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Crisis, Survival and an Enigma of Homelessness: Tracing the History of Afghanistan in Khaled Hosseini's Novels

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Diasporic writings revolve around the issues of dislocation, nostalgia, discrimination, survival, cultural changes, and identity. In his 1991 essay, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return", William Safran talks about the historical origin of the term 'diaspora', locating it back to the exile of the Jews from their original homeland and dispersion in various countries, which involves physical suffering and moral degradation. However, the term has expanded its periphery across the ages, and in the present context, Safran argues, it is used as a metaphor to designate several categories of people – "expatriate, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities..." (83). By extending the definition of the term "diaspora" provided by Walkner Connor, Safran presents the following characteristics that the members of expatriate minority communities are found to share. These include: dispersal from a center to two or more peripheral or foreign regions; retention of collective memory, vision, or myth; the belief that complete acceptance by the host country is not possible with a persistent sense of alienation; regard for the ancestral homeland as the true or ideal home and the place of eventual return; commitment to the maintenance or restoration of the homeland to its safety and prosperity; and personal and vicarious relation to the homeland in an ethnic-communal consciousness.



‘Home’ is an issue of foremost concern in the literary works of the diasporic writers. The issue is more complicated for the members of Afghan ethnic communities, who were forced to leave their country due to some socio-political or historical upheavals. Haunted by the memory of the homeland, and the consequent feelings of alienation in the host land, these authors nurture a desire for the construction of an alternative ‘home’ that is mostly imaginative. Salman Rushdie’s statement in his essay “Imaginary Homelands” (1981) is significant in this respect. He writes,

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or immigrants and expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, ...our physical alienation from almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost, that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, Imaginary Homelands, Indias of the mind (10).

A member of the Afghan diasporic community in the United States, Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul on March 04, 1965. In the early 1970s, Khaled migrated to Tehran with his family, as his father was assigned a diplomatic post at the Afghan Embassy in Iran. After returning to their homeland in 1973, the Hosseini family migrated to Paris, again on a diplomatic mission, in 1976. Their plan of returning to Afghanistan in 1980 got disrupted due to the Russian invasion. The Hosseini family migrated to the United States after being granted political asylum, and settled in San Jose, California. Hosseini’s novels provide a glimpse of the history of Afghanistan from the latter decades of the twentieth century until the present times to trace its culture, demography, and ethno-religious demarcations.



If one looks into the historical details, the emergence of the modern Afghan nation can be traced back to the late eighteenth century. It had been ruled, with various brief interruptions, by a series of monarchs, whose consolidation of power was constantly undermined by civil wars and foreign invasions. While conducting a research on Afghan culture, Linda Meril et. al. (2006) observe that the position of Afghanistan at the crossroads of Central Asia has subjected it to constant invasion and conquest throughout its long recorded history. The country had been the issue of rivalry between two great European powers - Britain and Russia. Thus, the turbulent condition due to the frequent shifting of power, civil wars, and foreign invasions, and the lack of employment, safety, and security have compelled many people to escape from their country and migrate elsewhere in search of a new life and better future. For them, history became an essential tool in voicing their nostalgia for the lost space.

In Hosseini novels, history plays an important role in restructuring the narrative voice. He has revealed, on numerous occasions, his desire to write fiction, a story that can justify the status of the Afghan people. This, he thought, would present a new perspective to his readers and help them to re-frame their perception towards the Afghan populace. In an interview with James Mustich, Hosseini comments:

For many people in the West, Afghanistan is synonymous with the Soviet war and the Taliban. I wanted to remind people that Afghans had managed to live in peaceful anonymity for the decades that the history of Afghans in the 20th century has been largely pacific and harmonious (2007).

