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NEGOTIATING THE SELF AND THE OTHER IN TIMES OF GLOBALIZATION: UNVEILING AFGHAN LIVES THROUGH SELECT NOVELS OF KHALED HOSSEINI

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Abstract:

Globalization has brought about an unprecedented interconnectedness between people, made possible a neoliberal economy, and has challenged the citizens of the world with a clash between multiple cultures across the continents. The ecumene of the planet is home to myriad peoples with maverick cultures, languages, etc., scattered throughout on its plane. Scientific or technological achievements have helped us as the citizens of this globalized world, to come closer physically but not without some *effet de bord*. Xenophobia, racial violence, the clash between different civilizations, etc., are the challenges that accompany globalization. The arguments here exude the colossal responsibility that lies presently on the shoulder of a writer to connect peoples internally or psychologically by exposing them to different cultures, peoples, etc., and facilitate a global negotiation between diverse people. In this time of globalization, we can't be truly globalized unless we lend our ears patiently to the writers across the globe. With such standpoints, the paper argues how Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan-American writer, has enlightened the global audience about Afghanistan through his novels. The paper examines two novels of Hosseini and tries to evaluate their contribution towards familiarizing the Afghan ways of life by suggesting Hosseini as a communication bridge between the people of Afghanistan and beyond.

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1.0 Introduction:

Fiction provides the means by which we can identify with those different to ourselves, appreciate shared aims and aspirations, and also acknowledge common problems which need to be faced and overcome, making narrative concerns universal.

- Kristian Shaw, *Cosmopolitanism in Twenty-First Century Fiction*

Globalization, which made its presence felt in the second half of the twentieth century, has brought about an unprecedented interconnectedness between people, made possible a neoliberal economy, and at the same time has challenged the citizens of the world with issues like xenophobia, racial violence, etc. It remains one of the most debated phenomena in academia with multiple dimensions to this discourse that has drawn universal attention concerning economy, politics and culture. This paper examines two novels, namely *The Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), of Khaled Hosseini, the Afghanistan-born American writer, and argues how these

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works contribute towards making a cosmopolitan human consciousness in present times of globalization. The study seeks to explore the cultural aspects of Afghanistan through the works of Khaled Hosseini to underscore the importance of reading authors beyond the national borders. This might facilitate it for the global audience to grasp and familiarize themselves with different cultures and peoples. The significance of studying what Goethe famously termed as *world literature* today is enormous in abating issues like xenophobia and in reconstructing a consciousness of a global culture and solidarity across faiths.

1.1 Globalization, Cosmopolitanism, and the Role of Literature:

The concept of Globalization, notes Fredric Jameson, presumes the sense of a colossal expansion of world communication systems, as well as of the horizon of a world market, both of which seem far more substantial and instantaneous than in the earlier stages of modernity (Jameson & Miyoshi, 1998, p.xi). The interconnectedness between people at present is marvellous considering the technological boom that has brought us all together under the same roof. There are other means of physical transportation of man or goods, and even capital, thanks to science and technology. No doubt such technical feats have brought us together on a physical level but the psychological connection between people across nations is unachievable without a substantial exchange of culture which is possible through studying literature or more specifically literature which portrays the cultures of the people who are different from us. The term Cosmopolitanism refers to an imagined or even utopic world city where its population is conceived as the citizens of the world, rather than incarcerating them within some national boundaries. The term is a combination of *cosmos* (world) and *polis* (city). In this time of human history, there is a dire need to build a cosmopolitan understanding between peoples. And cosmopolitanism, Pnina Werbner notes:

is about reaching out across cultural differences through dialogue, aesthetic enjoyment, and respect: of living together with differences. It is also about the cosmopolitan right to abode and hospitality in strange lands and, alongside that, the urgent need to devise ways of living together in peace in the international community. (Werbner, 2008, p.2)

But the emerging conflicts between different cultures are unmistakable now. Globalization has suddenly set the individuals conscious from a state of hibernation to encounter other beings who may hail from a different country or continent. And when these individuals encounter each other with all the *dissimilarities* between them, they naturally become dazed at the new cultures, people, and races that have been unknown to them heretofore. And this *fear of the stranger* is termed Xenophobia which, according to Michael Banton, "designates the way that others are kept at a distance because they are considered different" (Banton, 1996, p.8). Globalization places this challenge before us. This paper contends how transnational works of literature could help to connect with people who comprise the geographical *others* vis-à-vis the population of a given space, the *self*. Whilst reading the history or an ethnographic study of a different country could give us some factual information, studying the novels of a particular time-space could help us understand the psyche of the *other* people and their lived experience of a different time and place. E.M. Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) avers that the function of the novelist is "to reveal the hidden life at its source" (Forster, 1985, p.45). While suggesting the importance of teaching world literature today, James D. Reese raises some questions like "what can we do in our classrooms to foster openness to other cultures, religions, and ways of being?" And the answer to such queries can be garnered from the study of world literature which can 'launch' the people "on a voyage of discovery, exploring other ways of seeing and being as well" (Reese, 2002, p.63). And Hosseini can be perceived as one such writer to know the Afghan people whose cultural or religious identity at present has morphed them into a *majority* of the present-day *other*. And, as Forster noted about

