

THE POWER OF STORIES: CULTURAL NARRATIVES IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S *THE KITE RUNNER, AND THE MOUNTAINS ECHOED AND SEA PRAYER*

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Abstract

This paper examines the profound influence of cultural narratives in the novels of Khaled Hosseini, specifically in “The Kite Runner”, “And the Mountains Echoed” and “Sea Prayer.” This paper also explores the ways in which cultural studies, concepts and theories can shed light on the complexities of cultural identity, representation and negotiation within the narratives of postmodern Muslim diaspora novels by drawing on the foundational works of eminent literary critics like Stuart Hall, Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. By examining the interplay of cultural influences, hybridity and the subversion of established narratives, this analysis seeks to shed light on how these novels engage with the ever-evolving landscape of identity and society in a globalized world. Using a cultural studies perspective, it delves into the pivotal role of storytelling and narratives in shaping characters' identities, societal norms and cross-cultural understanding. The analysis highlights how Hosseini's novels intricately weave together cultural elements, historical contexts and individual experiences through the art of storytelling, shedding light on the profound influence of narratives on culture, memory and human connection.

Keywords: Afghan culture, cross-cultural understanding, hybridity, narratives of migration, postmodern diaspora novels.

Introduction:

In an era defined by globalization, migration and cultural diversity, literature serves as a powerful medium for exploring the intricacies of the human experience. Cultural studies, in contemporary postmodern diaspora Muslim literature, explores the multifaceted experiences of Muslim communities living in diverse cultural and geographic contexts. This genre of literature often delves into issues such as identity, belonging, migration and the negotiation of cultural boundaries. Postmodern literary theorists and literary critics such as Stuart Hall, Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have contributed valuable insights into the concept of cultural studies in postmodern diaspora novels. They have explored how these novels engage with issues of cultural identity, displacement, hybridity and representation.

Aim and scope of the study:

The aim of this paper is to examine the role of cultural narratives and storytelling in Khaled Hosseini's novels, specifically "The Kite Runner", "And the Mountains Echoed" and "Sea Prayer." This paper analyses how stories and narratives within these novels serve as potent vehicles for conveying and negotiating complex cultural identities, values and experiences. Through a cultural studies framework, the paper aims to bring out how these narratives shape characters' lives, reflect societal values and the complex interplay between culture, migration, displacement and resilience; demonstrating the transformative power of storytelling in the context of postmodern diaspora literature. The scope for a cultural analysis in Khaled Hosseini's select novels, focusing on cultural narratives, is broad and multifaceted. This analysis can encompass various dimensions of culture, storytelling and their interplay within the narratives.

The Power of Stories: Cultural Narratives in Khaled Hosseini's Novels - *The Kite Runner, And the Mountains Echoed and Sea Prayer*:

Khaled Hosseini's novels, *The Kite Runner*, *And the Mountains Echoed* and *Sea Prayer* offer rich opportunities for cultural studies analysis, as they explore themes related to Afghan culture, identity, migration and the impact of global events. In "The Kite Runner," the story revolves around the protagonist Amir's complex relationship with his ethnic and cultural identity as an Afghan. Cultural studies can analyse how Amir's identity is shaped by

his cultural heritage and how this identity evolves over time, especially in the context of his immigration to the United States. *And the Mountains Echoed* features a diverse cast of characters from various ethnic backgrounds in Afghanistan. Cultural studies can explore how the novel portrays the cultural and ethnic diversity within the country and how these differences affect the characters' experiences and relationships. *Sea Prayer* addresses the refugee experience, focusing on Syrian refugees. Cultural studies can analyse how the story captures the cultural dislocation and loss experienced by refugees and how it underscores the global nature of the refugee crisis.

The Kite Runner by Hosseini is a novel set against the backdrop of Afghanistan's tumultuous history. The story revolves around the complex relationship between two characters, Amir and Hassan, and how their lives are shaped by cultural narratives, societal expectations and personal choices. The novel is primarily narrated by Amir, a young Afghan boy who grows up in Kabul in the 1970s. Amir's father, Baba, is a well-respected figure in the Afghan community and Amir longs for his approval and affection. However, Amir is haunted by his sense of guilt and betrayal related to his childhood friend and servant, Hassan. Hassan belongs to the Hazara ethnic group, considered a lower class in Afghan society.

Despite their differences in social status, Amir and Hassan share a deep bond, reinforced by their shared love for kite fighting, a popular Afghan pastime. During a kite-fighting tournament, Amir witnesses a traumatic event that shapes the course of his life. Hassan is brutally assaulted while retrieving the last kite Amir cut down. Amir's guilt over not intervening to protect Hassan and his inability to stand up for his friend are central to the narrative. These events, along with the societal expectations of masculinity and honour, weigh heavily on Amir's conscience. The story takes a dramatic turn when the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan occurs, leading to Amir and Baba fleeing the country and eventually settling in the United States as refugees. In America, Amir builds a new life, marries and becomes a successful writer.

However, the novel's cultural narrative extends beyond Amir's personal journey. It explores the impact of war, displacement, and diaspora on Afghan communities, shedding light on the resilience and adaptability of the Afghan people. Throughout the novel, cultural narratives, such as

folklore, storytelling, and traditional values are woven into the narrative, illustrating their significance in Afghan culture. Amir's eventual return to Afghanistan, which is now under Taliban rule, sets the stage for his redemption and reconciliation with his past, including his relationship with Hassan. The novel ultimately conveys the power of stories and cultural narratives in healing wounds, preserving memory and forging connections across time and distance.

