

The Single story of Afghans and Afghanistan in *The Kite Runner*



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Abstract: *Orient is the subject matter of nearly all orientalists' literary works. But this study utilizing the nexus of Lisa Lau's Re-orientalism and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's The Danger of a Single Story to know how Afghan-diasporic writer Khaled Hosseini through his re-orientalistic techniques present a partial image of Afghans' cultural and religious practices. This qualitative study utilizes textual analysis approach to analyze the text. The people of Afghanistan and their practices are represented in a stereotypical way. The study finds out those techniques that easily categorizes the novel The Kite Runner as a re-orientalist work. On the other hand, the literary representation of Afghans makes the story of the novel fable against the charges of a single story.*

Keywords: Re-orientalism, Single Story, Stereotyping, Totalization

Introduction

Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner* highlights Afghans' political, social, cultural, and religious activities. The narrative touches on contemporary issues like radicalism, fundamentalism, the Taliban, and the oppression of women in Afghanistan. The writer, through the words of the protagonist, Amir, takes the readers into the deplorable conditions of the streets and cultural practices of Afghans. Readers find the perception that has been created about Afghanistan and its people to be both strange and fascinating.

Orientalists' interest in the portrayal of Orientals still exists but, now, diasporic South Asian writers have taken the place of orientalists as the legitimate representatives of the Orient (Lau, 2009, p. 572). In addition to highlighting the methods and approaches used to produce these kinds of stories, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), discusses the detrimental effects that a "single story" can have. Adichie is of the opinion

that single stories often develop from simple misunderstandings or one's lack of knowledge of others, but these single stories can have the intention to suppress other groups of people in order to meet the dominant discourses. She opines that media and literature usually tell one story, which influences people to generalize and make assumptions about groups of people. (p. 3)

Statement of the Problem

By drawing a nexus between Lisa Lau's conceptualization of "Re-orientalism" and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's notion of "The Danger of the single story", we intend to investigate that how Khaled Hosseini through the technique of a 'single story' perpetrates the skewed, reductive, and decontextualized account of Afghans and Afghanistan in *The Kite Runner*.

Research Questions

1 How has Khaled Hosseini employed different techniques which have exacerbated the

detrimental effects of Re-orientalism in *The Kite Runner*?

2 How has Khaled Hosseini in *The Kite Runner* depicted that the characters are different rather than they are similar?

Objectives

- To know that how the writer, Khaled Hosseini, has practiced re-orientalist techniques in the novel *The Kite Runner*.
- To highlight the effects of re-orientalist practices on the representation of Afghan culture and religion in the novel.
- To know those hidden tactics of the writer which place him as the translator of cultural and religious practices of Afghans.
- To find out those reasons which lead the writer to depict the characters as different instead of presenting them as similar people.
- To bring forth those tendencies of the writer through which he presents the story of the novel as a single story and risks the critical thinking ability of the readers.

Significance of the Study

This study is important for those who want to know the position of Afghans cultural and religious practices in *The Kite Runner* and the role of power in influencing people's thoughts. This study allows scholars to gain insight into the hidden force that governs and defines the substance of a piece of literature. It will broaden the reader's comprehension of the novel and help them comprehend the importance of presenting a society in an impartial and balanced manner. It will educate readers on the notion that inadequate representation not only deprives those who are represented stereotypically of their dignity, but also makes it more difficult for them to be acknowledged as equal members of society.

Literature Review

In the novel *The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini presents two different cultures: the cultures of Afghans and the norms of Americans. Most of the characters are Afghans. But few of them try to keep ancestral practices aside and desire to

adopt the cultural and social practices of Americans. Iulia (2022) points out that the harsh cultural environment of Afghanistan has led them to change their culture. America is altogether different for them. America has provided them all those opportunities that were their desires. Therefore, they did not sustain their ancestral legacy (Iulia, 2022, p. 44–8)

Sara Iqbal Kakar. et al. (2021) have studied *The Kite Runner* in light of Achille Mbembe's Necropolitics. As an exercise of necropolitics, despite the deplorable situation of Afghans, America has pressurized the native people of Afghanistan to leave their country. By exercising power over Afghans, America accomplishes its goal (Kakar et al., 2021, pp. 2–3). Lal Surya and Adithya (2021) study highlight how power determines the abilities and disabilities of the human body. Pashtuns are represented as normal and competent, while Hazaras are represented as disabled and weak. It is made clear that disability is socially constructed element. Power entertains the authority to label people as disabled, different, or normal. (pp. 51–55)