novels, studying the Afghan people through Hosseini's novels can help us know them more intimately, which a newspaper article or a newsroom debate cannot proffer.

1.2 Globalization, Islamophobia, and Khaled Hosseini:

Manfred B. Steger in his *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction* (2003) propels his discussion by saying, "I understand that "globalization" is a contested concept that refers to sometimes contradictory social processes" (Steger, 2003, p.1). He refers to Osama Bin Laden and problematizes the latter's proclaimed resistance to modernity (a western thing?) as he utilized modern technology like the satellite broadcasting system (a global platform) to propound his conservative ideology. Steger deconstructs Laden's standpoint as a resistant to a modernist *weltanschauung*. The author's opening arguments in that book highlight the truism of the hegemonic superiority of the West vis-à-vis the East, the modern and the primitive. In this introductory book on Globalization, the author seems to highlight the *problematic presence* of the *Muslim other* in this technologically advanced and modern life. Laden had been one of the key figures behind the rise of the discourse of Islamophobia which is used as a hegemonic tool by the West to garner global sympathy and justify a total animosity towards a certain sect. A brief discussion about issues like Islamophobia is legitimately germane to the study of Hosseini whose works have vividly portrayed the havoc wrought by the religious fanaticism of some self-righteous people in Afghanistan. The travails of the Afghan people who are mostly Muslims at the hands of some self-righteous fanatics problematize the epistemic presence of Islamophobia as a discourse.

1.3 Local Afghan Narratives against the Grand Western Narratives:

In times of globalization, the phenomenal question of Islamophobia is more contested than ever. And the role played by the international media in bringing out this exaggeratedly distorted image of Muslims is problematic. In this context the subtitle of Edward Said's book *Covering Islam* (1981) can be referred which reads "How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World." The struggle to achieve superiority among various civilizations is manifest now. And this contest between variegated civilizations is not wholly grounded on political ideology or economic issues as such. While speculating over the future civilizational crises, Samuel P. Huntington famously mentioned:

That the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic...the dominating source of conflict will be cultural...the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. (Huntington, 1993, p.22)

This *clash of civilizations* is now apparent between the *modern* West and the *primitive* East. And it would not be wrong to say that the dominance of the western discourse stems partly from the lack of any proper representative from the East who could shoulder the enormous task of informing a global audience about their side of the *story* and counter the dominant discourse. The postcolonial critic Edward Said has dealt with these issues in his magisterial work *Orientalism* (1978) in a far extended manner. After the end of the Cold War, the West has found its acutely inimical rival in the Muslims. This rivalry became more blistering after the 9/11 attack happened, partly because of the widespread travel of the news through advanced and globalized media platforms. The West embarked on a global level War on Terror after this particular terrorist attack. Afghanistan has suffered much from these battles which are often fought on its soil. And borrowing Lyotard's idea of the *grand narrative* which is well discussed in his most famous work *The Post Modern Condition* (1979), it can be said that Hosseini's novels present the *small* and *local* narratives of the country

against the grand narratives of the West. This paper seeks to highlight the *small* narrative of the global *other* as a response to the western discourse that tends to demonize Muslims.

Khaled Hosseini has led the global audience to see, encounter, and understand the precarious nature of lives in a part of the globe which most people ignored before the horrific incident of 9/11. After the attack on the Twin Towers, the world, now interconnected, started talking about Afghanistan. It also became the prime target of the West which invaded Afghanistan to uproot the Taliban regime. This article proposes Hosseini as a writer whose writings can be used to establish global solidarity between communities of inter-faith in a globalized world where concepts like Islamophobia are increasingly referred to.

2.0 *The Kite Runner* as a Portrait of Afghanistan:

Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner* portrays Afghanistan mostly through the eyes of its men. Baba's house in Kabul seems to represent Afghanistan in a miniature form without its women. It houses the main characters in the novel viz., Baba, Amir, Ali, and Hassan. Other important characters are connected to this household if they do not belong to it directly. The author places these fictional characters amidst real historical times and suggests their worldview through the lived experience.

