

A Study of A Changing Country As Depicted in Khaled Hosseini's Novel 'The Kite Runner'

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ABSTRACT

The rise and fall of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan has been a very popular theme in fiction in the wake of the 9/11. Khaled Hosseini dealt with the same theme in his first novel 'The Kite Runner' (2003). In fact, it is also the first novel written in English by an Afghan author. Through this novel, the writer has given an authentic insight to the people around the world about the Taliban in particular and the customs and traditions of the people of Afghanistan in general. It is Hosseini's close observations and great story telling skills that enable him to depict such complexities of life in Afghanistan during the regime of the Taliban. Moreover, the distance of time helps him to take a separate and objective view of the events depicted in the novel

It is an attempt to look at the role played by the Taliban government in Afghanistan during its reign as depicted in Hosseini's 'The Kite Runner'. The novel illustrates to some extent the excesses and abuses of the government, and the novel includes references to capital punishment, political and economic injustice, religious freedom, linguistic diversity, literacy and enfranchisement, and relationships between friends, father and son.

'Hosseini's 'The Kite Runner' depicts the socio- political set up of Afghanistan during the years from the late 1970s to the fundamentalist Taliban government of the 1990s until its fall. It had brought a radical change in the destiny of the country. It reveals the endeavour of the Northern Alliance and sacrifice, individual and collective, in the country's struggle for freedom from the Taliban. The awful condition of the people as depicted in 'The Kite Runner' was, in fact, the stark reality in Afghanistan during the reign of the Taliban government. The author shares the serious issues like the political, social and economic changes of contemporary Afghanistan with the readers and 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 the discrimination and political abuse within their own experience in the light of instances of such abuses in a different and unfamiliar country.

The detailed description of Hasan's letter to Amir reveals the pathetic condition of the people of Afghanistan in general under the rule of the 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."

(The Kite Runner. Print. Pages 189-90.)

Hassan shares the most terrible and bitter experience of his life in the conclusion of the same letter which is the common lot of all the citizens of Afghanistan. They have become the subject of exploitation as it was the order of the day and so they have forgotten to dream because there was no opportunity for them to give a proper shape to their dreams. Hassan concludes the letter, reflecting his mood and ambitions being shattered and thus, anxiously waiting for the fall of the Taliban government to be replaced by some other lenient government:

"I have been dreaming a lot lately, Amir Agha. Some of them are nightmares, like hanged corpses rotting in soccer fields with blood- red grass. I wake up from those short of breath and sweaty. Mostly, though, I dream of good things, and praise Allah for that...I dream

that lawla flowers will bloom in the streets of Kabul again and rubab music will play in the samovar houses and kites will fly in the skies.”

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We also hope and pray that one day like a phoenix, Afghanistan will rise from the ashes and become a pioneer of peace and prosperity for the whole region like the good old days.

The rise and fall of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan has been a very popular theme in fiction in the wake of the 9/11. Khaled Hosseini dealt with the same theme in his first novel ‘The Kite Runner’ (2003). In fact, it is also the first novel written in English by an Afghan author. Through this novel, the writer has given an authentic insight to the people around the world about the Taliban in particular and the customs and traditions of the people of Afghanistan in general. It is Hosseini’s close observations and great story telling skills that enable him to depict such complexities of life in Afghanistan during the regime of the Taliban. Moreover, the distance of time helps him to take a separate and objective view of the events depicted in the novel. In an interview, Hosseini says:

“And I happened to write a short story called ‘The Kite Runner’ back in the spring of 1999. I had seen a story about the Taliban banning kite flying in Kabul, and since I grew up in Kabul flying kites with my brother and my cousins, my friends, it struck a personal chord, I wrote a short story, which I thought was going to be about kite flying, and it ended up being about something altogether different. And that short story sat around for two years until March of 01 when I picked it up, and my wife found it and read it and she loved it. I went back to it, and I realized, “Wow! I think there is a novel in this thing.” And I had been thinking about writing my first novel for years and never had the courage to, never had the right material. I said to myself, “I think this short story is very flawed as a short story, but it could make maybe a good novel.” And it kind of was a personal challenge to finally write that first novel, and I began writing it.”

(www. Achievement.org.Web.Page2)

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punishment, political and economic injustice, religious freedom, linguistic diversity, literacy and enfranchisement, and relationships between friends, father and son.

The knowledge of Islamic fundamentalism as a possible way of life in the form of Taliban lies in the history of Afghanistan. The author who is a witness to the defeat of the two hundred years old Afghan monarchy that ended with King Zahir Shah being overthrown in 1973, had to move to Paris in France along with his parents in 1976 where his father held a diplomatic post. It happened that, after about two years of their arrival in Paris, Daoud Khan, who was the President of the new republic, was killed by a communist group, which became a hindrance on their way back to Afghanistan. In addition to the communist coup and the Soviet invasion of December 1979 complicated the problem manifold. As a result, the family could not muster the required courage to return to its native land. Instead, the family took political asylum in the United States in 1980 and settled as refugees in San Jose, California.

