

Chapter 5

Conclusion and Suggestions

After a thorough and in-depth analysis of the works of Khaled Hosseini, we can conclude that Hosseini delineated the humane side of Afghanistan. He has confessed that he began writing his first novel *The Kite Runner* before the 9/11 attack and that he stopped writing the same thinking it would be in poor taste. (Smith) Yet, he ended up finishing the book as he felt that at that juncture it was even more important to debunk the myths associated with Afghanistan which was then looked at with utter disbelief. Afghanistan has been a country wrought with wars and the brunt of it had been borne by the people. Though Hosseini himself is an exile writer, he felt responsible to bring to light the predicament of the people who suffered while the battle of power ensued. The reign of the Taliban was like a final nail in the coffin which took away fundamental rights from Afghan people. While men were made to adhere to certain rules, women were shoved further in an already patriarchal society. Hosseini has depicted the plight of women during the despotic Talib rule in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* wherein two women Mariam and Laila become his mouth pieces. Through them Hosseini made us live the agony of being a woman in a patriarchal country run by an autocratic regime. When the Talib reign came to an end with US intervention and democratic government was established in 2001, it appeared that Afghanistan was on its way to become a stable land. But the prosperity and freedom were rather short-lived. In 2021, the US forces left Afghanistan, leaving in their wake complete pandemonium. (Ap)

Taliban reign was established again in 2021 and after a period of twenty years Afghanistan was yet again under the aegis of Taliban. The Sharia law, which Khaled Hosseini has captured vividly in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was re-established. (Kabul) It was as if history was repeating itself. And thus, Khaled Hosseini's novels- which dig into life during the Soviet rule and the Taliban period of the 90s-become relevant yet again.

The current research delves into an in-depth analysis of fictional works of Khaled Hosseini. But it is already established in the previous chapters as to how the novels though fiction, are steeped in reality. The characters of Hassan, Mariam, Laila, Saboor, Abdullah, Pari, Nila and many more are all representations of Afghan people from varied classes and ethnicities. Together they reflect the face of erstwhile Afghanistan and give one a peek into the ground realities faced by the Afghan people in a country wrought with incessant scuffles and invasions. The research in hand is also pertinent because the year 2021 saw mayhem and took one twenty years back in time when the Taliban had seized power in the 1990s. It is sad that all the advancements and growth that Afghanistan saw in the last twenty years was curbed and women's rights suffered a major setback. At this juncture, subaltern perspective becomes relevant as in an autocratic regime both men and women are rendered subalterns. In the study at hand, the subaltern theories are an aid which highlight as to how being devoid of an agency hampers one to redeem oneself of any transgressions. The research also helped bring things into perspective in the context of subalternity vis a vis the various obstacles faced by the myriads of characters brought to life by Hosseini.

5.1 Relevance of the Research and Re-Establishment of the Taliban

While the research is focused on the theme of atonement with respect to subaltern voices, one cannot overlook the fact that owing to the 2021 withdrawal of US forces, the relevance of this research is manifold. Khaled Hosseini's fictional characters span through generations and though he aimed to talk about families, grief and human relations, Afghan militancy lurks through the narrative taking the shape of another character. When Taliban was reinstated in August 2021, marking an end to the twenty-year stranglehold of US, it was as if Afghanistan was shoved back to the dark era of 90s. We are at once transported to the troubled times depicted by Hosseini in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The protagonists Mariam and Laila were both victims of the ire of the Taliban and were subjected to assault and suffering. When the US forces left the Afghan soil, there was complete chaos. People hustled to jump on the planes to move away from Afghanistan as they could sense what the future held for them. It

resulted in several casualties while the Taliban maintained that people of Afghanistan are safe. Yet it was difficult for people to obliterate from their minds the aftermaths of Taliban's previous reign. Their dictatorial and regressive rule impacted Afghanistan negatively both in terms of women's rights and overall growth. (PBS)

Hosseini was devastated at how the withdrawal of US forces came about. He described the Taliban takeover of 2021 as 'absolutely gut-wrenching'. Furthermore, he added, that he was skeptical about the Taliban rule and that the group would have to show that they are different this time, 'with deeds and not with words'. He was also concerned about Afghan refugees and he mentioned, "I think I would call on all countries to keep their borders open and to welcome Afghan refugees who are fleeing 40 years of violence and persecution. This moment is not the time to give up on Afghanistan. It is not the time to turn your backs on Afghans and Afghan refugees." (Scully) Being an exile writer and someone who was a refugee himself once, he could relate and sympathize with the plight of his fellow countrymen.

The people of Afghanistan feared that the Taliban would replicate their previous reign and yet again impose the most radical interpretation of the Islamic law. And unfortunately, their apprehensions turned to facts in no time. Within a few months of getting into power the militant group curbed women's rights nullified the development in terms of women education and emancipation that came to be for the last twenty years. For the people of Afghanistan, it was all a grim reminder of their previous reign which lasted from 1996 to 2001. The draconian rules and the barbarian punishments aimed at anyone defying those rules were horrid memories for the Afghans. The moral policing and stringent dress code for both men and women were too vividly described by Hosseini in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Kite Runner*. It is appalling that in 2021, twenty years after their previous reign, when the world has progressed, the same laws are imposed on Afghans. In December 2021, just months after coming to power, the Taliban announced that Afghan women wishing to travel more than seventy-two kilometers should not be given transport facilities until and unless they are accompanied by a male relative. Public bathhouses were shut and women were expected to wear hijab so that only their eyes are visible. Men too were

forced to grow beards and it was made compulsory for them to attend congregational prayers at mosques. Those who did not show up were considered offenders and were beaten up and even arrested. (Azadi)