In his first novel *The Kite Runner* (published in 2003), Hosseini narrates the history of



Afghanistan beginning from the late 1960s until 2001, in the course of which the country has witnessed a radical shift of power. Following Rushdie's technique in *Midnight's Children*, Hosseini has blended the political history of Afghanistan with the personal history of the novel's protagonist Amir, vis-a-vis his journey through Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the United States. Beginning in the year 2001, the novel moves back in time through Amir's recollections of his childhood years in Kabul, his profound friendship with Hassan, and the transition of Afghanistan from monarchy to parliamentary government. In a conservative, class-based society, Hassan is raped by some 'sociopath'. The inability to save his friend (who turns out to be his half-brother) from sexual harassment haunts Amir throughout the existence in Kabul and later in San Francisco. The redemption from guilt comes with his decision to visit his homeland, where he meets Hassan's son, Sohrab, and takes him along to . This *bildungsroman* incorporates not only the development of its protagonist but also that of Afghanistan under Taliban rule. With its clear narrative technique, the novel provides a picture of America in the aftermath of 9/11 and the existence of Afghan Muslims.

The novel is set in Wazir Akbar Khan, the northernmost district of Kabul in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and chronicles the life of two boys - Amir and Hassan - "one conflicted, on the unsure emotional and moral ground; the other pure, loyal, rooted in goodness and integrity" (Hosseini i). The era comes under the monarchical rule of Mohammad Zahir Shah, whose diplomatic policies have brought political stability, economic prosperity, and social peace. The period of peace and prosperity came to an end when Zahir Shah is dethroned, and within a single night, the country becomes a Republic with Daoud Khan as the President. In this era of "economic development" and "reform", the wealthy,



upper class, aristocratic people, such as Amir's father, enjoyed several privileges that were denied to the people of humble socio-economic background. This is reflected in Amir's description of their house, car, and the lavish parties that were thrown occasionally by his father. The condition of people of the poor economic background of different ethnic identities is represented through Ali and his son Hassan, who worked as servants in Amir's house, occupying a small “mud shack”. Hosseini has represented the ethnic divisions and inter-ethnic conflict in the novel through the characters of Amir and Hassan.

Afghan society is essentially multi-ethnic, consisting of a wide variety of ethno-linguistic groups. The coexistence of multiple ethnic-lingual groups has resulted in conflict among people and has affected their relationships. The dominant ethnic group of Afghanistan that covers more than half of the entire population is *Pashtun*. The other major ethnic groups are *Tajik*, *Uzbek*, and *Hazara*. Although a conflict-ridden relationship persists among the members of every ethnic group, the conflict between Pashtun and Hazaras has taken a serious turn over the centuries and has been aptly reflected in the novel through the characters. Differences in physical features, geographical locations, languages, religious sects, occupation, and modes of living have affected the inter-ethnic relationship and have ultimately resulted in the marginalization and oppression of the Hazaras. Other factors contribute to this ethnic marginalization: while the *Pashtuns* inhabit the South-east and the North-eastern parts of Afghanistan, the Hazaras reside in the central mountainous region of the country. Religion was another source of conflict between the two groups because the *Pashtuns* belong to the *Sunni* sect while the Hazaras are *Shias*. Moreover, the physical features of the *Hazaras*, their Mongoloid looks, have made them easily distinguishable from



the rest of the Afghan populace. While the *Pashtuns* speak in the *Pashtu* language, the *Hazaras* speak in a Persian dialect. Generally, the *Pashtuns* occupy the upper class and are mostly merchants, traders, farmers, and animal breeders. On the other hand, the *Hazaras* occupy “the lowest socioeconomic bracket in Afghanistan” (Merill, et. al. 6), leading an impoverished lifestyle with the persistent practice of farming, herding, or working as domestic help. These factors have resulted in the marginalization and oppression of the *Hazaras* and render them to the status of the ethnic ‘other’. In this regard, Syed Mohamed (2013) cites Lieberman who perceives the novel as a ‘time capsule’ that freezes the nation’s “warring tribal principalities, petty mountain states, and ethnic enclaves spilling over the present national borders.” (Lieberman 180).

