

Re-Membering Nation: The Presentation of Afghanistan in the Novels of Atiq Rahimi and Khaled Hosseini

Dr. MD Abdul Wahab, Associate Professor, Department of English, Samsi College, Malda, West Bengal

Abstract: Atiq Rahimi and Khaled Hosseini, two leading authors from the Afghan diaspora, have impressively contributed to the 21st century 'new literature' dealing with the troubled Afghan nation. This article synthesizes the present researcher, awarded a doctoral dissertation on the subject under the title. It deals with the Afghan nation as conceptualized by the diasporic mind of the authors through their narratives and their fictional characters. It highlights the role of 'history and memory,' 'man and nature,' and 'culture and identity in making the 'Afghan homeland' and the 'Afghan nation''re-membered' by the authors and their fictional characters. This article and its corresponding dissertation will benefit the readers/researchers further investigating the issues raised here concerning Rahimi and Hosseini.

Keywords: 'Re-membering,' 'diaspora,' 'nation' and 'nationalism,' 'homeland,' 'history' and 'memory,' 'culture' and 'identity,' etc.

Since the middle ages, Afghanistan and the Afghans have always been associated with war and trouble. This association is due as much to the Orientalist mindset of the West as to the geo-strategic location of the country. Behind this cacophony, however, what has been drowned out has been the heritage of an ancient civilization, rich bio/ geo-diversity, and a diverse cultural fabric. Despite the prolonged periods of external aggression, colonization, inept monarchy, political uncertainty, the soviet invasion, civil war, the Taliban rule, the 9/11, the war on terror, and

environmental plunder or account of the same, Afghanistan has produced and inspired a rich body of literature by both Afghan and foreign writers that center around the land and her peoples. These works have been written in English and other languages (both local and foreign).

For instance, in several novels by Atiq Rahimi (b. 1962) and Khaled Hosseini (b. 1965), Afghanistan looms large both as a backdrop and as a character in her own right. The works in question are Atiq Rahimi's *Earth and Ashes* [(2002) translated from Dari *Khakestar-o-khak* (1999)], *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear* [(2006) translated from Dari *Hazar Khana-I khvab VA Ikhtinaq* (2002)], *The Patience Stone* [(2009) translated from French *Pierre de Patience* (2008)] & *A Curse on Dostoevsky* [(2013) translated from French *Moudit so it Dostoievksi* (2011)] and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003), *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) and *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013).

Rahimi and Hosseini are diasporic Afghan writers based in France and the United States. Besides being a writer of repute, Rahimi is a filmmaker, whereas Hosseini is a social activist. Though the novels by these writers deal with Afghanistan and the way she is perceived and presented both at home and abroad, no comprehensive study, as known to the present researcher, has been made to date, highlighting this aspect of their work and developing a balanced perspective concerning novels on the same subject by other Afghan and non-Afghan writers. A study of this kind may go a long way in capturing the nuanced reality of Afghanistan when the withdrawal of the NATO forces has reached its completion and when the activities of a resurgent Taliban are countering the impacts of the Arab spring.

For this doctoral study, the present researcher sought to adopt a research methodology that was interpretative and inter-disciplinary. He used the insights of such related disciplines as Post-Colonial Studies, Gender Studies, Nation and Nationalism Studies, Terrorism Studies, Peace and Conflict Studies, Cultural Studies, New Historicism, Eco-criticism, etc., to discuss the presentation of Afghanistan in the novels of Atiq Rahimi and Khaled Hussein.

The following research questions were kept in mind during this investigation: the question of an elusive 'Other', as also the process of othering as depicted in novels of Atiq Rahimi and Khaled Hosseini; the issue of gender discrimination as one of the factors, formulating the artistic consciousness of the chosen writers; the treatment of ethnic allegiances and antagonisms as presented in the novels of Rahimi and Hosseini; the role of history and memory in shaping the myriad negotiations between the nationals and the nation as presented in the novels of Rahimi and Hosseini; how Rahimi and Hosseini depicted various crises in the lives of Afghanistan and the Afghans, and the resistance of the said crises; the culture/identity interface as presented in the novels of Rahimi and Hosseini; how the presentation of the land and her peoples have been mediated through and by the subject positions of the writers concerned; how the chosen writers reveal in and through their novels the traditional Afghan attitude to Nature and its transformation during the second half of the 20th century and beyond; and, how the novels of Rahimi and Hosseini at once belong to an operate within a long literary tradition created by Afghan and foreign writers.