Taliban banned secondary education for women claiming that they could not create a 'safe environment' for women. Girls can no longer study beyond sixth grade. As per a report:

From 2002 to 2021, 3,816,793 girls enrolled in first through 12th grades. According to the Afghan Ministry of Education's 2020-2021 annual report, there was 18,765 public and private schools in operation. Afghanistan also had more than 200,000 teachers, including 80,554 women. Over 100,000 Afghan women were enrolled in public or private universities in 2020 and according to 2019 figures there were 2,439 female lecturers at higher education institutions. Public and private universities flourished in the last two decades, providing women and girls with countless opportunities to contribute to Afghanistan's future. These educational advances fostered broader societal achievements and gains for women. Before the Taliban takeover, 63 women were in the Afghan parliament, nine held minister- or deputy minister level minister level positions. Afghanistan's judicial system had 280 women judges and over 500 prosecutors. There were over 2,000 women-owned small and medium sized businesses. (Ahmadi and Sultan)

It is disheartening to see that the ban on women education would erase all the progress made in the direction of women empowerment. With women taken out from medical colleges, the future seems bleak. In the coming years there will be no female doctors, nurses, and midwives. Women patients are supposed to be treated by female doctors. And women medical students are supposed to be mentored by female doctors only. This segregation and gender discrimination is bound to affected he medical services available to Afghans in the long run. (Parker)

Hosseini has depicted this helplessness in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* when Laila is about to give birth. There is a lack of infrastructure in the hospital where she is being taken for the delivery. Laila is subjected to insurmountable pain as she is being operated for a C-section delivery without anesthetic.

“Tell me what’s going on!” Laila said. She had propped herself up on her elbows.

The doctor took a breath and then told Laila that the hospital had no anesthetic.

“But if we delay you will lose your baby.”

“Then cut me open,” Laila said. She dropped back on the bed and drew up her knees.

“Cut me open and give me my baby.” (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 283)

Hosseini has described how healthcare became a luxury during the Taliban reign, back in the 90s and how women were the ones who were hit the most. Things are back to square one since 2021 with Taliban yet again imposing gender discriminating rules when it comes to healthcare in Afghanistan. In this regard this study becomes pertinent as what Hosseini portrayed in his books is yet again a grim reality for the people of Afghanistan. In November 2022, fourteen people which included three women were flogged in public for supposed crimes like adultery, robbery, and corruption. This is again reminiscent of the public executions and beatings undertaken by the Taliban during their previous reign. Stating that it was in accordance with the Sharia law, Taliban conducted public executions and beatings in football stadiums to instil fear in the hearts of people and prevent them for any kind of dissent against them. (Wallen) One can at once picture the scene depicted by Hosseini in *The Kite Runner* wherein a man and a woman are beaten to death in a football stadium.

“Every sinner must be punished in a manner befitting his sin!” the cleric repeated into the mike, lowering his voice, enunciating each word slowly, dramatically.

“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!” (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 236)

In *And the Mountains Echoed*, Hosseini had described how Afghans were living in abject poverty. Economic instability was so widespread that people had to resort to giving away their children as they were not in a position to feed them. In *And the Mountains Echoed* we are introduced to fictional characters Saboor and his children

Pari and Abdullah who though fictional lends a real picture of the erstwhile Afghanistan. They represent those poor people of Afghanistan, who are struggling to make ends meet. It is infuriating to gauge that what Hosseini showed through his characters was not far from the reality of Afghan people. And moreover, after twenty years the people of Afghanistan are yet again faced with the same sad reality. As a report by Amnesty cites, owing to the Taliban takeover of 2021, followed by the international isolation and economic plunge, Afghanistan has been facing an economic crisis. As per the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 97% of Afghans were living in poverty which went up from 47% in 2020. To survive, families had to resort to child marriages and selling organs. Moreover, to make things worse there has been an exodus of doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers, government officials further hampering the social and economic set-up. (Amnesty International, “Everything You Need to Know about Human Rights in Afghanistan 2020”)

In *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini has brought to light the ethnic discrimination that was prevalent in Afghanistan. Through his characters he highlighted the plight of the Hazaras and how they were marginalized and made subalterns. Hassan who is a Hazara is jeered at and he is forever considered a lowly servant. Despite him being friends with Amir, he is never considered at par with the elite Pashtuns. In 1998, more than 8,000 Hazaras were killed in a massacre planned by the Taliban. We are made privy to this fact in *The Kite Runner* as well:

I had heard about the Hazara massacre in Mazar-i-Sharif in the papers. It had happened just after the Taliban took over Mazar, one of the last cities to fall... “Door-to door. We only rested for food and prayer,” the Talib said... “We left the bodies in the streets, and if their families tried to sneak out to drag them back into their homes, we’d shoot them too. We left them in the street for days. We left them for the dogs. Dog meat for dogs.” (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 243)

Years after this inhuman deed, when Taliban came back to power in 2021, Hazaras were yet again targeted and killed through unlawful ways. In June 2022, six Hazras were executed on purpose and it included a twelve-year-old girl. (Amnesty International, “Afghanistan: Taliban Torture and Execute Hazaras in Targeted Attack –

New Investigation”) The systemic persecution of Hazara minority continues and it poses a threat to this community which has been rendered subaltern.