"For you, a thousand times over," (2) Amir says, and this reflects Amir's strong cultural value of loyalty and redemption in Afghan culture. In *The Kite Runner*, "That was a long time ago, but it's wrong what they say about the past, I've learned, about how you can bury it. Because the past claws its way out. Looking back now, I realize I have been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty-six years." (1) – these lines highlight the persistence of history and cultural memory. "For me, America was a place to bury my memories. For Baba, a place to mourn his" (120), this quote reflects the immigrant experiences. "The curious thing was, I never thought of Hassan and me as friends either." (24) touches on the complexities of social class and ethnicity in Afghan society.

In *The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini skilfully explores the complexities of Afghan culture and the enduring impact of personal and cultural narratives. Through Amir's journey, the novel underscores how cultural narratives can shape individual identities and serve as a means of redemption and healing in the face of trauma and adversity.

The novel *And the Mountains Echoed* begins with a haunting folk story told by Saboor, a rural Afghan, to his children Abdullah and Pari. The story, a central cultural narrative in the book, revolves around a div (a creature from Afghan folklore) who takes children away from their families, echoing themes of separation and loss. The narrative then shifts to the lives of various characters connected by familial and personal bonds. Abdullah and Pari's relationship are at the core of the novel. Abdullah, as a young boy, makes a heart-wrenching decision to sacrifice his beloved sister Pari for her better future, giving her away to a wealthy Afghan family living in Kabul. This decision sets in motion a series of events that profoundly affect the lives of the characters and their descendants.

The novel spans decades and continents, exploring the lives of Pari and Abdullah, the Afghan family who adopts Pari, and a diverse array of other characters, including a Greek plastic surgeon, a French aid worker, and an Afghan-American doctor. Throughout the novel, cultural narratives emerge as characters grapple with their Afghan identity, the impact of war and displacement and the legacy of their homeland. The book delves into the rich tradition of Afghan storytelling and folklore, showing how these narratives are passed down through generations, preserving cultural memory and identity.

One of the key cultural narratives is the concept of “tashakor”, or gratitude, which is deeply ingrained in Afghan society. Characters wrestle with their obligations to their families and their homeland, and the novel explores the tension between individual desires and familial duty. As the story unfolds, readers witness the interconnectedness of these characters’ lives, even across great distances and cultural divides. The novel’s structure reflects the complexity of human relationships and the enduring power of cultural narratives to bridge gaps and bring people together.

A society doesn’t succeed without the success of its women, emphasizes the role of women in Afghan society and how cultural norms and expectations are evolving. “I suspect the truth is that we are waiting, all of us, against insurmountable odds, for something extraordinary to happen to us” (36) touches upon the longing for change and transformation. “Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right doing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there” invokes the theme of unity and transcending cultural and moral boundaries.

In *And the Mountains Echoed* Khaled Hosseini masterfully explores the impact of cultural narratives on the lives of his characters, illustrating how stories, folklore, and traditions serve as a link to their Afghan heritage. The novel demonstrates how these narratives can shape decisions, forge connections, and ultimately provide a sense of belonging in a world marked by change and separation.

Sea Prayer is written in the form of a letter from a father, named Baba, to his son, Marwan, as they prepare to undertake a dangerous journey by sea to escape the war-torn Syria. As they stand on the shore, Baba shares his memories of their homeland, Homs, and the cultural narratives that have

shaped their lives. Baba recalls the beauty of their city, once a place filled with gardens, laughter, and community. He reminisces about Marwan's birth and their family's history in Homs, evoking a sense of nostalgia for the cultural heritage they are leaving behind.

The cultural narrative in *Sea Prayer* is deeply rooted in Syrian history and heritage. Baba shares stories of their ancestors, including the importance of olives in their culture, as well as the rich tradition of hospitality and generosity that defines Syrian society. These cultural narratives serve as a connection to their past and a source of strength in the face of adversity.

As the story unfolds, Baba's letter becomes a heartfelt prayer for his son's safety and a plea for a better future. He describes the harrowing journey they are about to undertake, facing the treacherous sea and the uncertainty of life as refugees. The book is accompanied by illustrations that depict the family's life in Homs, their journey by sea, and the challenges they face. The illustrations, combined with the narrative, create a deeply moving and immersive experience for the reader.

Sea Prayer is a powerful exploration of the cultural narratives that define one's identity and provide solace in times of hardship. It underscores the impact of conflict and displacement on individuals and their cultural ties. Through the intimate letter between a father and his son, Khaled Hosseini's book highlights the importance of empathy, compassion, and understanding for those experiencing the refugee crisis, while also emphasizing the enduring strength of cultural narratives in the face of loss and upheaval.

Conclusion:

In Khaled Hosseini's novels, *The Kite Runner*, *And the Mountains Echoed* and *Sea Prayer* the power of stories and cultural narratives is evident in shaping characters' identities, belongingness and actions. These narratives reflect the broader cultural, historical and social contexts in which the characters exist. Cultural studies provide a framework to critically analyse how these narratives are constructed, conveyed and how they influence individuals and societies. Through these narratives, readers gain insight into the complexities of Afghan and Syrian cultures, as well as the broader human experiences of migration, displacement and identity. Hosseini's novels serve as compelling examples of the ways in which storytelling is

intertwined with culture and society, making them ripe for cultural studies analysis.

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