The title of the novel alludes to the popular Afghan sport of “Kite fighting”, which forms an integral part of Afghan culture. In her essay entitled “*The Kite Runner* from a Marxist Perspective” (2015), Kristine Putz observes that “Amir is the Kite Flyer, while Hassan is the Kite Runner” in the novel, and the relation between the two is reflective of the class differences that exist between the two races (1). Because of this ethnic difference, Hassan becomes a constant victim of physical and verbal assaults by the local mafias; he is raped by the local mafia Assef and later killed by the Taliban because of his *Hazara* identity. Despite being a witness to the humiliating episode, Amir doesn't speak a word, nor does he make any attempt to protect his playmate. Putz argues that Amir's act of watching Hassan be raped and then turning away from it is illustrative of the turning away of the *Pashtuns* from the plight of the *Hazaras*. This incident raises a barrier to the Amir-Hassan relationship.

After some years, in 1979, the country witnessed the Russian invasion and the



initiation of turbulence and insecurity, which compel many Afghan people to migrate to other countries. Amir and his father escape from their hometown in the darkness of night in a truck that smuggles people “out of *Shorawi*-occupied Kabul to the relative safety of Pakistan” (Hosseini103). Upon reaching Peshawar and after a brief stay, Amir and his father migrated to America, settling in Fremont, California.

The second part of the novel is set in California and presents a picture of the condition of Afghan Muslims in America, their condition, hardships, and experiences. After a long interval of twenty years, the narrative moves back in space to Afghanistan, as Amir visits his homeland in search of Hassan’s son Sohrab. This consists the third part of the novel with its setting in the early twenty-first century when the country has been devastated by constant civil wars and the oppressive Taliban regime. Upon his arrival in Kabul, Amir is astonished to find the devastating condition of his homeland. He could see “the signs of poverty everywhere” (Hosseini 214). All he could see were the ruins; people who earlier held respective positions in society are now turned into beggars, residing on the street sides, and orphan children, whose parents have died due to the wars.

It becomes profoundly difficult for him to find out Sohrab in the vast shackles of ruin. After the ruthless slaughter of his parents on the open streets, Sohrab was given shelter in a local orphanage, from where he was shifted to the den of a Taliban leader. This Taliban leader turns out to be Assef who finds extreme pleasure in torturing people. He challenges Amir to defeat him in a duel. A terrible fight ensues and, after much shedding of blood and terrible injury, Amir manages to take Sohrab out from the shackles of the Taliban, drives away to Pakistan with the help of a local driver Farid. After few weeks of stay, Amir flies off to



California, with Sohrab, and the novel ends with an optimistic note.

It is interesting to note that, in the first and third parts of the novel, which are set in Afghanistan, there is hardly any reference to a woman, except an occasional description of Amir's mother and Hassan's mother, through the protagonist's recollection. It is interesting to note that both of these women are physically absent as characters, since Amir's mother has died after giving birth to him, and Hassan is left by his mother within a week of his birth. The absence of the real, existing women indicates the overtly patriarchal nature of Afghan society, where a man acts as the ultimate pillar of the family. While studying the dynamics of Afghan culture in their article titled “A Critique of Afghan Culture in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*” (2019), Devendra Kumar Gora et al. analyses the course of circumstances in the novel, which include “condition of women, oppressed ethnic groups, festivals, rituals and traditions,” along with the conflict-ridden relationship between the *Pashtun* and the *Hazara*, concluding that the novel, in reality, presents a caricature of the Afghan culture itself (101).

As he was editing the final draft of *The Kite Runner*, a father and son story set exclusively in the world of men, Hosseini developed a desire to write another “love story” set in Afghanistan. But this time, he was knitting the plot a mother/daughter tale that would offer glimpses of the inner lives of two struggling Afghan women. Keeping the fact in mind, Hosseini's second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) begins in the 1960s in a fictional village of *Gul Daman*, near Herat, with its female protagonist Mariam, the illegitimate child of a prosperous *Herati* businessman named Jalil Khan. After her mother's suicide, the fifteen-year-old Mariam is forced to marry a *Kabuli* shoe-maker, named Rasheed, who is thrice her age. Mariam leaves the village of *Gul Daman* in Herat and is landed in the Deh-Mazang