It is said that the truth is stranger than fiction. But in this case truth and fiction almost coincide and one is left wondering about the future of Afghanistan. Hosseini himself has expressed his concern and is dismayed at the turn of events that led to the return of Taliban. He looks at them with disbelief and worries about the people of Afghanistan:

Maybe the Taliban has noticed the country it has conquered in 2021 is not the one it decamped from in 2001- nor is the quiet pre-Soviet era Afghanistan I grew up in where women wore short skirts, hippies lounged in tea-houses and you could drive across Kabul in minutes unencumbered by check-points or barricades fortified with concertina wire. Still, while the Taliban was busy launching RPGs at police cadets, the country was transforming. Over the last twenty years, Afghanistan formed a robust base of educated urban professionals. Young Afghans, male and female went to school and learned to code. They became software engineers and programmers...by 2020, more than 9.5 million children were enrolled in school, 39 percent of them girls- compared with only 90,0000, in 2001, overwhelmingly boys. Young women entered the workforce to help rebuild a country that Taliban left decimated and bankrupt...but perhaps in these 20 years, the Taliban changed as well..after all it is one thing to conquer a nation but a whole other matter to govern it. (Hosseini, “Perspective | Afghanistan Is Not the Country the Taliban Last Ruled. Will That Matter?”)

Hosseini was thus apprehensive of the current reign of the Taliban. He indulges in wishful thinking and hopes that perhaps the Taliban would realize that nation building is only possible if both men and women are equal participants in the economic growth of a country. But, as per a report by World Bank, the Afghan economy shrank by 25 percent in the last two years. Despite everything one in two Afghans remains poor. And with the restrictive policies when it comes to women education and employment further downfall is expected to be in the offing. (The World Bank)

The current study becomes of utmost relevance with these developments as Khaled Hosseini is credited as someone who brought Afghanistan to the forefront thereby showing the human face of a war-ravaged country. His books portray the grim realities of Afghan people over the years and the subaltern nature of the people reeling under despotic reign of the Taliban. The study delves into the travesties of these characters amidst the backdrop of militancy and highlights subalternity and patriarchy. Under the current volatile scenario in Afghanistan the research in hand thus becomes pivotal.

5.2 Analysis and Critique of Subaltern Studies

Subaltern Studies which form the theoretical framework of the research has been critiqued for varied reasons. While analysing and employing the valid arguments from the Subaltern theorists it is also imperative to keep a keen eye on the said pitfalls of the subaltern studies. This would enable one to maintain objectivity and not fall into a lopsided understanding of the study. One of the prime criticisms faced by the Subaltern Studies is that it revolves around binaries. There has been a simplification of class-dichotomies. Theorist David Ludden has asserted the problem saying:

First and foremost, the new substance of subalternity emerged only on the underside of a rigid theoretical barrier between 'elite' and 'subaltern,' which resembles a concrete slab separating upper and lower space into a two-storey building. This hard dichotomy alienated from social histories that include more than two storeys or which move among them. (Ludden 16)

The Subaltern studies were formed with respect to events in the Indian subcontinent. But the theory can very well be employed in other social milieus. The 'hard dichotomy' which is at the core of the studies often make it less fluid especially when putting it into different social frameworks. In the current study at hand, we have engaged the study in the context of Afghan political and social environment. While the notion of subalternity can very well be put into the Afghan milieu, subalterns are not just those who are colonized by a foreign power but also those who are marginalized and pushed towards fringes by their own people. The concept of subaltern has gone

through major transitions since Gramsci coined the word. But the core phenomenon remains the same.

Gramsci strived to dismantle certain set beliefs towards the subaltern groups and focussed on literature that presented subalterns in 'passive, humble or subordinated positions'. Gramsci believed that it was challenging but not impossible to draw a histography of the subaltern class. He also put forth the idea that subaltern classes are faced with the contemporary political, social, cultural, and economic conditions which in turn determine their marginality. He strongly believed that it was possible to alter their marginalised status and felt that subalterns themselves had the capability to change their stature. His ultimate goal was to make this change and he devised policies to achieve this goal. (Green) In this regard however, despite varied criticisms it is evident that the primary goal of both Gramsci and the Subaltern Studies Group was to put start a dialogue about these neglected group of people with less or no autonomy. And it has served this purpose as it came to become an integral and inseparable part of Post-Colonial Studies. In the current research it has been deduced that Hosseini's novels have multiple subaltern characters and though fictional they are inspired from the people of Afghanistan who faced insurmountable difficulties in a volatile country engaged in strife and wrought with endless wars. The subaltern theory could very well be employed in the Afghan environment as people were made subalterns not just by the hegemonic rule of colonialists but were also marginalized at the hands of their own people when they were stigmatised owing to their ethnicity. Gender subalternity was also a grave issue in Afghanistan. Women were pushed behind veils and treated unfairly while the hegemonic powers robbed them of their rights. Subaltern theory could help one gauge the complexities of the condition of the people of Afghanistan and create conversation around the injustice meted out to them. In this regard Subaltern theory as a theoretical framework aided in moving the research forward. Moreover, after the recent upheaval that came about in Afghanistan in August 2021, which led to the Taliban coming into power yet again, it has become pivotal to talk about the plight of the people of Afghanistan more so. Subaltern theories help make sense of the situation and also facilitate in probably offering solutions by understanding the core problem.

