

## Cultural Trauma and Identity Crisis in the Novels of Khaled Hosseini

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### ABSTRACT

**This paper attempts to highlight cultural trauma and identity crisis in the novels of Khaled Hosseini. Afghanistan's culture, traditions, and customs are unique to its geographical setting as a landlocked country. The glorious land of the Afghans is now much focussed on the basis of political attention and ethnic differences. However, a closer look at this region makes it easy to understand current events in Afghanistan. The present culture of Afghanistan exposes the distorted culture and tradition as the result of trade, war, and migration. Khaled Hosseini's novels portray the lives and inclinations of Afghans which are centred on their home and familial relationship. The familial bond is fragmented due to continuous power conflicts. Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic country but they are combined by a common thread 'religion'. The fierce loyalty towards their clan, tribe and courage is another common facet of all Afghans. Afghan society is based on kinship and so their friendly nature has led to the current political conditions that leads to human suffering and instability in politics. Religion, culture, identity, tradition and customs are the basic and important strands in Afghan society. The crisis of these strands in Afghan society and the group conscious of the migrated people are the important issues that are discussed in this paper.**

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, cultural trauma, identity crisis, Khaled Hosseini

## Cultural Trauma and Identity Crisis in the Novels of Khaled Hosseini

Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic and geographically landlocked country. The country foregrounds its belief and tradition based on kinship and familial love. The culture of Afghanistan starts from their tribal communities. These communities formed by their own ethnic identity and as its outcome, the society has various ethnic communities. The hierarchy of Afghan society is rooted on their ethnic differences. A country's glorification is known by its distinct identity and through their values on religion, culture and tradition. Afghanistan secures a significant place in history and known for many pessimistic view and destruction force. This paper tries to present the cultural richness and identity of Afghanistan through the novels of Khaled Hosseini and the trauma preceding the war. In addition, this paper tries to analyse the elements of cultural trauma and identity crisis with reference to Khaled Hosseini's novels.

Afghanistan is the land of many ethnic groups. It has been disrupted by various wars and emergence of Taliban regime. The war and disputes totally destroyed Afghan culture, families and created thousands of refugees. Afghans migrate to the Pakistan, United States, France and lead their life with their own cultural identity with struggle. In addition, Afghanistan is a landlocked and an Islamic country. Islamic religious tradition and codes, together with traditional tribal ethnic practices, play an important role in personal behaviour of Afghans which later turned as the reason for the clash conflicts in Afghanistan.

In Ancient days, Afghanistan literature is rich in literary tradition which reflects their identity through their literary works. The ancient art of storytelling is the richest form in Afghanistan literature which concerns Afghans life, tradition, values, beliefs, culture, and behaviours. Most of the Afghans are uneducated due to numerous warfare and so folklores and poems are carried to next generation through the medium of songs and storytelling.

Khaled Hosseini, in his novel, *And the Mountains Echoed* says, “we Afghans love our poetry; even the most uneducated among us can recite verses of Hafez or Khayyam or Saadi” (111).

Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan-American novelist and physician. Hosseini migrated to America as a political refugee during Russian invasion and interruption of America in Afghanistan’s political governance. He has continued his study in California and has struggled to learn the language English because of the influence of his native language. Initially, he has practiced medicine and due to his passion, he becomes an author of numerous awards. In 2006, he has awarded the Humanitarian Award from the United Nations Refugee Agency and has become a U.S goodwill representative to the organisation. He is the founder of The Khaled Hosseini Foundation in 2007, which funds projects to empower helpless groups in Afghanistan, especially to Afghan women and children. He has written three novels namely, *The Kite Runner* (2003), *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), and *And The Mountains Echoed* (2013). His novels present traumatic events which are rarely discussed by the readers.

In addition, his novels make the readers or non-afghans to know the unknown facts and breaks the stereotypical idea on Afghanistan and its civilians. The novels of Hosseini depict the past days of Afghanistan before the invasion of Soviet Union which is largely seen as a forgotten period in modern Afghan history. For western people, Afghanistan is synonymous with opium trade, Soviet war and the Taliban but Hosseini’s novels present harmonious environment that prevailed in Afghan society. The plots of Khaled Hosseini’s novels have diasporic elements. The reason behind their migration is the effect of war. In migrated countries Afghans live with their traumatised memories.

Khaled Hosseini’s first novel published in the year 2003, *The Kite Runner*. This novel is set in Afghanistan, based on two Afghan boys, Amir and Hassan lived in Kabul, Afghanistan. This novel has universal themes including ethnic anxiety between the Hazara

and Pashtun in Afghanistan and the immigrant experiences of Amir and his father, Baba in the United States. The novel has received the South African Boeke Prize in 2004.

The second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has published in 2007. In this novel, he depicts the life of Afghan women before soviet invasion in Afghanistan, during the soviet invasion, the civil war under the Taliban dictatorship. This novel insists the value of Afghan cultural identity from the female perspective. He has published his third novel *And Mountain Echoed* in 2013. This novel is an example of true relationship among the family members and it says about the people's opinion on Afghanistan after the atrocities of various wars and invasion. It changed the real nature of the country. Unlike other novelist, who writes about the darker sides of Afghanistan, Hosseini presents the joyful and optimistic environment. He also depicts the struggles of immigrants who are unwelcome by other countries. The characters in Khaled Hosseini novels yearns for the association and strive hard to gain Afghan identity.