The story informs the readers in a picturesque manner about the country's past, basking in its former glory. Before all the mess created by the battles fought inside and out, the country was intent upon inculcating values and accepting a progressive attitude. As we go through the novel we learn about Amir's mother who used to be a university teacher vis-à-vis the deteriorated condition of Afghan women under the Taliban regime. This novel focuses on the crisis of the relationships between a few Afghan males who stand representative of the people of Afghanistan. The cultural patterns which are present in the novel can be looked into to suggest how the novel can be appreciated as a medium of bridging the cultural gaps between Afghanistan and beyond.

Hosseini's novel about Afghanistan, *The Kite Runner* not only presents the lives of people in Afghanistan before and during the invasive battles but also reflects on the socio-cultural aspects of the country. The onus on the writer to let the world know what has happened in Afghanistan is suggested when a minor character in the novel named Wahid asks Amir to write about Afghanistan and let the world know about its misery. This can be perceived through the ethnic tussles between groups, the behavioural patterns of people, and the norms of life of the Afghan people.

2.1 *Ethnicity, Race, and Power:*

Afghanistan is mainly home to various sects of people who uphold a firm Islamic faith. The Pashtun forms the majority of the total population while the Hazara, Tajik, Uzbek, Baloch, etc., comprise the other minorities. Hosseini's novel focuses mainly on the crisis between the Pashtun and the Hazara people. For a long time in Afghan history, the Hazara people have been regularly discriminated against and even persecuted by the majority/Pashtun people. The basic differences between these two peoples are based on their religious identities i.e., the Pashtun people are Sunni Muslims whereas the Hazara, who have mongoloid features, are mainly Shia Muslims. Bismillah Alizada in his Aljazeera article says that until the 1970s, "Afghan law barred the Hazaras from holding office, enrolling in a university, or holding any position of national authority." There are characters like Assef who consider the Hazara people as the ethnic other who only pollute their Afghan blood by impurity. The Hazara people are also thought of as the load-bearing donkey owners. They have been given the least access to education or any other privileges which the elite

majority class enjoys. Assef also scolds people like Amir and his father who dote on the Hazara people. From his revulsion towards this particular sect, the attitude of the Pashtun people is manifest. The novel presents before us a few Hazara people who play significant roles in the story. They are Ali, Hassan, Sohrab, Farzana and Sanaubar. From the outset, the underprivileged life of servitude that the Hazara people live is apparent. Amir and Hassan are almost of the same age but the former goes to school while the latter takes care of the household chores. The Hazaras only play the role of dutiful servants to their Pashtun masters.

As shown by Hosseini, these Hazara people are not only used but exploited at times. At the beginning of the novel, Hassan is raped by Assef. This sodomization of the Hazara boy symbolizes the Pashtun oppression on Hazara. Later in the story, Amir's father Baba also seduces Ali's Hazara wife and Hassan is but his son only. This seduction of the house servant's wife is something more than a master's intrusion into the servant's room, especially when the master-servant relationship is problematized by ethnic tensions. Baba also cannot acknowledge Hassan as his son because of the fear of losing his ancestral reputation. Amir also dominates Hassan by using him as a pawn and ultimately driving him out of the house to achieve his end.

Outside these household discriminations, the political existence of these Hazara people is quintessentially discussed by Hosseini. When the Taliban people occupy power the Hazara people become the worst sufferers. The Taliban men executed the Hazara people in mass numbers during the last year of their reign in Afghanistan. And this incident is referred to in the novel when Amir says, "I had read about the Hazara massacre in Mazar-i-Sharif in the papers" (Hosseini, 2005, p.277). Amir later learns how Hassan and his wife Farzana were butchered by the Taliban official as they stood up to protect Baba's house. Besides being the story of two friends, this novel portrays the ethnic crisis which is still a conundrum in Afghanistan.

