

**Construction of Unauthentic Knowledge in Hosseini's Novel
And the Mountains Echoed**



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Abstract: *This research attempts to explore the creation of unauthentic knowledge in Khaled Hosseini's And the Mountains Echoed. Grounded in neo-orientalist theoretical framework, the study critically examines the representations of Afghans and Afghanistan in the selected novel, focusing perpetuation of neo-orientalist discourses and the construction of unauthentic knowledge. Drawing on the works of Edward Said, Spivak and Dabashi, the research applies the concept of "native informant". The study explores too the ways in which neo-orientalist discourses are produced, reproduced, and reinforced. Through a close reading method of the text, the analysis reveals instances of eroticization, othering, and the reinforcement of Western stereotypes about Afghanistan. The novel's representation of Afghan women tends to conform to Western preconceptions of Muslim women as oppressed and passive, overlooking their agency and diversity. Besides, the construction of the Afghan-American diaspora simplifies and exoticizes the experiences of Afghan immigrants, contributing to the perpetuation of unauthentic knowledge. The findings of this research underscore the importance of critically engaging with representations of non-Western cultures in literature and challenging the reliance on native informants. The research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of modern 'native informants' about Afghanistan.*

Keywords: Hosseini, Native Informant, And the Mountains Echoed, Afghanistan

Introduction

According to Edward Said, the West has been (mis)representing the East through systematic knowledge and still continues to this day in its representational discourses in media, literature and popular cultural production (Said, 1978). After 9/11, the role of (mis)representations increased dramatically and a hike was seen in the knowledge production by the orientals. Particularly, from Afghanistan and Iraq, the native informants appeared and the drive was to provide a justification for the so-called 'war on terror'. Under such evolved and politically

charged international environment, the amount of the perspective of knowledge produced needed proper substantiation. The key theorist, Hamid Dabashi and his work, *Brown Skin, White Masks* (2011) analysed and substantiated such knowledge. Dabashi investigated the issue in the academic and intellectual tradition of post-colonialism in order to trace the genealogy of the concept (Dabashi, 2011).

The research draws on Dabashi's concept of Native Informant and the postulates of his theory are applied to Khalid Hosseini's novel, *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013). The purpose is to

explore role of Hosseini as native informant including the authenticity of the knowledge he produces about the people, culture and society of Afghanistan. The research's purpose is to explore: whether Hosseini has played the role as a native informant in his novel *And the Mountains Echoed* and whether the construction of people and culture in the selected novel is misrepresented or not keeping in view Dabashi's theorization.

Hamid Dabashi, a prominent professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, argues that the use of native informants is a form of Neo-Orientalism that allows Western writers to appropriate and manipulate non-Western cultures for their own purposes. He states that, in the post-colonial age, the native informant represents the colonized. The right of the indigenous people to speak for his or her own people is allowed, though under the boundaries set by the West. Dabashi also argues that such works by the native informants are the product of the post-9/11 climate of fear and anxiety, which leads to the production of a particular image of Afghanistan shaped by the Western interests and biases (Dabashi 2011).

Hosseini, an expatriate Afghan, was born in Kabul in 1965. Granted political asylum, his family moved to California in 1980. Hosseini earned his medical degree and began practicing internal medicine in 1996. Hosseini runs his own welfare trust for the rehabilitation of Afghan people. He was declared as a US-Goodwill-Envoy to the United Nations Higher Commission for Refugee (UNHCR) in 2006. He has authored four novels: *The Kite Runner* (2003), *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013), and *Sea Prayer* (2018). *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013) is the story about Abdullah and his sister Pari embarking in 1952. They live with their father Saboor and stepmother, in a small village of Afghanistan called *Sadbagh*. Despite Saboor's efforts to find a good job that could feed his family but his efforts bore him no fruits and thus they are consistently poverty stricken. The intense love between the brother and sister, their long separation from each other and their eventual reunion is the storyline of the novel.