5.3 Criticism of Hosseini through the lens of Neo-Orientalism

While exploring the underlying theme of atonement and tracing the undercurrents of subaltern ethos, the term orientalism was touched upon as well. Edward Said's *Orientalism* brought forth the idea of the Western world patronizing the eastern and Asian societies. The Western world while conversing about the East, maintains a prejudiced and elitest attitude towards them. Said had looked down upon this aspect of the Western world wherein they presented themselves as those who are superior and came up with a stereotypical depiction of the East. Said argues that the West during their colonial discourse presents the Orient as 'Other.' In the Journal article, *Orientalism: The Making of the Other*, it is stated:

Orientalism is a built-in system or method by which the West not only socially constructed and actually produced the Orient, but controlled and managed it through a hegemony of power relations, working through the tropes, images and representations of literature, art, visual media, film, and travel writing, among other aspects of cultural and political appropriation. (Burney)

A new branch of Orientalism stemmed post the 9/11 attacks which came to be known as Neo-Orientalism. It drew most of its features from its precursor helmed by Said. Yet, it had a more pervasive approach. In the book, *Globalizing American Studies*, Neo-Orientalism is defined as:

Although the term "neo-Orientalism" designates a shift in the discourse of Orientalism that represents a distinct, and in ways novel formation, it nonetheless entails certain discursive repetitions of and conceptual continuities with its precursor. Neo-Orientalism is monolithic, totalizing, reliant on a binary logic and, based on an assumption of moral and cultural superiority over the Oriental other. Neo-Orientalism should be understood as a supplement to enduring modes of Orientalist representation. (Edwards and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar 283–89)

Khaled Hosseini is an exile writer who migrated from his homeland Afghanistan quite early. He thereafter got educated in the US and practised medicine before he

finally wrote his first book. Having lived most of his life away from Afghanistan, Hosseini has not observed the mayhem on the Afghan land, first hand. He identifies himself as an American citizen. Yet he could not help but be moved by the atrocities faced by his countrymen back in Afghanistan. Though he is someone who has been far-removed from his homeland and has grown up in a different cultural and social environment, Hosseini has made an earnest attempt to bring to light the plight of the Afghan people. But he is often critiqued for showcasing a western-centric view of Afghanistan in his novels. He is accused of being a prey to Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism in his portrayal of Afghanistan. The research paper titled, '*Does Hosseini Portray Western Centric View of Afghanistan in His Novels,*' accuses Hosseini of indulging in stereotyping of the East. It also states as to how Hosseini has delineated an image of Afghanistan which has violence writ in its DNA. It leads one to believe that the people of Afghanistan are belligerent people who know nothing but violence. Statements uttered by his characters like, "Fariba, all these people know is war...they learned to walk with a milk bottle in one hand and a gun in the other." (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 173) make one picture a country of hooligans who have nothing to do with cultural and economic development.

Other than that, Hosseini is also held responsible for showcasing America as a saviour in his novels. More often than not it is said that he depicts America and the West as a safe haven and as a refuge for his characters who are battling violence in Afghanistan. Various characters in his novels, be it Amir and Baba from *The Kite Runner* or Nila and Pari from *And the Mountains Echoed*- they all seek refuge in the West. It is implicated that the West is the calming force which gives them home and a civilized sojourn.

Thirdly, Hosseini is accused of being biased in his representation of Afghanistan. It is claimed that Hosseini's novels draw an image of Afghanistan that is culturally stagnant and which needs the leadership and assistance of rich Western countries like America to sustain. The paper also says that though Hosseini vividly narrates the horrors of war and violence in Afghanistan, he does not touch upon also talking

about an Afghanistan which was rich in culture. There was a time when women saw great progression and women in Afghanistan were accorded the right to vote in 1919 itself- a year before women could vote in America. The researchers thus claim that Hosseini chose to highlight the severe oppression and patriarchy prevalent in Afghanistan but he neglected the other side of Afghanistan, thereby giving a lopsided purview of the country. Women are shown to be suffering and are utterly helpless under the patriarchal Afghan society. (Rehana)

The article titled, *200 Years of Orientalism: From Mary Shelley to Khaled Hosseini* also critiques Khaled Hosseini for leaning toward Oriental tendencies in his novels. The author says that though his depiction of the plight of Afghan women may not be entirely fictionalised, he implied America as a saviour which saved Afghan men and women from the vile characters like Rashid in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Assef in *The Kite Runner*. The author also states vehemently that ‘the suffering that Hosseini’s characters- especially the Afghan women- go through serves a purpose in the narratives.’ While it is essential to highlight and start a dialogue about violence against women, one cannot use to justify Western intervention of any kind. The author then emphasizes how the idea of a ‘single story’- as famously mentioned by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her Ted Talk- is dangerous. It is pertinent to know the various viewpoints as it appears through Hosseini’s works that the West offered refuge and relief to the poor Afghan citizens. There is this singular narrative that shines through most of his works. (Aboelela)

The paper titled, ‘Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as a Child Rescue and Neo-Orientalist Narrative’ also emphasizes as to how though Hosseini paints an almost authentic picture of the ordeals of women and children of Afghanistan, he remains reticent about the role of West. It appears through his depiction that he is almost justifying the foreign involvement in Afghanistan and projecting it as a saviour of the East thereby initiating a Neo-Orientalist approach. (Al-Dagamseh et al.)

Thus, despite his books receiving acclaim and resounding success, Hosseini is critiqued for leaning towards Orientalism many a times. It is important to be

cognizant of various aspects of a writer's work so that the research does not become biased and lopsided.