2.2 Relationships, Food, and Language:

Hosseini's tale encapsulates various cultural and universal phenomena which help us connect with their culture more intimately. In one interview, the author says about the novel that "its themes of friendship, betrayal, guilt, redemption and uneasy love between fathers and sons are universal themes" (Guthmann). And these cultural habits provide the novel with a universal flavour. Furthermore, the novel toils to represent some phenomena which are exclusively Afghan like language use, food behaviour, a social institution like marriage, etc. The novel is written in English nonetheless there is a deliberate insertion of Afghan words which attributes an exotic charm to the book. A reader gets familiar with common Afghan words like *tashakor* (thank you), *agha* (an honorific title) or *khastegar* (a suitor), etc., as he reads the novel. It also informs the global readership about the food and drinks that Afghan people consume. *The Kite Runner* refers to certain foods like *lamb kabob*, *naan*, etc., time and again. While referring to the dish which Soraya prepares Amir says, "Soraya made *sabzi challow*— white rice with spinach and lamb" (Hosseini, 2005, p.173). The food habit of the people as represented in the novel lets us know them more intimately. Besides, the sense of hospitality shown by one minor character named Wahid to Amir is indeed an example of the way the Afghan people treat their guests. Wahid offers loaves of bread and vegetable *shorwa* to Amir who comes as a guest in his house. Later that night, Amir learns how his hosts and their children are passing the hungry night. And we find Wahid saying this: "We're hungry but we're not savages! He is a guest! What was I supposed to do?" (p.241)

Besides all this, there is another important aspect in this novel that only has enhanced its acceptability to the global audience by familiarizing them with an alien culture: the reference to popular culture. When we find Soraya reading Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) or the children marvelling at the popular Hollywood films and the heroes, we connect to them in a far stronger manner because they do exactly what we, the global audience often find ourselves doing. Amir and Hassan, watching the Western movies like *Rio Bravo* (1959), *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), or *The Good the Bad and the Ugly* (1966), makes them even more realistic characters before us, who seem to cross the line of fictionality. Furthermore, frequent references to Hindi songs from movies like *Pakeezah* (1972) inform us, specifically the Indian audience, of a shared enjoyment that connects us no matter how different we stand spatially or culturally.

Apart from all these issues of cross-cultural encounters, the novel allows the global audience an opportunity to re-live the Afghan experience of life both during and before the country was being devastated. The story tells the global audience that the people living beyond the borders are identical, of flesh and blood, with moments of sorrows and happiness, of failures and successes. *The Kite Runner* allows the global readers to attain some fresh perspectives on the recent history of Afghanistan. Like binoculars, Hosseini's novel lets the global readers see the far distant lands of Afghanistan without risking their lives by undergoing the predicament which Afghan people are subject to.

3.0 Afghanistan and its Reflection in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*:

Whereas Hosseini's first novel is a story of "fathers and sons", of the "friendships between men", the present novel centres particularly on the "mothers and daughters" and the "friendships between women" (Kakutani, 2007). In this novel, Hosseini presents the Afghan conflicts in a more vivid way. Paige Jurgensen notes that "the wars and political turmoil in Afghanistan are chronicled with more detail than in *The Kite Runner*" (Jurgensen, 2013). In *The Kite Runner*, the protagonist Amir flees the country with his father as soon as the Soviets break into Afghanistan and only returns to have a marginal experience of what has happened to his country. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* on the other hand puts its characters amidst war, lets them confront the conflicts firsthand, and undergo the sufferings. Unlike Amir and Baba, here in the present novel, the characters have no escape to some safe haven. The novel is also a powerful story of two girls' growing up and their confrontation with a harsh life. The novel not only presents the incorrigible religious fundamentalists, but also the immalleable zeal of the characters who suffer and survive. In this novel, Hosseini covers at least four decades of Afghan history encapsulating its past when the wars were yet to begin, to the US invasion of Afghanistan at the beginning of the new millennium. He further expressed his hope that the book might offer "emotional subtext to the image of the burqa-clad woman walking down a dusty street in Kabul" (Memmott, 2007).

3.1 War and Female Perspectives:

The story portrays a patriarchal society. From the very beginning of the novel, we see that women are pitted against the harsh conditions of a parochial society. Mariam's mother Nana is disowned by her master Jalil when she conceives an illegitimate child. She had to suffer when Jalil holds her accountable for the *act* and accuses that she forced herself on Jalil. It is at such moments that we come across perhaps the finest expression underlying women's condition in a male-dominated society when Nana says, "Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman" (Hosseini, 2007, p.16).

After Nana's suicide, Mariam is the next victim of a male-oriented society. First, her father forces his decision on her to marry a person much older than her. Mariam helplessly denies and says, "I don't want this. Don't make me" (p.46). But her decision, her desires do not matter for them. And one of Jalil's wives says that "your father has already given Rasheed his answer" (p.48). She is handed over to another patriarch Rasheed, who imposes other rules of the male-dominated society like dress code etc., on Mariam as he takes her to Kabul much before the Taliban came to rule. The patriarch in Rasheed declares that "It embarrasses me, frankly, to see a man who's lost control of his wife" (p.63).