district of Kabul in the year 1974. With the change in geographical location, Mariam notices striking changes in terms of language and practices. Her fluency in the Persian language comes to a jerk when she finds that in Kabul, the major language of communication is *Pashtu*. Living the first fifteen years of her life in the free rural atmosphere of Heart, Mariam finds herself bound within the four walls of the house. Mariam's husband is a stern patriarch and the very first thing he gives Mariam as a present is a *burqa*, which symbolically represents his desire to control her person and authenticates his role as the sole phave sole access to her body, beauty, and freedom. He makes his standpoint clear in his statements: "It embarrasses me frankly, to see a man who's lost control of his wife...Where I come from, a woman's face is her husband's business only. I want you to remember that" (Hosseini 69). Rasheed is a representative of the conservative, patriarchal society, unlike his neighbor Hakim, a school teacher who allows his wife to live a life of freedom.

In the early 1980s, Afghanistan witnessed an unprecedented progress in every sphere of life. It was an age in which women had enjoyed every sort of privilege and freedom. When she went on a solo outing for the first time through the city areas of Kabul, Mariam is surprised to observe women who

...were a different breed from the women in the poor neighborhoods...These women were – what was the word Rasheed had used? – "modern". Yes, modern Afghan women married to modern Afghan men who did not mind that their wives walked among strangers with make up on their faces and nothing on their heads (Hosseini 74).

With the beginning of turbulence and alteration in the socio-political sphere, Mariam's life



also alters: she is tortured by her husband and becomes a victim of marital rape, because of her inability to give birth to a child the turbulence in Mariam's personal life coincided with the national crises as the year 1978 marked the beginning of turbulence in Afghanistan.

Mariam, who is then on the threshold of womanhood, learns that President Daoud Khan is overthrown, killed and the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), "[a] revolutionary council of the armed forces has been established, and our *watan* will now be known as the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan..." (Hosseini 100).

It is interesting to note that the birth of the new, Democratic Republic of Afghanistan coincides with the birth of the other female protagonist of the novel, Laila, the second child of Hakim and Fariba. From 1978, the narrative moves forward in time to 1987, when the country is under Russian dominion, experiencing large-scale destruction of life and resources. The second part of the novel centers mostly on Laila, a girl of nine years of age, whose two elder brothers have joined and dedicated their lives in the war and against the Soviet troops. A daughter of a liberal father, Laila enjoys all sorts of rights that have been denied to Mariam. She has a childhood friend Tariq, with whom she shares intimacies. As Laila turns into ten in the year 1988, the Soviet Union starts pulling out their troops from Afghanistan. The last Soviet troops leave the country in 1989, but the Civil War continues, which resulted in further destruction. The whistling sound of the rockets can be heard everywhere:

"In Kabul, particularly in western Kabul, fires raged, and black palls of smoke mushroomed over snow-clad buildings. Embassies closed down. Schools collapsed...The freedoms and opportunities that women had enjoyed between 1978 and 1992 were a thing of past now" (Hosseini 253).



People started escaping to the neighboring countries of Pakistan and Iraq to save their lives and families. After the departure of Tariq's family, Hakim convinces his wife to take a journey abroad, but their plans are shattered and Laila's life turns upside down as the house is hit by a firing rocket that kills her parents and leaves her with numerous injuries. An orphan girl, Laila is offered shelter by Rasheed and Mariam. Discovering herself pregnant with Tariq's child, Laila, then a girl of fifteen years of age agrees to marry Rasheed to avoid being a social outcast and gives birth to a daughter and a son.