A standard charge levelled at the diasporic writer is that s/he exoticizes the place of origin for eyeballs and easy money. The process of remembering the country of origin in the phase of hauntology is often colored by the process of remembering; for the temporal and the spatial distance entails a thorough dismemberment of the memory as well as the concept of the 'Nation' within the diasporic mind that leads a near coeval reconstruction of the same. Amir, the protagonist of Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, seems to point out as much when he says, "but time can be a greedy thing — sometimes it steals all the details for itself" [KR188], and yet "You can take Afghans out of

Paghman, but you cannot take Paghman out of Afghans" [KR 318]. The thesis aims to see and show how Afghanistan operates both as a background and almost as a character in her own right in the works of Atiq Rahimi and Khaled Hosseini, influencing and getting influenced by how she is perceived by both locals and foreigners. Efforts were also made to develop a balanced perspective in this respect by referring to and commenting upon novels on the same subject by other writers.

The first chapter defined the terms and concepts relevant to the study. Then, the scope of the critical inquiry was identified, highlighting in the process the many ways in which the land and the peoples of Afghanistan have been presented in the novels of Atiq Rahimi and Khaled Hosseini under the influence of such import and factors as History and Memory, Trauma and Resilience, and Culture and Identity. In this chapter, the researcher's main focus was to conceptualize as well as contextualize the 'Nation' as it gets remembered and re-remembered in the novels of Rahimi and Hosseini under pressure from supremacist discourses like 'patriarchy,' 'classism,' 'ethnocentrism,' 'ageism,' 'neo-colonialism' etc., and through the 'diasporic gaze' of the two writers, which have been discussed with textual illustrations in the following chapters of the thesis.

In Rahimi's *Earth and Ashes*, for example, the farming village of Abqul becomes the microcosm of Afghanistan under Soviet occupation. The history and culture of the village that gave Identity to Dastagir and his family are summarily obliterated by the Soviets. Similarly, in Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, Amir's memory of Afghanistan and his personal and familial 'past' of 'un-atoned sins' give the plot its impetus.

The second chapter of the thesis was dedicated to a brief review of the research/work done in the study area. First, theoretical works on the concept of the nation were reviewed with a particular emphasis on how it is perceived and conceptualized by the diasporic writers and applied to the unique peoples and the polity of Afghanistan. Then critical writings on the works of Atiq Rahimi and Khaled Hosseini were discussed to find out the research gaps and justify the study on that score. The overview of the empirical data in the

forms of monographs, book reviews, and articles available to the present researcher, with some bearing on the subject of the present research, indicated the apparent absence of a comprehensive study on 'remembering' of the nation of Afghanistan in the novels of Atiq Rahimi And Khaled Hosseini.

The third chapter discussed how the history and memory of Afghanistan operate in once collaborative and conflictual coexistence. The history of Afghanistan, a nation in turmoil (from the 1950s to the present) that predominantly speaks the language of victors, and the memory of the contending 'pasts' (individual and collective) permeate and problematize the narratives that Rahimi and Hosseini spin. In Rahimi's *A Thousand Rooms of Dreams and Fear*, the history evoked is one of the great political upheavals that shook Afghanistan immediately before 1979, the year of the Soviet invasion. The memories are those of Farhad, Humaira, Mahnaz, and Yahya, slightly confused by alcohol, grief, or fear. In Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the Afghan history recounted spans the last three decades of the 20th century re-membered from the perspectives of Mariam and Laila, two powerless women and two victims of patriarchy and politics.

The fourth chapter of the study focussed on the delineation of Nature in the works of Rahimi and Hosseini. Both the writers, as is shown, grapple in their fiction with not only the traditional Afghan attitude to Nature but also with the transformation and degradation of the turbulent times faced by the land and her peoples.

For instance, Rahimi's *Earth and Ashes* reveals his environmentally aware depiction of Afghanistan under Soviet occupation. Through the one-day journey of Dastaguir from his village Abqul to the Karmakar coalmine, we find glimpses of the man-nature relationship in certain parts of Afghanistan. The description of 'the bridge that links the two banks of the dry riverbed north of Pul-i-Khumri,' the road that connects Northern Afghanistan to Kabul, the dirt track that bypasses left on the far side of the bridge between the 'scrub-covered hills' and reaches the Karkar coal mine, the army truck that passes over the bridge and disturbs the stony sleep of the dry earth and raises dust engulfing Dastaguir, his grandson Yassin, their

apples and everything around – all tell a sad tale of environmental degradation due to the over-exploitation of natural resources on the one hand, and the callous unconcern with the same.