The intense love between Abdullah and Pari is exemplary and both of them are ready to sacrifice their lives for each other. However, a paradigm shift takes place from backwardness to modernity when both go abroad. The novelist has reported a huge gap in the reunion of the characters which accounts for a major portion of the plot's development. Love, friendship, family, and reunion are among the major themes of the novel (Hosseini, 2013). Hosseini's Afghanistan is a place where women are oppressed, men are violent, and the only hope for a better life is to escape to the West. This representation is not only simplistic but also perpetuates the idea that Afghanistan is a cultural wasteland that needs Western intervention to improve.

The theoretical framework employed for the analysis of the selected novel has been formulated from the theoretical postulates' of Dabashi's *Brown Skin, White Masks* (2011). The term Native Informant refers to those natives who serve the interests of the colonizers, either unwillingly or willingly. This service from the natives makes the culture, knowledge and land accessible to the colonizers as it is a process of making the development of imperialism possible through informing it on/about the natives. The native informant has also been called 'comprador' by some critics that is taken from Portuguese language and its etymology dates from 1840 which basically refers to a Chinese who is engaged as an agent in European business in China. It was after some time that the term got an extension to refer it to a native servant who basically serves the colonial commercial interests. In *Brown Skin, White Masks*, Hamid Dabashi (2004) has tried to uncover the philosophical foregrounding of the American supreme undertaking, and it's drawn out European shadow, by examining the nature and capacity of comprador intellectuals that he calls native informers.

As far as the term Native Informant is concerned, so Adam Shatz introduced it which is in opposition to Native Informer. Dabashi modified it from informer to informant. Dabashi says, "*Informant attributes to comprador intellectuals the knowledge they claim to have*

but do not. Whereas informer denotes the moral degradation associated with treachery” (p.12).

The typical Native Informant are born and raised either in Pakistan, Iran, Lebanon and Somalia and they immigrated to Europe or the United States for higher education, for financial status, however, they remained on the professional margins of the society whose interests they were serving. They showed alienation from native land. Some even made careers and felt themselves unable to live in native land. Native informants like Hirsi Ali, Irshad Manji and Azar Nafisi are considered as “voices of dissent” before the audience of the North American and Western European. They are considered as having difference of opinion against the innate barbarity of Islam (Dabashi, 2011).

Dabashi gives the example of Fouad Ajami that whenever he appears on American television to discuss *“the mindset of these Arabs”*, he never fails to include the phrase *“we Americans”*. These native informers will lock their self in an empty room before an interview in order to work on their accent but when they appear on TV or Radio their native accent jumps out of their mouths and accompany them whole heartedly (*Brown Skin White Masks*, 2011). Moreover, by native informers he does not refer to such translators, professors who use to teach in different countries, who are operating their daily occupation by teaching security languages but he refers to those who use muddy waters of the Great War in order to advance their own careers and life by abandoning their own native life. In an Essay *“The Native Informant”* (2003) in which Adam Shatz has done a very good service by placing an appropriate example of comprador intellectual at the heart of mobilized imperium: Fouad Ajami who use to live in Washington DC, although he was from Lebanon. He moved so deeply into the imaginations of the imperial power that he does not stops himself saying; *“we Americans ought to understand how the mind of these Arabs works!”* (p.42).

Analysis and Discussion

Dabashi in *“Native Informers and the making of the American Empire”* states that *“their task is to feign authority, authenticity, and native*

knowledge and thus to inform the U.S public of the atrocities that are taking place throughout the world, in the region of their native birth in particular, by way of justifying the imperial designs of the U.S as liberating these nations from the evil of their own designs”. (p.57).

In *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013), the native informants, on one hand, are the Afghan characters who narrate their stories to the Western reader. Referring back to literature review of the paper, Riaz (2021) in his article *“A Subaltern has Spoken”: Self (Re)-Orientalism in Atiq Rahimi’s “The Patience Stone”* that Afghanistan Orientalized by writing un authentic knowledge and writings about its people and culture and this propagation of knowledge is becoming the center of World attention after 9/11. West is truly in need of Native Informers to flourish their agendas by these so called authentic voices. On the other hand, Khalid Hosseini himself has served the role of the native informant by providing information to the western readers through his fiction.

