



REPRESENTATION OF AFGHANISTAN CULTURAL IDENTITY IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S *THE KITE RUNNER*

Vaishali, MPhil. Scholar, School for Languages, Literature and Culture, Department of Comparative Literature, Central University of Punjab, Bathinda

Abstract: *Afghanistan is the land of many ethnic groups. So that there are many different cultures and all groups call proudly themselves Afghans. Afghanistan has been disrupted in 25 years by wars and Taliban rule totally destroyed Afghan culture, families and created thousands of refugees. So many Afghans migrate in the United States with their own cultural identity. Afghanistan is an Islamic country and Islamic religious tradition and codes, together with traditional tribal and ethic practices, play an important role in personal conduct and dispute settlement. Here, in Afghanistan, the celebration of Id, Afghan literature, long schools in summer days and kite flying tournament in winter days in Kabul are mainly depicted in this novel.*

Keywords: *Cultural Identity, Afghanistan Culture, Characters of Amir and Hassan.*

INTRODUCTION

Identity is an idea and expression of a person and other individuality or society groups. It is a private sense of self which have a conscious and unconscious feeling, personal beliefs and values, rational and irrational motivations, and facts which constitution the social context that we have experience of feelings and motivations. Identities are According to Dacey in his book *Adolescent Development* as “relatively stable, role- specific understanding and expectations about self” (Dacey). So that the identity is a label where identifications refer to the classification act itself.

Identity is the fact of being who or what a person or thing is. Everybody lives in different countries in the world with different culture, ethnics, personality and culture. These differences make his or her identity in society. Identity is used to know the social status of ethnicity, races, community etc. Arvind Kumar Jha states this in his book *Indian Diasporic Literature in English* as:

“Diasporic production of cultural meaning occurs in many areas, such as contemporary music, film, theatre and dance, but writing is one of the most



interesting and strategic ways in which Diaspora might disrupt the binary of local and global and problematize national, racial and ethnic formulations of identity” (37).

Culture refers to the customs, practices, language and values that define social groups which based on nationality, ethnicity, regions and common interests. According to the Stuart Hall in his article *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* as “cultural identity in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificial imposed ‘selves’ which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common” (51). Now Cultural identity is based on particular ethnic groups and how they influence one’s feelings and behaviors. It is important to people’s sense of self and how they relate to others.

This definition defines that the cultural identity reflects the common experiences and shared cultural values such as language, customs and religions. Like in this novel, the Afghans which lived in Kabul used to speak Dari (Afghan Farsi) language which is their native language to communicate others. Khaled Hosseini also used Dari language in his novel *The Kite Runner* as “Soraya’s family would have thrown the engagement party, the *Shirini- khori* or Eating of the Sweets” (156). Since the language is the kind of culture so they shared their culture through language. We are more aware of our cultural identity when we found ourselves in another than when we are in our own culture. Amir tries to maintain his original identity, Pashtun, in his host country, America, with his family.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan-American novelist and physician. He was born on 4 March 1965 in Kabul, Afghanistan and now lives in California. In his childhood, Hosseini has enjoyed reading foreign novels in translation and he has also written short stories of his own. When the Soviet war started in Afghanistan, they settled in California in 1980. Hosseini came to America when he was only 15 years old and don’t know how to speak English. He has continued his study in California and has struggled with English. He has completed his graduation in 1984 and then earn bachelor’s degree in Biology in 1988. After that, he has entered at the University of California and has completed his M.D. He has practiced medicine and continued to write short stories in his spare time. In 2006, he has awarded the Humanitarian Award from the United Nations Refugee Agency and has become a U.S goodwill envoy to the organization. He has created The Khaled Hosseini Foundation in 2007,



which funds projects to empower vulnerable groups in Afghanistan, such as women and children.