Similarly, in Hosseini's novel *And the Mountains Echoed*, we see the brutal torture of the old dog Shuja by the village boys and the equally brutal feeling of the giant oak tree by the guilt-oppressed Sabur. The treatment of Sadbagh and its inhabitants by the unnamed drug lord chimes in with the plunder of Nature thanks to insatiable human greed.

In the fifth chapter of the thesis, the researcher discussed relevant novels by Rahimi and Hosseini that point to the interface between culture and identity. As sociologists and political thinkers have explored, our personalities develop through a culturally embedded socialization process. Cultural scientists have come up with different views to explain the constant negotiations between the social 'constrictions' on the one hand and the 'constructions' of the individual identity.

Both Rahimi's *A Curse on Dostoevsky* and Hussein's *And the Mountains Echoed* show-case the culture/identity (including society/individual) interface in the lives of ordinary Afghans; for the society of this war-ravaged country is highly paternalistic, and still, it is the individuality of the characters, because (and in spite) of their national generalities, that often influence the 'decisions' that they take. In *A Curse on Dostoevsky*, Rassoul's motto is, 'I would be a murderer rather be a traitor. (CD56). This attitude motivates his actions and vacillations that stem from his typically Afghan culture. At a further remove, this forges his identity as an Afghan man in a lawless land because in Afghanistan, 'You can kill, rape, steal ... the important thing is not to betray. Not to betray Allah, your country, your friend'. (CD 101).

In Hosseini's *And the Mountains Echoed*, Nabi voices a strand of the culture of the war-ravaged Afghanistan when he remarks, 'I suspect the truth is that we are waiting, all of us, against insurmountable odds, for something extraordinary to happen to us .' (ME 104). Though Nabi and Nila Wahdati initially appears to be callous individuals as they make the deal that separates the siblings

Pari and Abdullah, hidden and noble aspects of their identity are later revealed in the narrative.

In this chapter, the researcher also sought to find out how the self and the society negotiate even in the tough times –how Afghanistan and the Afghans, as presented in Rahimi’s and Hosseini’s novels, deal with various crises through stoical endurance and heroic resistance to the same. In Rahimi’s *The Patience Stone*, for example, the unnamed female protagonist has to endure a crisis at the hands of patriarchy that would turn her into the proverbial patience stone or sang-e-labor. Like the patience stone, her ‘self’ explodes to assert itself. She gets the final opportunity to turn the table on the oppressive male as represented by her comatose husband. Similarly, in Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam gets raw deals throughout her life. Nevertheless, she is ultimately able to live, kill and die of her own accord by vindicating her self-identity.

The sixth and concluding chapter of the thesis summed up the issues raised and the inferences made in the previous chapters to present a holistic view of Afghanistan and Afghans gained from the several studies of the novels of Rahimi and Hosseini. Attempts were made to point up some other associated aspects of the novels. The novelists were concerned that they deserved and demanded strict critical attention, which the thesis could not adequately discuss.

The researcher tried to discuss how collages of Afghanistan get created in the novels of Rahimi and Hosseini both through passing descriptions within the stream of narratives and through narrative set-pieces; for, in this way, the homeland is at once remembered and re-membered by these diasporic writers.

REFERENCES

- Hosseini, Khaled. *Moreover, the Mountains Echo*. (abbr. *ME*) New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing India Pvt. Ltd., 2013. Print.
- . *The Kite Runner*. (abbr. *KR*) London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2004. Print.
- . *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. (abbr. *TSS*) London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2008. Print.
- Rahimi, Atiq. *A Curse on Dostoevsky*. (abbr. *CD*) Trans. Polly McLean. London: Chatto & Windus, 2013. Print.
- . *Three [Earth and Ashes (abbr. EA) (Trans. Erdag Goknar), A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear (abbr. TRDF) (Trans. Sarah Maguire & Yama Yari), The Patience Stone (abbr. PS) (Trans. Polly McLean)]*. New York: Others Press, 2013. Print.