5.4 Khaled Hosseini as a Writer Who Writes About Human Condition

It is important to analyse differing view-points about a work of literature. As discussed above, one can gauge that Hosseini has been both loved and critiqued despite his books selling millions of copies. Herein after an in-depth study of the backlash aimed at Hosseini the researcher would present her own viewpoint. One cannot deny the fact that Khaled Hosseini brought Afghanistan in the forefront after it was looked at with dubious eyes post the 9/11 attacks. The Eastern countries have been looked at by the West as backward and as a still reeling in the dark ages. It is partly owing to the imperialistic attitude and an inherent air of superiority. But there is more to these countries than the social evils and patriarchy that the West portrays and looks mercifully at. Khaled Hosseini is an exile writer who left Afghanistan at a young age. He claims to have been suffering from 'survivor's guilt' as while his fellow Afghans were suffering through the violence meted out to them all due to external conquests and civil wars, he was away safe and sound in a foreign land. Yet Hosseini always felt a deep connection with his homeland and thus he wrote about books set in Afghanistan. While Hosseini's books run through the backdrop of Afghan political and social environment, they are primarily tracing human relationships and familial bonds. He himself has mentioned the same in one of his interviews when asked about how he feels when he is labelled as a writer writing for a western audience:

I don't write for any audience I write for myself...if I work with the idea of writing for a specific audience then the process becomes an agenda. And then there will be this corrupting presence in the room. I don't write for the people of Afghanistan- it is not for me to tell them about what is happening there...on the contrary, I am educated by them. I don't write for a Western audience though I have a lot of readers in the US. But I don't want to be seen as the West's window into Afghanistan. That isn't my intent. I write stories about the human condition. (Nair)

Hosseini also has mentioned time and again that he is a fiction writer who has not resided in Afghanistan since the 1970s and so his perspective is bound to be skewed on occasions. He claims, "I take a leap of imagination in writing about those who have lived through difficult times. (Kellaway)

Another accusation that is put on Hosseini is that he depicted the utter mayhem in Afghanistan quite explicitly while showing the helplessness felt by Afghan women. Moreover, he implied that the women of Afghanistan are lost and their sufferings could only be put to an end by the Western world. Firstly, the atrocities meted out at the Afghan women is not exaggerated by Hosseini. It is crucial to bring to light the violence directed at these women irrespective of who the perpetrator of the violence is. In this regard one must credit Hosseini for unmasking the face of violence in the war-ravaged Afghan soil. Women are the ones who are the silent sufferers in any war. In Afghanistan too women were made to go through insurmountable grief. Patriarchy was already entrenched in the society. Civil wars and external aggressions did not make things easier for women. While Hosseini did show that things stabilised once the Taliban was ousted, it is merely a fact as the Sharia law imposed by the Taliban can unanimously be termed as draconian. He did not imply that it was America which came as a saviour of the Afghan women. In fact, one can clearly gauge as to how he has portrayed the women in his novels as resilient. They are conditioned to behave in a certain manner and they do endure the injustice and violence. Yet Hosseini do not present them as docile rather they are shown as strong women who despite being in dire situations try tooth and nail to break free from the clutches of patriarchy and abuse. One can at once think of Laila and Mariam from *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and the indomitable courage they display in the face of extreme circumstances. They are not represented as dainty damsels in distress who wait for the West to show up and be their saviours. Instead, Laila makes a run for life while planning to flee Rashid's house. She also instils courage in Mariam who did not have the good fortune of being raised in a normal household. And towards the end, we find Mariam emerge as their saviour who finally ends the systemic chain of abuse. It is much later that the Taliban leaves. In fact, Mariam is being executed by them though she kills Rashid in self-defence. The women in Hosseini's novels are crippled by circumstances but they are

never put across as meek and helpless. Hosseini gives us an array of women characters, all belonging to different familial and educational backgrounds. In *And the Mountains Echoed*, one is left intrigued by Nila Wahdati. Wahdati who despite living in a country which is patriarchal and orthodox does not suppress her voice. She writes erotic poetry which is her own expression of desire. When she feels suffocated in her homeland where women were not expected to defy the set norms, she moves to Paris. Though being affluent she has more agency than a normal Afghan woman, she is made subaltern owing to her rebellious streak. Even her father is ashamed of her for she does not conform to the Afghan way of morality.

Another criticism hurled at Hosseini's works is that he presents binaries in his novels. The dual metaphor of good and evil is inherent in his books especially in *The Kite Runner*. But if one delves deep, it would be understood that Hosseini's characters are not purely 'good.' Baba may be considered as someone who is on one end of the spectrum as someone representing 'goodness.' Yet he is also flawed. He is a philanthropic but he is guilty of not accepting his own flesh and blood as his legitimate son. Despite being a paragon of virtue, he is afraid of his reputation being tarnished. He shames Amir and does not show him acceptance owing to which Amir longs for paternal love. Amir too is a flawed character who has been cowardly and despite being close to Hassan, never considered him an equal. Hosseini has also been accused of dehumanizing the people of Afghanistan and focussing entirely on extremism. Yet one can gauge that Hosseini has in fact humanized Afghans and made the world look at them as vulnerable but resilient beings who are merely the victims of aggression. He has shown brought to light the plight of Afghan population and made the world look at them with a newfound love. Hitherto Afghan was looked at with suspicion, more so after 9/11. Albeit unconsciously, Hosseini aided in drawing the human face of Afghanistan amidst the world at large.

Being an exile writer and as someone who has lived in America for most of his life, it is but natural for the country to be seeped in his writing. But one cannot say that he is biased as he has also criticised America for the recent events wherein the withdrawal of the US troops led to complete pandemonium in Afghanistan. He felt that the

withdrawal could have happened in a more responsible manner. He showed displeasure with President Biden for not showing empathy with the Afghan citizens whom he addressed as partners for the last twenty years. He condoned the chaotic withdrawal by the American forces and was worried that the progress Afghan women had made over the last twenty years is 'up in the air.' (William)

Apart from this Hosseini has also talked about how women in Afghanistan had agency and rights much before the Soviet conquest. In *And the Mountains Echoed* his character Nila Wahdati elaborates as to how Afghan women were not always bereft of their rights. She lauds King Amanullah for bringing about this radical change in the patriarchal Afghanistan society long before the Russian conquest:

You see, he woke one morning, the king, and proclaimed his plan to reshape the country... into a new and more enlightened nation...No more wearing of the veil, for one...A woman in Afghanistan arrested for wearing a *burqa!* When his wife, Queen Soraya, appeared barefaced in public...And no more polygamy, he said... from now on, he declared, no man can force you into marriage. And no more bride price, brave women of Afghanistan, and no more child marriage. And here is more: You will all attend school. (Hosseini, *And the Mountains Echoed* 181)

In all his novels Hosseini has delineated an array of characters who are real and flawed. For this reason, his books have not only touched readers but have also brought visibility to the war-ridden land of Afghanistan. The recent development which led to the resurgence of the Taliban made one think hard and see that though the American reign was not a perfect one, it did ensure growth and women emancipation. Since 2021, women have been robbed off their rights and the economic development has taken a major beating.