In 2003, Khaled Hosseini's first novel *The Kite Runner* was released. This novel is set in Afghanistan, based on two boys' story that lived in Kabul, Afghanistan. This novel has many themes including Ethnic tension between the Hazara and Pashtun in Afghanistan and the experience of the immigration of Amir and his father in the United States. The novel has received the South African Boeke Prize in 2004. His second novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has published in 2007. In this novel, he depicts the experience of the women per-war Afghanistan, during the soviet occupation, the civil war and under the Taliban dictatorship continued his writing and after that, he has released his third novel *And Mountain Echoed* in 2013.

The Kite Runner opens with Amir, narrator and protagonist, who lives in California and at that time, he is releasing his novel. On late summer, Rahim Khan, his Baba's close friend, calls him to come to see him in Pakistan. After that call, Amir thinks about his life and his friend Hassan in Kabul where they have played together in childhood. Hassan was a Hazara, Shia Muslim, and Amir was a Pashtun, Sunni Muslim. Hassan and his father, Ali, was a servant in Amir's house. Hassan's mother, Sanaubar, was given him birth in 1964 just after one year Amir's mother died giving birth to him. Amir was taught from mullah who taught him Islam but Hassan didn't study and help his father at home in many works. Amir used to tell stories to Hassan from his favorites book *Shahnamah*, sitting cross legs under the shadows of pomegranate trees. And he especially liked the two characters "Rostam and Sohrab". Amir himself wrote some short stories that wanted to tell his father but his father was not interested.

One day, Amir and Hassan have gone to a park where people were flying kites. Amir bought one and got Hassan to fly it with him. They spot another kite and battled it. Using one of Hassan's favorite tricks, they won. Continuing their winning streak, Amir won the next tournament. Hassan was set off to run the losing kite and was trapped at the end of an alley. Assef, a Pashtun boy who hated him because of being a Hazara, and raped him. Amir was watched this and ran away. When Hassan appeared with the Kite, Amir pretended as he didn't know what happened. Afterward, Amir and Hassan drift apart. Amir, racked by guilt, decided either he or Hassan must leave. He stuffed money and a watch under Hassan's



pillow and told Baba that Hassan stole it. When Baba confronted them, Hassan admitted to it, though he didn't do it. Shortly after, Ali and Hassan moved away.

In 1981, they escaped from Kabul and settled in California. Amir continued his study and completed his graduation in California. His father worked in a gas station. Then they met with General Taheri, an old friend of Baba, and his daughter Soraya. Then Baba was diagnosis with lungs cancer. Amir and Soraya married and after a month, Baba died. Amir and Soraya were unable to get a baby and doctor advised them to adopt the child. Amir worked on his writing career. Then he received a call from Pakistan. Rahim Khan wants to see him. Amir went there and decided to meet Rahim Khan. Rahim Khan told him that Hassan was his really half-brother from Hazara woman.

Amir decided to go Kabul with driver Farid. When they reached Kabul everything was changed. They find Orphanage where Sohrab, the son of Hassan was supposed to be. But the director of the Orphanage told them that Taliban took him from there a month ago. They fixed a meeting with Taliban guard with the official. When they met, Sohrab appeared more feminine and suggested that men sexually abused him. When Amir talks with an official he recognized that he was Assef who thereafter was beaten Amir badly and broke his ribs. Amir and Sohrab escaped from there with the help of Farid. They recovered in the hospital and spend few weeks in a hotel. Amir told Sohrab to live with him in U.S and Sohrab accepted. But officers tell Amir that the adoption of Sohrab was impossible. So, he had to live in Orphanage for a few time and then, at that time Sohrab tried to commit suicide but Amir saved him. Amir and Soraya figured out a way to get Sohrab to U.S. He lived with them, but he stopped speaking entirely. One day, they went to a park where people were flying kites. Amir bought one and got Sohrab to fly with him. They spot another kite and battled it. Using one of Hassan's favorite tricks, they won. Sohrab smiled, and as the losing kite filed loose, Amir set off to run it for Sohrab.