Some years later, the country comes under Taliban rule: "Everywhere, there were shouts: *Allah-u-Akbar!* Mariam saw a bed sheet hanging from a window on Jadeh Maywand. On it, someone had painted three words in big black letters: ZENDA BAAD TALIBAN! Long live the Taliban!" (Hosseini 268). The Taliban imposed restrictions on every basic right of people. Rasheed becomes a stern supporter of Taliban ideals and imposes his authority by increasingly violent tortures over his wives and daughter. Unable to bear the torture and to save Laila and the children from a terrible future, Mariam strikes her husband with a shovel, which takes his life. During that time, the people who are found to violate the Taliban principles, are dragged to the Ghazi Stadium, and tortured violently in public, by throwing stones on the convict's body, until he/she is dead. Mariam is arrested for committing mariticide and is executed in the Ghazi Stadium. Laila gets reunited with his girlhood lover Tariq, marries him, and moves to Pakistan with her family. She learns about the bombings in her country by the Americans after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in New York. They return to their homeland in 2002 when the disturbances have ended, the Taliban are driven out of the country and an international peacekeeping force has been sent to Kabul. The



country is governed by the President, Hamid Karzai. The narrative closes in the year 2003, with Kabul on the verge of complete transformation.

Hosseini's third novel *And the Mountains Echoed* is set in 1952 and narrates the life stories of two siblings, Abdullah and Pari, separated at an early age. It begins with a popular Afghan folktale about the *div* who took the most loving son of Baba Ayob. Several years later, the father reaches *div's* palace in pursuit of his son and finds that his son is in far better condition than he and his family could ever afford. This folktale forms the structure of the narrative, which presents a picture of the rural life in the village of Shadbag, the inescapable poverty which compels Saboor to sell his favourite child, his daughter Pari to the wealthy Wahdati couple of Kabul in exchange for a lump sum amount. The Wahdati house in Kabul, a seat of comfort and extravagances, lacking in emotional warmth, alludes to the mythical palace of *div*. The marriage between Mr. Suleiman and Nila Wahdati was only a negotiation, which had left them childless. Pari comes into their lives as a fairy and bridges the gap between the two unattached islands, though momentarily. Sometime later, Mr. Wahdati is affected by paralysis, which makes a major portion of his body invalid. After a few months, Nila leaves her husband, house, and country with her adopted daughter Pari, in pursuit of a new life in Paris.

The narrative moves forward to the 1980s, with the country under Soviet invasion. It was also, as Nabi aptly describes, "a time of exodus, and many families from our neighborhood packed their things and left the country for either Pakistan or Iran, with hopes of resettling somewhere in the West" (Hosseini 138-139). The next decade turns out to be more ruinous, with the territorial expansion of war. Nabi recalls: "The street where we lived,



once so quiet and pristine and gleaming, turned into a war zone. Bullets hit every house. Rockets whistled overhead” (Hosseini 139). It was during this time that the Wahdati house received utmost damage, affecting the roofs and scarring the walls. The furniture and other souvenirs are looted by the military men.

After many digressions, the narrative moves forward in time to the year 2002, when the country is devastated by the Global War on Terror, launched by the American government, in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Pari’s life in Paris has been eventful: after completing her education, she engages in an affair with her mother’s ex-boyfriend Julien, but the relationship turns out to be unfruitful. Eventually, she gets married to a school teacher named Eric Lacombe and gives birth to three children, Isabelle, Alain, and Thierry. Abdullah, on the other hand, escapes to Pakistan, where he meets and marries a woman named Sultana, and the couple migrated to the United States in 1982, after being granted asylum and opens a restaurant. The two siblings, Abdullah and Pari, are reunited in America after a prolonged passage of time.

In each of these three novels, Hosseini has presented fragments of Afghanistan’s history, while narrating the tale of its transformation from an abode of peace and stability to the “proverbial hell on earth” (Hosseini 2003). A closer analysis of these three novels attracts the readers’ attention to their structural and thematic parity. Hosseini’s novels are technically and essentially bildungsroman, in which the lives of the protagonists are inextricably connected to that of their national identity. The second common feature is that the novels represent the lives and conditions of people of different classes, social positions, and ethnic variations. In this regard, Indu Sharma observes that Hosseini's novels, "although rooted in



Afghanistan have branched out across generations, time periods, and the globe. He has played with style and structure so immensely in his novels that they can no longer become the tale of the characters but the story being the microcosm of the macrocosm (Afghanistan)" (547).



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