from its influence. For ages, man has been exploiting nature for his personal profits and pleasures without giving a single thought to the damage and destruction he is causing to the natural environment. When a man goes on exploiting nature ruthlessly, nature sometimes too becomes violent. Nature shows its power through natural calamities like cyclones, famine, drought, flood, earthquakes, etc. Glotfelty in "Introduction" to *The Ecocriticism Reader* cites Barry Commoner's first law of ecology that 'everything is connected to everything else' while arguing that Ecocriticism expands the notion of the 'the world' to include the entire ecosphere" (xix). Hosseini also highlights the condition of people brought about by droughts in Afghanistan. However, as droughts and unpredictable weather worsen, more people are at risk of losing their jobs and incomes and are compelled to leave their country despite the general unrest. The third and worst year of the drought occurred in the summer of 2000. Villages in Helmand, Zabol, and Kandhar became herds of nomadic populations that were always on the move in search of water and lush pastures for their livestock. They arrived in Kabul when they could find neither and all of their goats, sheep, and cows had perished. They moved into temporary slums packed in huts, living there fifteen or twenty at a time, on the Kareh - Ariana mountainside (295). Such a dramatic rise in water scarcity in the coming centuries would clearly spell catastrophe for our civilization. Some of the most severe anthropogenic influences on the natural environment have occurred in the south Asian region of Afghanistan. If we don't pay attention to nature and their voices, they'll start to rebel.

After Laila gives birth to a girl, and her secret is revealed to Rasheed, he gets very angry at her and develops a strong hatred for Laila. He would often beat her up. Now both ladies in the house plot to escape but fail and are caught every time and sometimes they get beaten up harshly by Rasheed. While Mariam in the third chapter is in jail awaiting her death penalty, after killing her tyrant husband, Rasheed, who has brought up severe miseries for Mariam and Laila, she had understood the sounds and sensations of nature. The recollection of the pastoral green comforted her even after she killed her husband Rashid to save Laila. She had dreams of her house in Kolba, Mother Nature, her mother Nana, and her tutor, Mullah Faizullah, twirling his rosary beads, walking with her along the stream, their twin shadows gliding on the water and on the grassy banks sprinkled with a blue-lavender wild iris that, in this dream, smelled like cloves (358)

Hosseini like any other lover of nature ends the novel again with the pastoral scenes, when Laila decides to visit Mariam's childhood home, Kolba, while paying homage to her, she crossed the streambed, stepping from one stone to another. She heads towards mountains, towards weeping willow, which she can now see, the long drooping branches shaking with each gust of wind (387). Hosseini through the two female protagonists gives a message to reconnect with nature, because nature is the only way that seems to heal their wounds caused by immense suffering. After all the turmoil in their lives they always associate with nature and natural elements for tranquility and serenity and nature taught them how to find happiness in life in the silence of nature.

CONCLUSION

A Thousand Splendid Suns echoes Hosseini's ecological concerns. He is successful in weaving together various descriptions of nature throughout his book, reminding readers of their dependence on the natural world and wants us to believe that some of the best cures for healing, gratification, and balance in our hectic life may be found in nature. Our brains and spirits can be healed by going for a walk in nature. Nature provides us solitude, tranquilly, harmony, and beauty without asking anything in return. Through a variety of pictures, scenes, hues, patterns, and other exquisitely beautiful manifestations of beauty, nature communicates with us.

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