ETHNICITY IN AFGHAN CULTURE

The Ethnicity comes out from their homeland Afghanistan which is an ethnic group like Pashtun, Hazara, Tajik, Baluch and many other groups. The writer analyzes the cultural identity because their conflict based on cultural identity from the same country but different ethnic groups. It is not actually based on political wars but cultural ethnic groups include loyalty and family. Shanzehk explains it in his article *The Kite Runner by Khaled*



Hosseini as “The story doesn’t focus as much on politics and war as it does on the lives of those affected. It is a tale of family and friendship, loyalty and salvation amid the horrors of war” (Shanzehk). In this novel, the writer shows the cultural conflict between children based on ethnic group. Hassan belongs to Hazara which a minority is grouping in Afghanistan and every Pashtun hatred them. Even Taliban killed every Hazara people in afghan and took their children in orphanages. Women conditions were also very bad and denied their right to education, work and so on. Pashtun rules over afghan so Assef, who is a Pashtun, disliked Hassan and raped him. Amir, who is also Pashtun and belongs to the rich family background, indirectly hatred Hassan and doesn’t help to save him from Assef who raped him. There are many same cultural identities in Afghan even they belong to different ethnic groups.

AFGHAN CULTURE

Afghanistan literature is rich in literary tradition. The ancient art of storytelling continues to flourish in Afghanistan. They tell Folklores which concerns Afghans life, tradition, values, beliefs and behaviors. Classical poetry and plays are playing very important role in Afghan culture. Most of the afghan peoples are uneducated and cannot read and write so Folklore and Legends told through the medium of songs and storytelling. In this novel, the writer also depicts this cultural tradition through Amir and Hassan. Hassan is an uneducated but Amir goes to school. He used to tell his own written stories to Hassan. Amir and Hassan like poetry and other literature work like epics. Amir usually told him the story of Shahn amah which is 10th century epic of ancient Persian heroes. Hassan likes it very much even in his birthday he demands to listen to a story from this epic. “He like it all the chapters, the shahs of old, Feridoun, Zal, and Rudabeh. But his favorite story and mine was “Rostam and Sohrab” the great warrior Rostam...” (Hosseini 27) Hassan was so much crazy about this story and he named his son Sohrab from this story’s name. Amir also writes own stories and become a great novelist in America. He can write his first story in 30 minutes.

The people of Afghanistan are a firm believer in the omnipresent God and follow the principles of Islam. They believe that Islamic law permits every ‘believer’ to maintain arms when they directed by the rulers. Amir and Hassan belong to the same tradition of Islam. Hassan prays every day with his father. Afghan celebrates Eid Al-Adha as how the prophet Ibrahim almost sacrifices his own son for god. Amir, Hassan and his father see all this in the backyard every year. On Eid, the three days celebration after the holy month of Ramadan,



Kabul dressed and wear newest clothes, visited their family. Writers depict all tradition of the afghan in this novel very clearly and enjoy this tradition in his life as “People hugged and kissed and greeted each other with “Eid Mubarak”. Happy Eid. Children opened gifts and played with dyed hard-boiled eggs” (Hosseini 41). Hassan also got the gift by Baba on this occasion and played with Amir. There is another tradition which writer show in this novel; it is a Yeida which is the longest night of the winter in the month of Jadi. On this night, Amir and Hassan listen to stories from Ali about ancient tales of sultans and thieves. People of the town eat watermelon in this night so they wouldn’t get thirsty in coming summer. Yelda is a starless night and endless dark, waiting for the sun rise.

Afghanistan is a multilingual country. There are two languages Dari and Pashto that is used to communicate. Dari is the Afghan’s Farsi language which is an official language in Afghanistan. Hosseini used most of the words in Dari language in his novel as “Hey, Babalu, who did you eat today? Huh? Come on, Babalu, give us a smile!” (Hosseini 36). Here Bablu means Boogeyman and this is Dari word. Somewhere Hosseini used Dari language and also mentioned the meaning of the word in English. ““You look Khoshtep,” said Baba. Handsome” (Hosseini 153). He used some another word of Dari language like Bas, Bachem, Bakhshesh, Bismillah, Chai, Chapan, Inshallah, Jan, Hafez, Kursi etc in his novel.