After the exit of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1989, the Soviet backed Mohammed Najibullah to lead the communist power in Afghanistan in their absence but his rule did not survive for a long period. After the collapse of the Najibullah- led government in 1992, the Mujahideen leader Ahmad Shah Massoud became the defence minister under the government of Burhanuddin, the former Afghan President. The Mujahideen- led government too was overthrown and surrendered in front of the radical Taliban group in 1996, which had grabbed power in Afghanistan and would rule the country till 2001.

Based on the above facts, Hosseini's 'The Kite Runner' depicts the socio- political set up of Afghanistan during the years from the late 1970s to the fundamentalist Taliban government of the 1990s until its fall. It had brought a radical change in the destiny of the country. It reveals the endeavour of the Northern Alliance and sacrifice, individual and collective, in the country's struggle for freedom from the Taliban. The awful condition of the people as depicted in 'The Kite Runner' was, in fact, the stark reality in Afghanistan during the reign of the Taliban government. The author shares the serious issues like the political, social and economic changes of contemporary Afghanistan with the readers and 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 the discrimination and political abuse within their own experience in the light of instances of such abuses in a different and unfamiliar country.

'The Kite Runner' is written in the first person from the protagonist's point of view with Amir as narrator. Amir is the only child of a wealthy merchant in Kabul. His mother passed away immediately after his birth. He recounts the long exciting journey of his life from Kabul to Peshawar in Pakistan and finally from there to San Francisco in America. There he meets Soraya, the daughter of a former general of Afghanistan and gets married to her. During the short span of time that he spent in Kabul, Amir used to waste away his hours with illiterate but sincere friend Hassan, the son of their servant Ali belonging to the Hazara ethnic minority. His happy life in Kabul came to an end with the arrival of the Soviet tanks in Afghanistan. He and his family had to escape to Pakistan and at last settled down in America.

Khaled Hosseini has used the flashback technique in 'The Kite Runner'. The novel opens in 2001. Amir, the grown-up narrator lives in San Francisco and is pondering over his past, recalling how he had deceived his childhood friend, Hassan. The action of the narrative then continues with a flashback to the protagonist-cum-narrator's experiences during his boyhood in Kabul, Afghanistan. Amir's latent childhood memories resurfaced as soon as he receives a call from Rahim Khan, his father's 'old business partner' and his 'first grown-up' friend during his early days presently living in Peshawar in Pakistan. Amir, who is now thirty-eight years old, remembers the sweet and bitter experiences of his life in the company of his boyhood friend and servant, Hassan that took place twenty-six years ago.

With the ascent of the Taliban in power, there came a radical change in the law and order in Afghanistan as depicted in 'The Kite Runner'. Islamic Shari'ah law replaced the secular law of Afghanistan. The government did so purposefully to maintain Islamic environment as well as to stop the access of the popular culture in Afghan society. In other words, the Taliban's effort was to keep the people of the country far from Enlightenment, the West claims to stand for. However, the modern history of Afghanistan clearly exhibited the failure of the extremist government. The Taliban's acts of cultural vandalism- the most infamous being the destruction of the giant Bamiyan Buddhas- had a devastating effect on Afghan culture and the artistic scene. The Taliban burnt countless films, VCRs, music tapes, books and paintings. They jailed filmmakers, musicians, painters and sculptors. These restrictions forced some artists to abandon their craft, and many continued their practices in hiding. Some built cellars where they painted or played musical instruments. Others gathered in the guise of a sewing circle to write fiction. And still others found unique ways to trick the Taliban- one famous example being a painter who at the order of the Taliban, painted over the human faces on his oil paintings, except he did it with watercolour, which he washed off after

the Taliban were ousted. These were among the desperate ways in which the artists tried to escape the Taliban's firm grip on virtually every form of artistic expressions

In Taliban's view perhaps the most important item required is

“an artificial beard, black and chest length, Shari'a[h]- friendly in order to maintain at least the Taliban version of Shari'a [h]” (The Kite Runner. Print. Page 202.)

However, the citizens of Afghanistan failed to keep pace with the strict Shari'ah based laws and were desperately looking for external help during the regime of the Taliban. It seems to them that the other parts of the world .were not well informed about their despicable condition in Afghanistan. They believed if the other countries of the world came to know about the repressive rule of the Taliban, those nations might come forward to their rescue. With this hope, Farid's elder brother insisted Amir to write a book about the miserable lot of the people of Afghanistan:

“ May be you should write about Afghanistan ...Tell the rest of the world what the Taliban are doing to our country.”

(The Kite Runner. Print. Page206.)