Our world undergoes different forms of crises, including world wars, hunger, famine and hazardous diseases. Apart from these crises, the postmodern world witnesses the rise of terrorism and its inhuman attacks. The feelings of uncertainty and terrorism has always troubled human beings and it is recorded in literature through literary works. Subsequently, the life of Afghan people is filled with uncertainty and fear after witnessing the war and destruction of their family, culture, and society. The fear and being victim of the war affects the psyche of an individual and community that leads to trauma. Trauma is originally taken from the Greek means wound. In literature, trauma is known as the wound that inflicted in the minds of the victims. In Afghanistan, the victims are the people who witnesses the traumatic event, undergoes horrific situation and live with traumatized memories.

The concept of trauma has different perspectives, and many theorists included trauma as a theory in multidisciplinary way. Trauma is not only discussed in terms of medicine and

psychiatric literature rather it is evolved in various academic field like literature, sociology, psychology, and cultural studies. The trauma theory initially perceived by focussing on traumatic event and personal traumatic memories. The early stage of trauma concepts and formulated ideas on trauma are seen from psychological point of view that focus on an individual than collective form.

Cultural trauma focuses on collective feel on a traumatic event. Jeffrey Charles Alexander, a sociologist has written about the connection between trauma and society. In his book *Trauma: A Social Theory* proposes his view on cultural trauma as when members of a collective community feel that they are subjected to a horrific event which leaves permanent marks upon their group consciousness. It highlights their traumatic memories forever in the minds of the victim and changes their identity. “It is by constructing Cultural traumas that social groups, national societies, and sometimes even entire civilizations cognitively identify the existence and source of human suffering” (Alexander 6).

Jeffery C. Alexander emphasizes the social dimension of cultural trauma as “Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways (1). Cultural trauma is the process of the changing an individual or community’s identity amidst traumatic memories, and their memories and human sufferings are felt as a community. In Afghanistan, the ‘collectivity feel’ occurs due to migration. The dislocation and displacement from native country to another country leads to trauma. The displacement in Afghanistan is seen in two-fold, in first, internal displacement and secondly, external displacement. Generally, the displacement due to conflicts and war questions the identity, origin, culture, and their roots. In particular, due to migration an individual or a community faces identity crisis and suffers in terms of their distorted culture.

Identity is an idea and expression of a person and social groups. It is a private sense of self which has a conscious and unconscious feeling, personal beliefs and values. In addition, it creates a bond with the social context by focussing on the experiences of personal feelings and motivations. In all countries, identity is known through their social status like ethnicity and races. In the book, *A History of Modern Middle East*, Chatterji says, “Afghanistan is essentially tribal a country where the ‘nation’ is viewed through clan” (Chatterji 163).

Afghanistan is a country which has numerous tribal communities and constitutes the powerful Islamic fundamentalist tradition.

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’s article *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* cultural identity is defined as, “cultural identity... 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” (qtd in. Vaishali 143). Cultural identity is based on how a particular ethnic group manipulate one’s feelings and behaviours. This definition defines that cultural identity reflects the common experiences and shared cultural values and memories of language, customs and religions. This identity and culture are destructed by continuous war in Afghanistan that leads to cultural trauma. The traumatic feel among migrated communities is the result of their quest for identity and their culture in migrated country.

In *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini present a varied picture of Afghanistan. The major characters, Amir and Hassan represent the Afghan culture and their pride over their ethnic identities. The awareness of culture and identity is increased when a person lives amongst other communities. For instance, when Amir migrates to America, he tries to maintain his original identity. The identity of Amir is similar to Khaled Hosseini and the incidents represent his identity crisis in migrated land, America. Hosseini’s first experience in school

reflects the mind of the immigrant and their identity crisis. Amir, the voice of Hosseini explains the difficulties of an immigrant in learning a new language, English. After many struggles, Amir learns English. It helps him to voice out the traumatic experiences in his native land that undergone for more than thirty years of war. Amir's reflection on his native land is the collective process that represents his Afghan community. According to Alexander, "People also have continually employed the language of trauma to explain what happens, not only to themselves, but to the collectivities to which they belong as well" (Alexander 7). In this instance, Hosseini represents the profound feelings of diasporic individuals and their trauma through his writing.

The distress and sufferings of Amir in the process of migration is the reflection of trauma. In America, Amir finds his comfort zone when he marries Soraya Taheri, daughter of Afghani General Taheri. According to Kai Erikson, "traumatic wounds inflicted on individuals can combine to create a mood, an ethos—a group culture, almost—that is different from (and more than) the sum of the private wounds that make it up" (Kai Erikson 185). The shared and common experience of trauma in Afghanistan and America reflects the collective identity crisis. The identity crises in America makes Amir to think on Afghanistan. The nostalgic memories of Amir and the eagerness to return to Afghanistan expose the diasporic feeling under cultural trauma.