Maha Qahtan Sulaiman (2022) analyzes the novel by using Yi Fu Tuan's definition of the meaning and purpose of religion. It can be said that the concept of Islam and Tuan's idea about religion are not on the same page. The Taliban only follows the laws that are prescribed by Islamic legislation. The problem lies in the difference between Islamic laws and the demands of contemporary social and political life. (pp. 278–279). Saood Khan et al. (2021) use Fairclough's three-dimensional analysis to trace Hazara's genocide. Hazaras are not only facing genocidal atrocities, but they also bear other dehumanizing activities such as sexual abuse, religious conflict, socio-political conflict, and economic conflict too. (pp. 673-675)

Research Methodology

We have analysed the novel *The Kite Runner* in the light of 'Re-orientalism' and 'The Danger of Single Story'. By using qualitative research method, we have explored and interpreted the text of the novel in the presence of mentioned concepts. We have traced the re-orientalist

tactics that are practiced by the writer, Khaled Hosseini and his inclination to depict the story of the novel from the perspective of a single stories.

Theoretical Framework

Before the rise of Re-orientalism, Edward Said (1978) argued that Europeans had split the world into the Occident and the Orient, and held the authority to portray the East (p. 1). However, Lisa Lau (2009) clarifies that "Re-Orientalism is based on how cultural producers with eastern affiliations come to terms with an Orientalized East, whether by playing (along with) them or by discarding them altogether" (p. 572). Those techniques that are considered problematic in the practices of Re-orientalism are: the necessity of being recognizably South Asian; generalization and totalization; and truth claims. However, the portrayal of the South Asian characters is stereotyped, sensationalized, and oversimplified (pp. 582-585). It is the pseudo-power that has been granted to Diasporic South Asian writers to portray their own culture and religion as the orientalist had portrayed. (Brouillette, 2007, p. 43)

Vikram Chandra (2000), opines that the standard to evaluate a literary work's authenticity is not generally, universally, applicable. Such literary works that fall short to the intended goals are not accepted by the cult of authenticity (pp. 15–19). Therefore, the post-Saidian era has observed harsh critique, because only those writers have been given career-making opportunities who have western acquaintances (Chaudhuri, 2005, p. 10).

Kwame Anthon (1992), opines that South Asian Anglophone writers mislead readers under the guise of reacting to the practices of colonizers. They too support the colonialist approach in portraying the Orient. They work as cultural brokers (p. 149). As other mediums that are used to sustain power, literature is also used as a product of power and its content is used as a 'discourse that provides support to the prevailing power' (Foucault, 1982). Mushtaq Bilal (2016) considers that due to the vigilant surveillance of Western politics, diasporic South Asian writers are unable to challenge the

misconceptions propagated against eastern societies, Islam and the Muslim communities in particular (p. 20).

According to Adichie (2009), it is a single story that presents partial image of a society. Stories are not apolitical. It is power that determines stories nature. Collective mindsets are shaped in desired directions by using single stories. The harsh repercussions of a single story are that it creates difficulty in the recognition of human beings as equal because "it emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar" (Adichie, 2009, p. 4).

Analysis

Postcolonial literature has been reshaped by diasporic writers. Rather than criticizing, the new genre of fiction overlooks to express discomfort with the dominant orientalist techniques of depicting the Orient (Shivani qtd. in Lau, 2009, p. 19). To sustain the dominant discourse of orientalism, Hosseini tries to draw a line between the socio-political situation of Afghanistan and America. The concept of Occident and Orient is made clear by Rudyard Kipling when he says, "Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" (Kipling, 1994, p. 44). On the basis of the inclination of different characters towards the practices of Afghanistan and America, Hosseini presents the differences between occidental society and oriental society. The contrasts between them illustrate how Hosseini uses re-orientalist techniques to construct a single story about the cultural and religious customs of the Afghan people.