5.5 Atonement as a Universal theme in his Novels

After a thorough analysis of his novels, one can conclude that atonement is common theme in his stories. In fact, the universality of his novels exists in the theme of redemption. Human beings are prone to aberrations of different kinds. Guilt follows

and one is more often than not left to yearn for redemption. In *The Kite Runner* only it is only when Amir atones himself is when he finds peace. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* Mariam finds atonement through sacrifice and making her life worthwhile. Laila on the other hand finds it in a higher purpose and for working towards the upliftment of her country. In *And the Mountains Echoed* Nabi atones himself by writing a letter to Pari and hoping that even though it took a lifetime, the brother and sister duo are able to reunite.

The research paper titled, 'Retribution to Redemption: A Momentous Literary Journey,' says that redemption and retribution have been the most prominent themes in literature since the time of Aristotle. The authors state that Shakespeare's works gained widespread acclaim owing to this aspect. Even the novels of Maupassant, Dickens capture this principle. The moral and dramatic side of the stories of retribution and redemption lend them a universal quality which people in general relate to. (Meduri)

Khaled Hosseini's novels though set in the backdrop of Afghan turmoil are essentially stories about human relationships. In *The Kite Runner* he traces the relationship between two friends and half-brothers and the story of a father and son duo. The social political and cultural milieu of Afghanistan play a vital role in pushing the story forward. Yet in the end one can surmise that the novel is about Amir's betrayal and his eventual quest for atonement. It is also the story of a son who yearns for his father's love. Despite Amir being a flawed character one can understand and sympathise with him as he grapples with his inner demons. Hassan who appears to be an epitome of grace does not seem like a larger-than-life character yet as someone the replicas of whom we can see all around us. He is that friend who stands by you and has your back. He is an ally who can see right through you and who always chooses to see the goodness in you. Thus, when he is abused the reader at once is distraught and agitated and can feel the helplessness and anger felt by Amir. The bond that the two boys share is delineated with so much sincerity that when it breaks, one is crestfallen. Amir is guilt ridden and repents his actions. When he finally faces his demons and comes back to his homeland, it is as if life has come full circle. In Sohrab he sees Hassan and

rescuing him gives him the much-awaited retribution. Human bonding and a hunt for identity are universal themes which stand out in Hosseini's novels. Amir tries to make sense of who he is and who he must be in order to be in his father's good books. Hassan has yielded to the identity of a Hazara who is destined to servitude. Identity is an assimilation of one's race, religion, ethnicity, economic and social environment. Being a Hazara Hassan has been conditioned in a way that he has conceded to the identity of an individual belonging to an inferior status. He is portrayed as a selfless and naïve boy who realizes that Amir can be mean but he loves Hassan deeply. Hassan's letter and the rescue of his son Sohrab finally leads to Amir's atonement. Hassan's letter acts a catalyst which makes Amir relive the bond that the two boys shared. It also facilitates in Amir's acceptance of his character flaws. It makes him reflect on his past deeds and in turn take responsibility of his actions. This serves as the first step which pushes him to work towards atonement:

I dream that my son will grow up to be a good person, a free person, and an important person. I dream that *lawla* flowers will bloom in the streets of Kabul again and *ruhab* music will play in the samovar houses and kites will fly in the skies. And I dream that someday you will return to Kabul to revisit the land of our childhood. If you do, you will find an old faithful friend waiting for you. (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 191)

When finally, Amir is able to rescue Sohrab and bring him to America with him, he feels a sense of contentment and the dark clouds of guilt gradually dissipate leading to atonement:

“Do you want me to run that kite for you?”

His Adam's apple rose and fell as he swallowed. The wind lifted his hair. I thought I saw him nod.

“For you a thousand times over,” I heard myself say.

Then I turned and ran.

It was only a smile, nothing more. It didn't make everything alright. It didn't make anything alright. Only a smile. A tiny thing. A leaf in the woods, shaking in the wake of a startled bird's flight.

But I'll take it. With open arms. Because when spring comes, it melts the snow one flake at a time, and maybe I just witnessed the first flake melting. (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 323-324)

The theme of atonement is thus a universal theme with which the readers identify with. The tender bond of love shared by the two Afghan boys at once touches one's heart. Readers around the world might be far removed from the volatile soil of Afghanistan but the human story of two friends and half-brothers amidst a war-trodden backdrop has a universal appeal to it. The narrative of Amir as a flawed guilt-ridden man, who is looking to redeem himself comes across as a story with which one can greatly identify with.