It is also due to the firm Shari'ah law that the Taliban had punished two adulterers-

‘a blind folded man’ and ‘a woman dressed in a green burqa’ to which Amir himself was an eye-witness. The site of the punishment given to these adulterers in the soccer field shortly after the half time is very touching. They put them in two holes behind the goal posts already dug, intended for the said purpose. Next, the scene that took place immediately after the completion of the unloading of the three trucks too draws the attention of the readers:

“Two Talibs with Kalashnikovs slung across their shoulders helped the blind folded 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 she 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 one of the chest- deep holes. The blind folded man, on the other hand, quietly allowed them to lower him into the hole dug for him. Now only the accused pair's torsos protruded from the ground... A chubby, white- bearded cleric dressed in grey garments

stood near the goal posts and cleared his throat into a hand held microphone... He recited a lengthy prayer from the Koran...”

(The Kite Runner. Print. Page235.)

Yet again, the readers find rigidity in the tone of the cleric who had addressed the public at the stadium saying, “brothers and sisters” after the completion of his prayer and continued:

“We are here today to carry out Shari’a[h]. We are here to carry out justice. We are here today because the will of Allah and the word of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him... God says that every sinner must be punished in a manner befitting his sin... And what manner of punishment, brothers and sisters, befits the adulterer? How shall we punish those who dishonour the sanctity of marriage? How shall we deal with those who spit in the face of God? How shall we answer those who throw stones at the windows of God’s house? WE SHALL THROW THE STONES BACK!”

(The Kite Runner. Print. Pages 235-36.)

The scene of hurling stones at the adulterers by the crowd till the death of the victims is notable in this regard. It not only reveals the dictatorship of the Taliban and the blatant use of religion but also shows the wretched conditions of women in Afghanistan.

Under the rule of Taliban, women suffered the most. They were treated as playthings by the Taliban who felt that since they are lords of the country, women are slaves and they are to be treated as slaves. Hassan’s letter is one glaring example. He writes:

“The other day, I accompanied Farzanajan to the bazaar to buy some potatoes and naan. She asked the vendor how much the potatoes cost, but he did not hear her; I think he had a deaf ear. So she asked louder and suddenly a young Talib ran over and hit her on the thighs with his wooden stick. He struck her so hard she fell down. He was screaming at her and cursing and saying the Ministry of Vice and Virtue does not allow women to speak loudly. She had a large purple bruise on her leg for days but what could I do except stand and watch my wife get beaten? If I fought, that dog would have surely put a bullet in me, and gladly! Then what would happen to my Sohrab?”

(The Kite Runner. Print. Page 190.)

The ethnic disparity in the society of Afghanistan during the reign of the Taliban is one of the most striking features apparent in Hosseini's 'The Kite Runner'. It draws the attention of the readers greatly. As a result of the racial clash, Afghanistan has lost the harmony between its different groups. The author has described such racial discrimination skilfully and vividly in the novel. While the domination of one power or state within a league or confederation is apparent through the Russian invasion and America's war against Afghanistan, the predominant influence of one social class over others is clearly reflected through the Pashtun- cum- Taliban government's suppression over the Hazaras in the country. The Pashtuns [belonging to the Sunni school of Afghanistan] comprised the bulk of the population of the country. Being Pashtun and majority in number, the Taliban targeted the other ethnic minority communities of Afghanistan. Through such dominance of one superior 'social class' over the weaker, Hosseini has also hinted at the Taliban government's rejection of the Western imperialism. The government did so by banning the Western culture popular in Afghanistan.

In 'The Kite Runner', the racial discrimination is effectively shown through the dominance of the Pashtuns [Sunni] under the leadership of Assef over the Hazaras and the other minority communities of Afghanistan. For example, Assef claims that the Taliban had massacred the Hazaras in Mazar-i- Sharif in 1998, and explains the incident with great pride:

"Door to door we went, calling for the men and the boys. We'd shoot them right there in front of their families. Let them see. Let them remember who they were, where they belonged... Sometimes, we broke down their doors and went inside their homes. And... I'd... I'd sweep the barrel of my machine gun around the room and fire and fire until the smoke blinded me... You don't know the meaning of the word 'liberating' until you've done that, stood in a roomful of targets, let the bullets fly, free of guilt and remorse, knowing you are virtuous, good, and decent. Knowing you're doing God's work. It's breathtaking."

(The Kite Runner. Print. Page 242.)

The readers get a vivid picture of the kind of repression the people of Afghanistan suffered during the regime of Taliban government through Amir's conversations with Rahim Khan, Farid and Zaman separately. Getting the news of the ailment of Rahim Khan, his old friend, Amir visits Peshawar in Pakistan in order to attend him. There, he comes to know from Rahim Khan, the details about his native country Afghanistan and the pros and cons of

the rule of the Taliban there. Rahim Khan condemns the Taliban as despots. According to him, the scenario of Afghanistan was different before the reign of the Taliban:

“The way Baba had seen it those days, Afghanistan’s troubles were only a temporary interruption of our way of life- The days of parties at the Wazir Akbar Khan house and picnic in Pagman would surely return.”