Despite the fact that every character is Afghan, they are depicted as distinct because some of them strive to give up their cultural and religious practices. On the other hand, those who adhere to Afghan religious and cultural customs and wish to preserve their ancestors' identities are portrayed stereotypically. Assef, Mullah Fatiullah, Taliban, Farid, and Sanaubar adhere to Afghan culture and religion, and they are portrayed as illiterate, patriarchal, primitive. Amir, Baba, Raheem Khan, and Soraya struggle to adopt American customs and thus, they are portrayed as liberal, educated, and civilized.

Hosseini points out those characteristics of Afghans that give readers a bad impression of the country. Such acts not only dehumanize Afghans' practices but also strip them of their dignity.

The main character, a Pashtun boy named Amir, appears to be a well-read boy. While utilizing his knowledge, he takes advantage of the illiteracy that exists among Afghans. Amir is represented as superior to other Afghans. He possesses the ability to expose the appalling conditions in Afghanistan to the world. His positional superiority has made him to speak for the subjugated Afghans. "You know the best," Wahid says to Amir, "tell the rest of the world what the Taliban are doing to our country" (Hosseini, 2009, p. 192). In fact, the protagonist's duty to expose the suffering of Afghans to the world highlights Hosseini's positional dominance. By using his voice to translate Afghan customs, he presents his work as an authentic representation. Thus, the writer presents the deplorable situation of Afghans to show to the World that Afghanistan is in desperate need of civilizing. As a colonizer, he uses Afghanistan and its people to symbolize his power. Afghans' helplessness is considered as an opportunity as it gives him the strength that comes "from the weakness of others" (Conred, 1994, p. 8).

Amir looks at the situation of Afghanistan as an outsider and states, "A sadness came over me. Returning to Kabul was like running into an old forgotten friend and seeing that life hadn't been good to him, that he'd become homeless and destitute" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 201). He does not treat Afghanistan and its people as his own. In contrast to Afghanistan, which is portrayed as a depressing place, America is shown as a place where sinners can wash away their sins. Against the deplorable situation in Afghanistan, America is described as:

America was different. America was a river . . . I could wade into this river, let my sins drown to the bottom . . . Someplace with no ghosts, no memories, and no sins . . . If for nothing else, for that, I embraced America. (Hosseini, 2003, p. 109)

His portrayal of the two nations has dispossessed and ridiculed the oppressed people of Afghanistan while only empowering and humanizing those who identify themselves as Americans or adhere to American standards.

Raheem Khan is another character who does not consider Afghanistan to be a liveable place. He shares the situation of Afghanistan with Amir and says, "Children are fragile, Amir Jan. Kabul is already full of broken children" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 179). His words relegated Afghan society to an inhumane status. Compared to his home country, he considers America as a place full of opportunities. He describes the optimistic nature of America and says to Amir, "I see America has infused you with the optimism that has made her so great" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 166). It is the optimism that has led the writer, as a reformer, to change the cultural and religious practices of Afghans. Through the words of above characters, it has been made clear that Europe, especially America, is the home of order, rationality, and symmetry, and whereas the Orient as the place of "disorder, irrationality, and primitivism" (Said, 1977, p. 38).

On the other hand, Hosseini portrays those characters who adhere to Afghan culture and religion as ignorant, backward, uncivilized, and marginalized. Assef's character, standing in stark contrast to Amir, is presented in a crude way. All those attributes that establish his identity as animalistic and inhumane are given to him. As Amir describes his characters, "His well-earned reputation for savagery... nicknamed him Assef_Goshkhor_, or Assef 'the Ear Eater'" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 29). In line with orientalist, Hosseini presents Assef as a barbaric and inhumane figure. With a particularly exotic portrayal of the native people, the author, an Afghan immigrant, presents himself as an authentic storyteller in order to satisfy the "insatiable reading appetite of the occidental reader" (Huggan, 2002, p. 13).

In addition to Assef's position, the Taliban have been depicted as practitioners of exotic practices. The image created by Hosseini supports the stereotypes propagated by orientalist. Raheem Khan's narration demonstrates their savagery. He begins by

telling the tale of Hassan and his spouse,

A pair of Talib officials came to investigate and interrogated Hassan. Hassan protested again. So they took him to the street...and shot him in the back of the head . . . Farzana came screaming and attacked them . . . shot her too (Hosseini, 2003, p. 178).