Hamid Dabashi's concept of a "native informant" refers to an individual who is of a certain cultural background and is deemed to have the authority to speak on behalf of that culture. He clarifies this in his book *Brown Skin White Masks*, (2004) that; *“Informants credits comprador intellectual with the knowledge they claim to possess but in fact do not. Whereas informer suggests the moral degeneration which is specific to the act of betrayal”* (p.34). Hosseini, serves as native informant in the sense that he is an Afghan-American who has written extensively about Afghanistan and Afghan culture.

One of the central characters in *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013), is Nila Wahdati, a famous Afghan-born poet who lives in France. Nila serves as a native informant for the Western characters in the novel, providing them with insights into Afghan culture and society. When Nila Wahdati is questioned by the editor about her ancestry. He described Nila as a very gorgeous lady who does not identify as an Afghan. Nila recounts that her family relocated to Afghanistan to assist the reigning monarch at

the time, Amanullah, who desired to bring about secular change in the nation. Nila says that when Amanullah attempted to outlaw the female headscarf, a common practise in many Muslim communities, the Afghan people rose up in opposition and drove him out of the nation. Nila says in her closing statement that she wanted her daughter to grow up strong and joyful, and that it would have been challenging if she had lived in Afghanistan. She adds, *"Children are never everything you'd hoped for."* (p.181).

Further she talks about Afghanistan when giving an interview to Monsieur Boustouler, *"whether I approve or not is irrelevant. This is France, Monsieur Boustouler, not Afghanistan. Young people don't live or die by the stamp of parental approval"* (p. 195). She is describing and representing Afghanistan, its people and culture which is not suitable at all for young kids and women. But the stuff that Nila talked about in the interview was not even approved by her own daughter Pari because when Pari was reading her interview, she was not sure whether it's true about Afghanistan or not. Whether the things that Nila is highlighting about Nabi the old chauffeur and her father Suleiman Wahdati is true or not that's why she really wanted to visit Afghanistan and want to know about her family's heritage.

Nila is also depicted as a victim of Afghan patriarchy, which is presented as a monolithic and oppressive force. As she talked about patriarchy of Afghan men in the novel, even her own father she considered as a patriarch who is not in favor of women freedom *"My father would have to send a search party to bring me back. He would lock me up. For days. He would say from the other side of the door, you humiliate me. Why do you humiliate me so? What will I do about you? And sometimes he answered that question with his belt, or a closed fist. He'd chase me around the room. I suppose he thought he could terrorize me into submission"* (p. 209). As mentioned in literature review Ahmad (2021) states that *"these native intellectuals of third world countries are serving interests of their imperial masters"* (p.06) he says that these intellectuals, who are known as Native Informers are using English language as a tool

of creating knowledge about the horrific condition of women in Afghanistan, and it can be seen clearly that these women seek liberation from their own brown men.

Through the use of Abdullah as a native informant, Hosseini reproduces dominant Western discourses about Afghanistan, which often depict the country as backward, primitive, and in need of Western intervention. Similarly, it has been showed by Khalid Hosseini in the book *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013) that these afghan people are poor, Abdullah a major character in the novel was the one who sends money to Afghanistan for Adel and his father *"I have an uncle in America, my father's half-brother, uncle Abdullah. I've never met him. But he was sending us money every few months. It helped. It helped a lot"*. (p.258). The emphasis on the line helped a lot is clearly showing us the image of dependence of East on the West even in order to live peacefully in your own country, you need money and help from the West. This kind of colonial representation, according to Spivak, *"the 'West' representing and defining the 'East' on its behalf was to constitute the colonial subject as the other"* to support the West's dominance over the East (p. 22). In Said's book, *Orientalism* (1979), he provides a comprehensive analysis of colonialism's language and its portrayal of the "Other". This reinforces the idea that the West has a duty to help "civilize" Afghanistan and the broader Middle East, perpetuating the neo-Orientalist myth of the "white man's burden."