The most famous game in Afghanistan is kite flying tournament. It is an old traditional game in winter. Hosseini shows this wonderful game in his novel and through this game, he depicts the incident which makes between two friends. The kite flying tournament is a competition which started early in the morning and doesn’t end until only the winning kite flying in the sky. During this novel, Baba wants that Amir wins this tournament. Amir is flying the kite and Hassan is the assistant and hold his spool. Amir won this tournament and Hassan run to take the kite as a reward for him. Through this tradition, Amir comes close to his father but hate Hassan. Which kite is cut by the winner is a reward of his winning and only this kite can come close to him with his father. For this kite, Hassan has sacrificed himself and Amir doesn’t help him to save from Assef who raped him. Amir feels guilt for this and wants him to get off his life so he is accusing Hassan of stealing his money and watch. Hassan from inferior ethnic and accept everything from the superior ethnic Amir. It is a cultural identity which never changed.



Hassan's identity is Hazara in Afghanistan as Shai Muslim which is a low ethnic group. Their physical appearance is so different than Afghans like Pashtun. The writer shows this through Hassan and Amir. Hassan has a round face like Chinese people and broad nose, narrow eyes. They are completely illiterate like Hassan and Ali and do low jobs like a servant, waiter or beggar. On the other hands, Pashtun has their identity which belongs to Sunni Muslim. Their identity cannot be changed by anything. They are the upper class of Afghan. In America Amir and Baba shows that the Pashtun is the richest ethnic. They still keep their tradition and habits as Pashtun.

Here writer also shows that the refugees or migrates adopt some new culture in the host society but also maintain their own identity. Some country people accept them but same cannot believe them. They are sick about their cultural identity and adopt some cultural identity from the host society. Some country people don't accept them and want to avoid them. Every country has their own cultural identity. Hosseini shows this in his novel through the American store owner's conflict with Baba. The owner of the store asks Baba's ID because they don't believe in Baba's check. This is common in America but Baba offended him, because in Afghanistan, they buy something by just take the wooden stick as a credit card but not ask for ID. Amir also maintains his afghan culture in marriage. He uses his tradition wedding ceremony with Soraya such as Lafz which is Nika. Soraya also wears afghan tradition dress in her marriage. They signed the certificate and their families give them a mirror and threw a veil over their heads. Amir also uses the tradition of afghan when his father was dead people wear dark dresses and covered their heads with traditional white Hijabs.

CONCLUSION

In this novel, we find out various cultures which Hosseini depict very beautiful way. He wants to introduce about the Afghan culture and different ethnic groups and their conditions. He introduced us many relationships between them and their effects on them. The kite is a symbol of the success of Afghan boys in this novel. The cutting of kite is not a complete victory for them. In this story, the run and get the last kite is Hassan. He is the best kite Runner for Amir in this story that gets every kite without looking the sky. We also explain the two characters that develop the whole story and performed with the conflict through their actions and dialogues. The writer also analysis the cultural identity issues



which are the base for the actions and conflicts between Amir and Hassan. Because they belong to different ethnic groups but live in the same country. Their cultural identity influences their life which creates internal and external conflicts.

REFERENCES

- [1] Dacey, S. John and Maureen Kenny. *Adolescent development*. university of Virginia: Brown and Benchmark, 1997. Print
- [2] Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity and Difference* (1997): 51. Print
- [3] Hosseini, Khaled. *The Kite Runner*. London: Bloomsbury, 2003. Print
- [4] Jha, Arvind Kumar and Ram Kumar Naik. *Indian Diasporic Literature in English*. New Delhi: Crescent Publishing Corporation, 2014. Web. 11 dec. 2014
- [5] *Kite Runner-Amir Jan*. 05 dec 2014. 06 dec 2014
<<http://www.123helpme.com/view.asp?id=161744>>.web
- [6] Shanzehk. "The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini." *Teenink* 03 dec 2014. Web. 12 dec 2014
- [7] Wendt, Alexander. "Anarchy is what states make of it." *International Organization* 1992: 394. Web. 13 dec 2014