All those traits that are considered animalistic have been given to them. They're depicted as usurpers of human rights. Hosseini responds to the Afghan Taliban and their religion in a manner reminiscent of how orientalists have treated Eastern societies, portraying them as deeply mystical, introspective, and otherworldly in nature. Orientalists believe that some people fit the definition of "other"—that is, "as monsters, aliens, or savages who threaten the stability of the rational human self or the values of civilized society" (Morton, 2003, p. 37).

Afghan women are portrayed inferior. Hosseini portrays Sanaubar as having "brilliant green eyes and impish face had tempted countless men into sin . . . Sanaubar's suggestive stride and oscillating hips sent men to reveries of infidelity" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 6). The peculiar, rugged, and marginalized aspects of a Pashtun woman are selected and shared as a common fact about Pashtun women. The stereotype of Muslim women that is attached to her, is that they are sensual, helpless, and incapable of defending themselves (Zine, 2006, p. 35). Afghan people and their customs are portrayed in a mystic way. The writer's materialistic approach has made it easy for him to highlight those practices of Afghans that are already consigned to orientals. Their lifestyles have been mocked. Afghanistan's conditions have been portrayed strange and terrible because they are associated with a notion of simplicity that "goes along with the idea of a mystic East" (Clini, 2021, p. 5).

The representation only highlights the terrible state of Afghan society while ignoring diversity, which serves to reinforce Eurocentrism rather than universality. The author's portrayal of Afghanistan functions as a betrayal of cultural roots and an abandonment of allegiance to Afghans and their practices. While reacting to

Afghanistan's religious customs as an outsider, the author assists orientalists. However, the issue lies in the portrayal of Baba, a Pashtun character, as a liberal who rejects Islamic teaching and says, "If there's a God out there, then I would hope he has more important things to attend to than my drinking scotch or eating pork. Now, hop down" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 13). These exaggerated and idealistic interpretations of the native customs of Afghans serve as a constant rehashing of stereotypes. In the discourse of colonialism, stereotypes are viewed as a "sign of cultural, historical, and racial difference" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 297). Throughout the narrative, the ideological stratification is used to uphold the Western world's hegemony over Afghanistan. Once more, the author mocks the prayer and gives credit to technology progress and states,

All the men prayed together. One of the refugees asked Baba why he wasn't joining them. God is going to save us all. Why don't you pray to him? Baba snorted a pinch of his snuff. Stretched his legs. What'll save us is eight cylinders and a good carburetor. (Hosseini, 2003, p. 96)

The way Islam is portrayed lends support to harmful ideologies against its traditions. Islam, according to Hosseini, is out of step with the needs of the modern world, where technology has enabled everything. Notably, those who create the perception of Islam frequently portray it as "anti-rational and anti-scientific, incapable of progressing with social changes" (Lockman, 2009, p. 79).

The distorted representation of Afghan society remains dangerous for the represented community. Readers may get a false impression of the Afghan people as a whole due to the incomplete portrayal of a small number of Afghans' behaviors and their practices. It has also created a problem for the readers to accept Afghans as same humans as Westerners. The cultural and religious bias towards the targeted society works as "genocide of a particular community" (Ahmad, 2013, p. 354). The practices of Hosseini make it reliable that representation of orientals at the time of colonization was not without the "consent of Orientals, nor were Orientalists all Westerners"

(Said qtd in Lau, 2009, p. 589).

Conclusion

While depicting Afghanistan as a country of those who are either passive, violent, barbaric, or inhuman, Hosseini exposes himself as proxy of orientalist. He has utilized different re-orientalist techniques to show that the writer is an authentic representative of his country. His work is not in the position to break the stereotypical image about Eastern people, especially about Afghanistan, but it further makes those stereotypes as legitimate. As he writes "I bow to the west" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 292), therefore he compromises not only on the practices of Afghans but also subjugates his consciousness and intellect against his masters. Perhaps, the author's indifference for Afghanistan's social practices and its people demonstrates that the work is created under pressure, consequently pre-emptively refuting the claim that the literary portrayal is a true representation of Afghans. By presenting only those practices of Afghans which are against the practices of West relegate the novel to the position of a single story. The single story of Afghans not only usurps their dignity but also support westerners' superiority. Instead of supporting western agendas, such literary portrayal compromise critical thinking. Instead of a single story, the blemished identity of Afghans can be restored by presenting their diverse stories. Multiple stories not only provide space for critical thinking but they can be used to gain deeper understanding of Afghans' cultural and religious practices and its complexities.

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