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini presents atonement of a different kind which yet again has a universal appeal. Mariam is an illegitimate child who finds herself stuck in a sad marriage with a much older man. Hosseini portrays her as a picture of endurance. She bears the atrocities of her husband for she has been marginalised from the time she was a little girl. She does not know what agency is. Laila is a fearless girl who owing to an unfortunate event finds herself as the second wife of Rashid. Unlike Mariam she has a rebellious streak. She also has some agency owing to the little education her feminist father could expose her to. The bond of sisterhood which develops between these two women makes it a universal story of triumphing against all odds. Mariam who had hitherto been a demure woman finds herself standing up for Laila. Laila had showered Mariam with love and respect. It is something which Mariam had never experienced before. Therefore, when Rashid is about to assault her, Mariam does the unexpected and for the first time in her life reacts to Rasheed's violence. Later when she is executed for the murder of Rasheed, she is not bitter for she feels that by doing so she could give Laila and her kids a second chance. Laila on the other hand grabs the second chance that Mariam gives her with both hands and works for

the upliftment of her homeland. The sisterhood and the eventual atonement of the two female protagonists lent this novel a universal appeal.

And the Mountains Echoed is not your usual story but multiple stories woven around the themes of familial love, war and mortality, sacrifice, and atonement. But at the heart of it is the story of the brother and sister duo Pari and Abdullah. When Pari is taken away by the Wahdatis, Abdullah is crestfallen. Hosseini gives a realistic account of the dichotomy between the classes which forces a desperate father to sell his three-year-old daughter so that his other two children can sustain. Nabi, Wahdatis's driver realizes much later that he was instrumental in the separation of the siblings. He spends decades caring for his invalid master and eventually leaves a letter hoping for atonement. He hopes that though its possibly too late, Pari and Abdullah may reunite. Nabi's remorse and his bid to atone himself touches the reader. Nabi had no inkling that a small action of his could have such life-altering impact. An error in judgement which leads to far-reaching consequences- this premise is quite familiar and universal thereby bound to touch the readers.

Hosseini draws characters which are layered and are steeped in reality. No character is purely black or white in *And the Mountains Echoed*. And therein lies the beauty of the novel. In the real world most of us are a blend of good and bad. There is no such thing as perfection. Thus, these flawed characters which yearn to redeem themselves feel mighty relatable. Furthermore, we have two sisters Parwana and Masooma. While Masooma is a beauty who is desired by everyone, Parwana is a plain Jane who feels embittered on being sidelined. When the man whom Parwana secretly loves is also smitten by the beautiful Masooma, Parwana ends up pushing her sister which makes poor Masooma an invalid for life. Parwana is wrecked with guilt and spends the following years of her life as a caregiver of her sister. She grapples with a sense of remorse and hopes to atone herself by taking care of Masooma. Hosseini do not portray his characters as evil but attempts to humanize them. They commit unforgivable sins, yet they are not boxed as morally corrupt. Parwana feels sorry for what she did and works towards redeeming herself.

In *And the Mountains Echoed* the theme of atonement is delineated through a potpourri of characters. All the characters hail from varied economic and social backgrounds but their link with Afghanistan becomes a common denominator. He introduces two Afghan-American exiles Timur and Idris who come back to their homeland after a hiatus. Hosseini draws through his own experience of coming back to Afghanistan and feeling disillusioned. As he states in this article about sketching out the character of Idris, “He was a vehicle to describe what it’s like to be an Afghan in exile, to return to see how divergent my experience was from other Afghans...I felt like I’d come and that I was a foreigner and that the locals knew it.” (“Khaled Hosseini Discusses Unforeseen Consequences”) While in Afghanistan Idris bonds with a young girl Roshni who is disfigured by her uncle. Idris promises to help Roshni and arrange for her to get a surgery. Yet once he leaves Afghanistan and experiences the luxury of his American abode, he gradually dispels Roshni from his mind. He does not feel happy about it. And years later when Roshni becomes a successful author, Idris meets her, all the while fearing that she would call him out.

Thus, like *The Kite Runner*, while the central theme of *And the Mountains Echoed* may not be atonement, it runs as a pivotal aspect through the multiple stories. If not for Nabi’s sense of guilt and his wish to reunite the brother and sister duo, the story would have not reached a catharsis. Pari who was a little girl when she was separated from her brother, yet she always felt something amiss in her life. Abdullah on the other hand pines for his sister, and had probably lost all hopes for a reunion. The fable with which Hosseini commences the story is symbolic and is a sort of premonition of what was going to happen to the family. Like Baba Ayub in the story who forgets his beloved son Quis, Abdullah too forgets his sister as he suffers from dementia. Though Pari could not be united with her brother in the true sense of the word, she finds a box which tells her that Abdullah remembered her and loved her deeply even after decades. Nabi in a way finally redeems himself as not only Pari comes to know of her brother and understands what was missing in her life, she also finds her niece and namesake Pari. In reuniting Pari and Abdullah, Nabi also becomes instrumental in bringing together a lost family. The younger Pari who had always wondered about

her namesake, was more than happy to have her aunt by her side while she had to go through the painful process of seeing her father slip into oblivion:

I turn over and watch Pari sleeping soundlessly beside me. Her face is pale in the light. I see Baba in her face- youthful, hopeful Baba, happy, how he used to be- and I know I will always find him whenever I look at Pari. She is my flesh and blood. And soon I will meet her children, and her children's children, and my blood courses through them too. I am not alone. A sudden happiness catches me unawares. I feel it trickling into me, and my eyes go liquid with gratitude and hope. (Hosseini, *And the Mountains Echoed* 402)

Thus, it is quite evident that atonement is a common trail which runs through all his novels. His protagonists are flawed and at times owing to circumstances or due to their own transgressions, are desperate to atone themselves and find peace. This humane theme makes his works universal which never fail to touch the readers deeply.