More commonly, Hosseini's work has been criticized for perpetuating a simplified or one-dimensional view of Afghan culture, particularly in his portrayal of Afghan women. For example, in the chapter "Pari," Hosseini portrays a young Afghan girl who is sold into marriage by her father, a storyline that perpetuates Western stereotypes of Afghan women as oppressed and powerless. He concludes: *"Girls like Pari are always the victims, aren't they? Always caught between two worlds. The one they can never fully embrace and the one they can never fully leave behind."* (p.128). This is exactly what Dabashi critiques the native informant for, i.e. perpetuating

stereotypes and presenting a simplified or one-dimensional view of their culture. He argues that this can serve to reinforce Western prejudices and misunderstandings. He contents: "*Native informants do not represent the intricacies of their cultures, but rather they cater to the commonplaces of Western prejudice*" (Dabashi, 2011).

Post-9/11 fiction set in Afghanistan is a prime example of neo-orientalism. Western authors who write about Afghanistan often present themselves as experts on Afghan culture, even if they have never set foot in the country. They rely on stereotypes and orientalist tropes to create a vision of Afghanistan that conforms to Western expectations. In doing so, they create unauthentic knowledge about Afghanistan that reinforces Western hegemony and marginalizes Afghan voices. However, Hosseini also presents a complex portrayal of Afghan society, weaving together the stories of multiple characters and exploring themes of family, loss, and displacement. In this way his work challenges certain Western assumptions about Afghan culture. The work can be productively analyzed through the lens of Neo-Orientalism to gain a deeper understanding of the complex ways in which Western representations of non-Western cultures can be both challenging and limiting. While Hosseini's work has been praised for its ability to humanize the Afghan people and shed light on their experiences, it has also faced criticism for perpetuating stereotypes and presenting a simplified or one-dimensional view of Afghan culture (Mehmood & Janjua, 2017).

Findings

Khaled Hosseini, the Afghan expatriate, has been raised, and educated in the United States since early 1980s. The event of 9/11 opened the space for the 'native informants' in the western countries, to support, through literary perspective, the narrative of their western masters. Khaled Hosseini was not the exception. He too, came to the forefront, and depicted his native Afghan culture and people from neo-orientalist lens, as other, uncivilized, and brutal. His knowledge about Afghanistan is unauthenticated in the sense that he left

Afghanistan in 1976, while, he came to Afghanistan, his native land, in 2003, as UN envoy, for a short visit. In this period, he never visited his native land ever. While his writings in fiction concentrated on this period, while is not only false, but misleading and unauthentic. In other word, the construction of knowledge in his fictional work is unauthentic.

Conclusion

There reside more than fifty ethnicities in Afghanistan. Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek are the major ethnicities who constitute around 90 percent of the total Afghan population. The Pashtun Durrani dynasty found Afghanistan in 1747 and they remained dominant throughout history in state and society. The other ethnicities remained as subalterns in the sense of state power. The Soviet invasion and subsequent occupation of Afghanistan (1979-1989) paved the way for weakening the hand of Pashtun in state and society, while, the marginalized ethnicities, not only strengthened, but got power too. In other words, the war (1979-1989) paved the way for massive influx of arms and cash into Afghanistan, which, ultimately, militarized the marginalized ethnicities. Once the war over (1989), civil war ensued and severe ethnic infightings began, killing rival ethnic groups. This ethnic strife in Afghanistan, can be one of the reason behind Hosseini's construction of unauthentic knowledge, misrepresenting the major ethnicity, on one hand, and to support the western agenda of war on terror, on the other. Unless and until the ethnic tension is resolved in Afghanistan, the native informants in Afghanistan, will remain, active, towards misrepresentation.

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