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Representation of Afghan History and Conflict in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

Abstract: Literature has become a tool for representing history and contributes to the formation of historical moments. It reveals the processes and tensions by which historical changes come about. Afghanistan as a nation in South Asia has gone through with several wars, invasions, and has suffered continuous and brutal civil war since the late 1970's. The most disastrous period in the history of Afghanistan was Russian and American Invasion which was also allied by the civil wars and the rise of Taliban to power. Afghanistan consists of many ethnic groups but Pashtuns and Tajiks are in majority. Because of the diverse ethnic population, there have been many conflicts, disorders, and clashes between various groups on several occasions. The country has witnessed some bloody encounters between Pashtuns and Hazaras. The paper is an attempt to trace the history of conflict in Afghanistan by revisiting major events that have happened in the history of Afghanistan but it will also deal with conflict that has ravaged a country like Afghanistan with reference to Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*.

Key Words: Afghanistan, America, Conflict, Invasion, Russia, Taliban

Introduction

Khaled Hosseini was born in 1965 at Kabul, Afghanistan. His father, a diplomat in the Afghan Foreign Ministry, moved to Paris in 1976. Notwithstanding his eagerness to return to Kabul in 1980, he had to drop the idea owing to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Subsequently the family sought political asylum in the United States which was granted forthwith. Hosseini's first novel *The Kite Runner* was published in 2003 while the second novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* appeared in 2007. His third novel *And the Mountains Echoed* was published 2013. All three novels received widespread critical acclaim and went on to become international bestsellers.

In all his novels Hosseini, masterfully depicts the prevalent socio-political condition of Afghanistan. Among other things the focus of attention in his novels is the impact that human relationships have on a society which has to invariably undergo undesirable as well as uncontrollable changes owing to conflict. Hosseini expresses his concern about the wretched condition of the Afghan people and in particular about the plight of Afghan women. There are many conflict zones in the contemporary world where people encounter various problems, face many hardships and gain harsh experiences. Afghanistan is one of the worst hit conflict zones in the world. It is a war-torn, ravaged, and deeply troubled nation.

Afghanistan as a nation has gone through with several wars, invasions, and has suffered continuous and brutal civil war since the late 1970's. The most disastrous period in the history of Afghanistan was Russian and American Invasion which was also allied by the civil wars and the rise of Taliban to power. Afghanistan consists of many ethnic groups but Pashtuns and Tajiks are in majority. Because of the diverse ethnic population, there have been many conflicts, disorders, and clashes between various groups on several occasions. The country has witnessed some bloody encounters between Pashtuns and Hazaras. Due to these ethnic differences and the involvement of other nations directly or indirectly, the civil war in

Afghanistan has deteriorated the situation to such an extent that people are dying every day because of poverty. The existence of people in the country has become impossible due to the long stretched war and the war on terrorism. Amin Saikal (2004) in his "Introduction" to Modern Afghanistan remarks:

Rare is the country that has sustained as many blows, and such hard blows, as has Afghanistan since its foundation as a distinct political unit in 1747. Yet the country has managed to survive and to retain some form of sovereignty and territorial integrity, despite numerous wars and invasions and swings between extremist ideological dispositions, ranging from tribalist value-systems to Marxism-Leninism and Islamic medievalism. It is the country in the world that has experienced military occupation or intervention by Great Britain (twice in the nineteenth century), the Soviet Union (in the 1980's) and the United States of America (since late 2001). (1)

The nation had to contend with Russian and American invasions together with the problems of civil war and the rise of Taliban to power. The situation was worsened when King Zahir Shah was overthrown in 1973 and a republic was declared. The king was overthrown by a member of his own family, Daoud Khan who declared himself as the new ruler of the Republic of Afghanistan. But within the span of two years, Daoud Khan too was overthrown and killed by a communist coup in 1975. During this period there were many tribal factions that were fighting with each other to seize power. In 1979, Soviet Army invaded Afghanistan, and there started a civil war which lasted for ten years until their expulsion from the country in 1989. The result of this Soviet Invasion was that five million Afghans had to flee from their own country.

After the departure of Soviets from Afghanistan in 1989, they backed Mohammad Najibullah to lead the Communist power in Afghanistan but he too did not survive for long. It was in 1992 when the Najibullah-led government collapsed and the Mujahideen leader Ahmad

Shah-Massoud became the defense minister under the government of Burhanuddin, the former Afghan president. In 1996 Taliban grabbed power, overthrew the Mujahideen-led government and ruled the country till 2001. In an interview with Riverhead Books, Hosseini describes:

I want them to see that the Afghan people existed before there was a war with the Soviets and before there was a Taliban. I want them to understand that the things we are seeing now in Afghanistan—the tribal chiefs vying for their own interests and the various ethnicities colliding with each other—have roots that go back several centuries . . . I want readers to have a really good time reading this story. I want them to be touched by it because to me novel writing, first and foremost is storytelling . . . And I want people to simply remember Afghanistan. (Bloom 12)

Although Hosseini's novels are set in Afghanistan readers can relate the events and experiences to the contemporary world. He has widely discussed in his novels the conflict in Afghanistan and its impact on Afghan people and society. With regard to his two novels, *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Rebeca Stuhr (2009) remarks:

Hosseini tucks within the plots and narratives of his two novels events and details that address the state of civil strife and international hegemony in Afghanistan, including the U.S. involvement there beginning in 2001. Though the details of his plots and interaction of his characters, Hosseini presents problems of racism and ethnocentrism, as well as exile and immigration. (65)