5.6 Hosseini as a mouthpiece for Subaltern Characters

The concept of subaltern was initiated by Gramsci for he wanted to represent social groups which were neglected, shunned, and kept away from political activities. He also introduced the concept of cultural hegemony through which he implied that the hegemonic powers dominated the home country and imposed their own beliefs which gradually obliterated the values and beliefs of the home country. The Subaltern Studies Group took the concept of the subaltern and employed it in the context of South Asia. It went on to become a significant offshoot of the post-colonial studies. Though Gramsci had intended the term to be assigned primarily to peasants and working class, gradually the connotation of the term broadened. It is also argued that Gramsci's use of the term 'subaltern' may have more than one assumption. In the research paper, 'Refiguring the Subaltern,' it is discussed how Gramsci established subalterns as 'irrepressible,' 'hegemonic' and 'citizen.' While Spivak depicted subalterns as those who cannot speak, Gramsci had presented them as those who were forthright about their ideas but were not acknowledged or understood by the hegemony. The researcher puts across the fact that the intent of the Subaltern Studies

Group was to carry forward the notion of subaltern to the present and not limit its meaning to a past phenomenon. They understood that it had the potential to be applied in analysing the socio-cultural conditions of not just the South-Asian societies but can be put to use in a global scenario. (Thomas)

It was much later that the concept was analysed by the likes of Spivak, who studied it through a larger lens and made it a vital concept of post-colonialism. Through the thorough analysis of Gramsci's notion of subaltern and the fluid notion of subalternity ascertained over the years by the Subaltern Studies Group scholars, it has been understood that the concept of subaltern has the potential to be put into a global framework. With this respect, it has been studied in the context of Afghanistan and more specifically through the Afghan characters of Khaled Hosseini's works.

It has been established that in all his novels, namely *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed*, Khaled Hosseini has portrayed subaltern characters. It is not an exaggeration to say that Hosseini is a mouthpiece of these subaltern characters. He has explored subalternity in varied dimensions. In *The Kite Runner* he has strived to become the voice the voice of subalterns who were discriminated owing to their race. One can feel the plight of Hassan who on account of his Hazara ethnicity is doomed to serve the rich racially superior upper class. He tolerates perpetual racial slurs and even sexual assault without uttering a word as he is devoid of an agency. Hassan's father Ali too has suffered the same fate. His wife formed an illicit relationship with Baba which resulted in the birth of Hassan. Baba was ridden with guilt but as he belonged to a privileged class, he could get away with it. Later Hassan's son Sohrab is met with the same sad fate that was destined for their lot. His parents are killed by the Talib militants and he finds himself living a deplorable life in a dilapidated orphanage. His misfortune does not end here and he is ridiculed and molested by Assef- the same guy who years ago had tortured his father, Hassan. Though Hosseini gives this novel a sort of happy ending wherein Amir atones himself and saves his nephew Sohrab from the clutches of racism and exploitation, one can gauge the grim reality that the subalterns faced in erstwhile Afghanistan. He presents the subalterns in *The Kite Runner* as passive and as those who have accepted

their marginalized status. By portraying these characters in a fictional narrative Hosseini took the first step towards laying bare amidst the world the frightful reality of these marginalised people.

While in *The Kite Runner* he depicted racial subalternity, in his second novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* Hosseini makes an earnest attempt to represent the repressed women of Afghanistan and delineates gender subalternity. In *The Kite Runner* he depicts the subalterns as submissive and as those who have been so conditioned to serve and stay in the fringes that they have grown a silent acceptance. But in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini pictures women who are exploited, abused, and stereotyped, yet they try to stand against the perpetrators of these actions. Mariam appears as a meek character throughout the book. Yet when she forms the bond of sisterhood with Laila, she stands up against Rasheed and does the unthinkable. Though she sacrifices her life to save Laila, she is at peace for having made a difference and for finally standing up against someone who tortured her for years. Laila is shown from the start as a rebel owing to her upbringing and education. Stuck in adverse circumstances she suffers too. But she speaks against her patriarchal husband and becomes Mariam's refuge. The Western world had hitherto assumed that the women of middle eastern countries who lived under the shadow of patriarchy, were meek and powerless. Hosseini herein becomes a mouthpiece of these subaltern women and puts forth before the world the adversities these women faced and how they still strived to stand against the injustice meted out to them.

In *And the Mountains Echoed*, Hosseini yet again explores gender subalternity when he draws out the character of Nila Wahdati. But herein one realizes that even the most independent and affluent woman can be a prey to gender subalternity. Nila is nothing like Mariam or Laila from *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. She has lived a life of luxury and is well-educated. Yet, she too is judged by people at large for her life choices. She is labelled and ridiculed for penning poetry about love, sex, and female desire. It is much later, when she is in France that her undeniable talent is acknowledged and she is praised for her literary prowess. In Afghanistan there seemed to be no place for women who have a bold voice and who do not tag along the lines set by age-old

patriarchy. By speaking through Nila, Hosseini vocalizes and gives space to women who are independent and who were not ok with the prevalent misogyny. It is indeed deplorable that though Nila finds herself a prey to misogyny in the 1950s, even today women in Afghanistan are looked down upon and have been robbed off basic rights after the advent of the Taliban in 2021. In the same novel, Hosseini has represented the LGBTQ+ community as well when he captures the helplessness of Suleiman. Though Suleiman is a rich privileged man, he leads a life of lie and is never able to come out to the world about his sexuality. He is a subaltern too as he belongs to the marginalized community of people who must live a life of deceit and hide from the world their true selves. In this regard Hosseini's portrayal of subaltern characters from a wide spectrum becomes quite pertinent as it helps shake up the existing framework in Afghanistan which veers towards discrimination and prejudice.

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