Universally, women are the icon and idol of family's heritage. Hosseini skilfully picturizes the lives of Afghan women and their struggle to maintain the values in the family in his novels. Before the arrival of Taliban regime and their domination over women's life, Afghanistan had a wide-ranging dimension of society. It gave importance to religious rituals in grandeur manner, liberation and independent life to all women, and served good education to young ladies. The richness in Afghan tradition are becomes memories in migrated country.

After every displacement, the victims suffer because of their unlocatable roots of family and culture.

The laws of Taliban have changed the lives of Afghan women. Basically, Afghan women are known for their art of storytelling. Their stories have the combination of familial love and braveness. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini spotlights various families and paints the female characters with the varied colours as enduring star as Mariam's mother and as the beacon of hope, Laila. Through this novel, Hosseini represent the importance of Afghan woman and their effective role in the family. The characters like Mariam, Laila, and Tariq are victims of cultural trauma. The internal and external displacements have paved the way for identity crisis and cultural trauma. Laila gathers news about her country through television that reminds the 'collectivity feel' of Laila and her yearning to return to her native country, Afghanistan. Migrants who return to Afghanistan have a different attitude than other migrants because they have the desire to reconstruct their native land. For instance, Laila decides to serve the country by teaching the poor children. In cultural trauma, the victim and the trauma are seen apart from psychological trauma which focus on welfare of the society. Hosseini through the character, Laila, represents the hope of the cultural trauma victims of Afghanistan to reconstruct the fragmented society as well as to regain their identity.

Families are the basic paradigm of the society. Afghanistan had peaceful times and admiring atmosphere within the family, before the warfare. Girls are allowed to go to school and to express their wishes and dreams of their future. They allowed to fight for their rights and the schools are seen as the agricultural land which seeded liberating and empowering ideas in the young minds of Afghan women. The pride over their gender and identity is nurtured from their childhood. However, Afghan women had witnessed the distorted culture during their internal displacement. Their privileges are taken away by war and they face cultural trauma.

Identity of an individual in Afghanistan is known through their distinct uniqueness in following their religion. Every society is built up with the values and belief which are started from the family. Family is the medium which leads to selfless love and unity. It also deals with love, culture, religion, truth, and knowledge. It is about the awareness that sometimes the rule of society and culture placed human in the difficult situation. Jeffery C. Alexander says, "Identity involves a cultural reference" (15). This novel also talks about marital relationship and equality between man and woman. The death of family members and shattered hope leads to migration. It leads to cultural trauma and crisis in their identity.

The people of Afghanistan bestow importance to relationship. The relationship of kinship is more valuable than kingship. Later, the scenario has changed and the values are degraded in the family as well as in society. In the third novel *And the Mountains Echoed*, Hosseini powerfully depicts the relationship between brother and sister; on the other hand, the longingness for true values is faded away in the contemporary era. The characters like Saboor and his children- Abdullah, and Pari highlight the sacrificial love within the family. The true nature of Afghan culture and identity is explored through their way of living and maintaining their relationship even though they lived in different countries and circumstances. For instance, the characters like Nila wahdati, Pari, Timur, and Idris are victims of cultural trauma.

*And the Mountains Echoed* deals with the people who are culturally different from Afghanistan due to their migration. The cause of cultural trauma is known through Second generation people namely, Abdullah and Pari because of war and poverty. The trauma behind their behaviour is known through their attitudes and approach towards Afghanistan. For instance, Pari lives with hyphenated identity in France and face collective identity crisis. Timur and Adris gives less importance to Afghanistan. The third-generation people are unaware of their roots and traumatized memories. Most of the immigrants return to

Afghanistan to protect their wealth in Afghanistan which is one of the means to get back to the native country. Alexander shares his view on Cultural trauma within the context of social process as, “For traumas to emerge at the level of the collectivity, social crises must become cultural crises. Events are one thing; representations of these events are quite another. Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity” (15).

Hosseini has praised his homeland by writing about their past and memorable incidents. Hosseini’s novels represent the past and happy life of Afghans and highlight their belief and attachment towards their identity. The immigrants from Afghanistan are united by their shared traumatic experiences and memories. The collective crisis of identity makes them to return to their native country, Afghanistan. The experience on cultural trauma focuses on group consciousness and traces back to their roots and original identity. The idea of reconstruction is seen in the novels of Khaled Hosseini during the characters’ resettlement in Afghanistan. Amir in *The Kite Runner* after undergoing identity crises visits Afghanistan and tries to come away from trauma by rescuing Sohrab, Hassan’s son. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Laila relieves from cultural trauma by returning to Afghanistan with an idea of reconstruction by teaching in an orphanage in Afghanistan. Pari Wahdati, Timur and Idris try to come out of their trauma by helping the nation, Afghanistan.

Cultural trauma focuses on group consciousness on a traumatic event and emphasizes the crisis during the process of cultural trauma. Identity crisis is the major element that specifies immigrants’ issues and Khaled Hosseini as an immigrant skillfully depicts the issues of being an immigrant. Khaled Hosseini’s novels express the causes of war and reasons for cultural trauma and identity crisis.

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