(The Kite Runner. Print. Pages 173- 74.)

In order to show the drastic change in the Taliban and their greater degree of inhumanity, Rahim Khan mentions the inhuman treatment of the Northern Alliance towards its citizens during 1992 to 1996 and compares with the former. The Northern Alliance captured various parts of Kabul and ruled despotically. Rahim Khan tells Amir:

“If you went from the Sher-e- Nau section to Kerteh- Parwan to buy a carpet, you risked getting shot by a sniper or getting blown up by a rocket- if you got past all the check points, that was. You particularly needed a visa to go from one neighbourhood to the other. So people just stayed put, prayed the next rocket wouldn’t hit their home.”

(The Kite Runner. Print. Page 174.)

Rahim Khan’s description about the inhumanity of the Northern Alliance is insignificant in comparison to the Taliban’s cruelty. His hopes and above all, the hopes of the whole nation proved futile. Rahim Khan’s disappointment is reflected through his words when he says to Amir with a sigh:

“Yes, hope is a strange thing. Peace at last. But at what price?”

(The Kite Runner. Print. Page 175.)

It is true that the people of Afghanistan celebrated in 1996 when the Taliban came and put an end to the fighting which was happening on a daily basis. It was beyond the expectation of the people of Afghanistan that the Taliban would exceed the Northern Alliance in terms of their oppression. The Taliban even imposed ban on kite flying.

The revelations of Farid, a taxi driver by profession about Afghanistan’s past history, too, give an authentic insight into the despotic or cruel nature of Taliban. While travelling on the way from Peshawar to Jalalabad, Farid told Amir that the condition of Afghanistan was miserable and everywhere there was poverty. Then –

“he pointed to an old man dressed in ragged clothes trudging down a dirt path, a large burlap pack filled with stubbed grass tied to his back. That’s the real Afghanistan, Agha Sahib. That’s the Afghanistan I know. You?”

(The Kite Runner. Print. Page 204.)

Farid tries to create a clear image of the deeds of the Taliban in front of Amir. While driving his car, Farid tries to explain the whole thing in brief:

‘He pointed to the crumbled, charred remains of a tiny village. It was just a tuft of blackened, roofless walls now...’ “I had a friend there once... He was a very good bicycle repairman. He played the tabla well too. The Taliban killed him and his family and burned the village.”

(The Kite Runner. Print. Page 214.)

Farid makes Amir rather cautious by telling him that Kabul does not exist the way he remembers it. To his surprise, Amir sees the most deplorable condition of the people of Afghanistan. When Amir was a child, he saw the beggars roaming around the streets when they were less in numbers and:

“Now, though, they spotted 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 “Bakhshesh, bakhshesh!” And something else, something I hadn’t notice right away: Hardly any of them sat with an adult male- the wars had made father a rare commodity in Afghanistan.”

(The Kite Runner. Print. Pages 214-15.)

To his surprise, Amir comes to know from Zaman, the director of the orphanage situated in the northern part of Karteh- Seh in Afghanistan, that though there are many children in the orphanage but all of them are not orphans:

“Many of them have lost their fathers in the war, and their mothers can’t feed them because the Taliban don’t allow them to work. So they bring their children here... This place is better than the street, but not that much better... There is very little shelter here, almost no food, no clothes, no clean water. What I have in ample supply here is children who’ve lost their childhood.”

(The Kite Runner. Print. Page 222.)

The worst thing that took place during the Taliban era was child trafficking. Zaman is the eye-witness of such a deed. His revelation in front of Amir opens the eye of the readers and generates enormous pain. Under bound circumstances, he encouraged it and with much anger, guilt and dejection he says:

“There is a Talib official... He visits once every month or two. He brings cash with him, not a lot, but better than nothing at all... Usually, he’ll take a girl. But not always.”

(The Kite Runner. Print. Page 224.)

Zaman’s effort to resist the trafficking at the cost of money went in vain. He says that :

“If I deny him one child, he takes ten. So, I let him take one and leave the judging to Allah.”

(The Kite Runner. Print. Page 225.)

Zaman, who spent his entire life’s savings on the orphanage is forced into such situation. His helplessness is shown by his speech when he says to Amir that:

“I swallow my pride and take his goddamn filthy... dirty money. Then I go to the bazaar and buy food for the children.”

(The Kite Runner. Print. Page 225.)

The detailed description of Hasan’s letter to Amir reveals the pathetic condition of the people of Afghanistan in general under the rule of the Taliban:

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