The conditions of the females were exacerbated when the Taliban took over the country. Their harsh promulgation of *shariah* laws banned women outside the house without some male guardian and curbed almost all human rights. Besides, the women not only suffered through the shelling and bombing like everyone else, but they were also "abducted and sold as slaves, forced into marriage to militia commanders, forced into prostitution, and raped" by the Taliban (p.331). Hosseini presents the struggles of these women here is much informative in the sense that they let the global audience decipher beyond the ways international media has represented them. The novel has tried to show how religious fanaticism coupled with official power to govern can prove fatal, a lesson to be learnt by the rest of the world.

In such a hopelessly darkened society, men like Hakim only show the source of light who can be conceived as a contrast to the character of Rasheed. Like the character of Baba in *The Kite Runner*, Hakim champions a liberal mindset where men and women are held in equal worth. His appreciation of liberal leadership points to the fact that not everyone in the country is a religious fanatic. Laila's character also serves the global audience as a representative of the women of Afghanistan who despite all hurdles crave knowledge and dream for something good.

Through this novel, Hosseini has tried to project the precarious lives of Afghan women to the global readers and underscore the political conditions which put the women of the country in an utter void of insecurity. Natasha Walter notes:

Hosseini is almost too careful to describe for ignorant westerners the political background to these women's lives, from the Soviet occupation that ruled Laila's childhood to the growing strength of the Mujahideen that her brothers join, amid "rising rumours that, after eight years of fighting, the Soviets were losing this war". Once the Soviets are ousted, he takes an even more didactic turn, spelling out how the Mujahideen turned from idealised freedom fighters to oppressors. (Walter, 2007)

Hosseini's novel provides the global audience with an opportunity to know these burqa-clad Afghan women beneath the skin.

Hosseini's story of Afghanistan not only burdens itself with the herculean task of telling their side of the story rather it gives precautions to the global audience about the evil things that might occur if the governance of a country rests on the fundamentalist people like the Taliban. Living on this earth is impossible if perfect harmony does not reign between people across nations, faiths, or identities.

During a talk at Book Expo America on 2nd June 2007, which is available in the book *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as a postscript, Hosseini notes how his first novel has succeeded in *moving* a global readership. He says:

I received letters from India, London, Sydney, Paris, Arkansas, all over the world from readers who expressed a passion to me. Many of them wanted to know how to send money to Afghanistan. Some told me they wanted to adopt an Afghan orphan. In those letters, I saw the unique ability

that fiction has to connect people who dress differently or practice different religions, and I saw how universal some human experiences are, like friendship, guilt, forgiveness, loss, and atonement. (Hosseini, 2007, p.329)

Thus Hosseini himself admits the role of fiction to connect people with different cultures or faith. The struggles that characters like Mariam or Laila have been through stand testimony to the real fights of the real Afghan women. Maybe many of them do not make it to their survival against all odds e.g., Mariam. But some Laila makes it to a better and hopeful future. And people like her indeed testify to the resilient attitude of the people like Mariam.

4.0 Conclusion:

The study has endeavoured to unveil and understand Afghanistan and its people through selected texts of Hosseini in the context of today's globalized society. Globalization has worked miracles for some people, for others living in poverty, it has proved only challenging. Through the first novel, the article has tried to showcase the various aspects of Afghan life e.g., people, culture, language food, etc. The study also underlined that the human relationship which develops between various characters in the novel bears some universal traits. It deals with friendship, betrayal, sin, atonement, etc., which are basic humane things all across the globe. Knowing a country through its people and culture as represented in literature is an aesthetic way of global negotiation between the self and the other. The second novel is discussed focusing mainly on its presentation of women and war. The story of women's survival is preferred over the discussion of Afghan language, food, culture, etc., which are discussed in the context of *The Kite Runner*. Whilst the so-called developed countries have raised slogans of feminism, the desolate struggle of Afghan women seems much dim and unattended. In a country like Afghanistan, which is overlooked by most as anti-modern, the whims and aspirations of its women are unheard of. Could we know about characters like Mariam or Laila, their moments of joys and sorrows, through newspaper headlines or newsroom shows any better than we can know them through Hosseini's narrative? The study has sought to contextualize Hosseini in times of globalization further aiming to encourage the method of knowing and negotiating with the *other* through literary engagements. An exchange in culture might lead us to a better cosmopolitan future where challenges like xenophobia would disappear. While the western discourse of Islamophobia dominates the global consciousness, some Muslim writers like Hosseini are trying to tell the other small narratives. These small narratives might help the audience to shake off the western agenda of demonizing the other to win in the civilizational race. Reading stories of the lives of *others* can help us create a cosmopolitan attitude and overcome some challenges like xenophobia. And the article can be concluded with the hope that the more people read world literature, the more they will be able to embrace the *other* with all its external differences and internal similarities.

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