The Kite Runner is the story of two Afghan boys Amir, the son of wealthy man in Kabul and his friend Hasan. The novel is a kind of bildungsroman which traces the development of Amir and his relationship with his country. It also depicts the socio-political set up of Afghanistan from late 1970's to the fundamentalist Taliban government of the 1990's until its fall in 2001. Hosseini has dealt with serious issues like political, social, and economic change in contemporary Afghanistan. As Rebeca Stuhr (2009) puts it:

Hosseini writes compelling stories through which he questions assumptions and breaks apart stereotypes through the strengths and weaknesses of his characters. He interweaves into the action of his stories the details of history, culture, and daily life in Afghanistan. He challenges his readers to reflect on discrimination and political abuse within their own experience in light of instances of such abuses in a different and unfamiliar country. (77-78)

The Kite Runner is divided into three sections and the first section is set in Kabul. In this part, the childhood of Amir, the protagonist of the novel is described during the early 1970's to mid-1970's. The relationship between Amir and Hassan also develops in this section. The second part begins in 1981 when Soviets invaded Afghanistan and because of this invasion, Amir and his father have to leave Afghanistan for California where they live as members of the immigrant Afghan community. This part concludes with the marriage of Amir and Soraya and the death of Amir's father in 1989. The final part of the story begins in 2001 when Amir returns to Afghanistan through Pakistan. It is Rahim Khan, Amir's mentor and his father's best friend, who calls Amir and invites him to return Afghanistan.

The Kite Runner covers the period from the 1979 Soviet Invasion until the reconstruction and rebuilding of Afghanistan and following the fall of Taliban. Hosseini in the novel has portrayed Afghans as an independent and brave people who have defended the country from several invasions over the past few decades. The story of the novel turns gloom when Amir, the protagonist of the novel returns home and encounters Taliban in order to help Hassan and his family. Hosseini describes the suffering of his people that they have to undergo during the Taliban regime. The novel is full of haunting images which totally disturb the mind of the readers. Taliban, while punishing the two adulterers "a blindfolded man" and "woman dressed in a green burqa" to which Amir himself was an eyewitness (247). The sight of the punishment is very touchy and catches the attention of the readers:

Two Talibs with Kalashnikovs slung across their shoulders helped the blindfolded man from the first truck and two others helped the burqa-clad woman. The woman's knees buckled under her and she slumped to the ground. The soldiers pulled her up and slumped again. When they tried to lift her again, she screamed and kicked... It was the cry of a wild animal trying to pry its mangled leg free from the bear trap. Two more Talibs joined in and helped force her into the one of the chest-deep holes. The blindfolded man, on the other hand, quietly allowed them to lower him into the hole dug for him . . . (Hosseini 247-248)

The scene of throwing stones at the adulterers by the crowd till the death of the victims is quite heart rendering and notable in this regard. The scene not only shows the dictatorship of the Taliban but also shows the horrible condition of women in Afghanistan.

The readers get a clear picture of the kind of brutal repression that people suffered during the tenure of Taliban regime through Amir's conversation with different people particularly with Rahim Khan. During Amir's visit to Peshawar Pakistan in order to meet Rahim Khan, he came to know the every detail of his country. While condemning the Taliban, Rahim Khan calls them despots and he believes that Taliban are not really bad, but more than that: "Nay, its worse. Much worse . . . They don't let you be human." (Hosseini 183)

The readers can easily get an authentic insight into the despotic nature of Taliban and Afghanistan's past history from the revelations made by Farid, a taxi/truck driver. Amir, while travelling from Peshawar to Jalalabad with Farid came to know everything in about the wretched condition of Afghanistan. Farid makes Amir somewhat cautious by saying that "Kabul is not the way you remember it" (Hosseini 225). To Amir's surprise he can now see the most devastating image of Afghanistan. Amir, earlier in his childhood when he used to roam with Baba he had seen the beggars roaming around the streets as their number was less. But,

Now, they though squatted at every street corner, dressed in shredded burlap rags, mud caked hands held out for a coin. And the beggars were mostly children now, thin and grim faced, some no older than five or six. They sat in the laps of their burqa-clad mothers alongside gutters at busy street corners and chanted “Bakahesh, baksheesh!” And something else, something I hadn’t noticed right away: Hardly any of them sat with an adult male—the wars had made fathers a rare commodity in Afghanistan. (Hosseini 226)

Amir while reading Hassan’s letter gets the horrible condition of people of Afghanistan under the rule of Taliban:

Amir agha...Alas the Afghanistan of our youth is long dead. Kindness is gone from the land and you cannot escape the killings. Always the killings. In Kabul, fear is everywhere, in the streets, in the stadium, in the markets, it is a part of our lives here, Amir Agha. The savages who rule our watan don’t care about human decency. (Hosseini 200)

During the Afghanistan’s many years of war and internal strife children were mostly victimized. When Amir visits the orphanage in search of Sohrab, Zaman the director of the orphanage says: “There is very little shelter here, almost no food, no clothes, no clean water. What I have in ample supply here is children who have lost their childhood” (Hosseini 234). A somewhat similar sentiment is expressed by Sohrab when he says: “There are a lot of children in Afghanistan, but little childhood.” (Hosseini 291)

Conclusion

A study of *The Kite Runner* clearly shows out that war which lasted for decades affects a nation very deeply and leaves unforgettable scars on the psyche of common people. The novel brings an idea before readers that a conflict can devastate and destroy peace and harmony of any nation. Hosseini’s novels particularly *The Kite Runner* shows the trauma that innocent Afghan people have been subjected to from the past few decades.

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