



RESEARCH PAPER

**A Re-orientalist Approach to Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and
*A Thousand Splendid Suns***

Ihsan Ullah*¹ Dr. Munawar Iqbal Ahmad²

1. PhD Scholar, Faculty of Languages and Literature, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan, thesis.eng1@gmail.com
2. Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences, Air University, Islamabad, Pakistan

DOI

[http://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2022\(6-III\)75](http://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2022(6-III)75)

ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to draw upon the Orient's skewed representation perpetuated and disseminated by Khaled Hosseini in his Anglophone fiction *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* under the framework of Re-orientalism. Re-orientalism extends itself as a concept where the Oriental author propagates a literature mystifying the East as barbaric and uncivilized and in turn validating the hypothesis to suppress and rule the Orient. This study adopts a Qualitative approach by applying the technique of close reading with Re-orientalism as the theoretical framework. The findings of this study show the Orient in a monolithic and essentialized manner where they are exoticized, caricatured and concocted as antithesis of the enlightened West in the selected works.

KEYWORDS Caricaturing, Occident, Orient, Oriental Writers, Re-Orientalism

Introduction

The Kite Runner, published in 2003 by Khaled Hosseini who is a diasporic writer, is a fascinating account of friendship between two boys from diverse worlds, Amir and his father Baba from an affluent Pashtun family and Hassan and his father Ali, from an Afghan minority ethnic group Hazara who were servants to the house of Baba. The story is set in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan during the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1978. The book revolves around the two boys who engage in a kite competition that ends in Hassan's molestation by Assef with the help of his friends Wali and Kamal. This made Amir guilty of not being in defense of his friend Hassan from assault. His second book, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, published in 2007, is about a story of two women named Leila and Miriam. The story is about Miriam and her co-wife Leila to their husband Rasheed. The two women encountered struggles and sufferings in their married life through their husband Rasheed who disrespected women and demonstrated male chauvinism.

According to Khan (2018) the colonized are represented in a way which distorts their actual reality. These representations are inculcated in the minds of the colonized through formal education, language and cultural relations. The characters in both fictions have been analyzed to have an insight into the extent of how Re-orientalism has been utilized for the literary representation of Pashtuns. One step further, the women have been manifested as second gender as well as the victims of masculinity. In connection to this, analyzing the voices of women in the two novels helps us to understand Re-orientalist approach by Khaled Hosseini as a coexisting theme.

Re-orientalism is founded on how writers having Eastern connection accept a modified East, either by conforming to perceived anticipations of Western audiences or

by playing to their tune. (Lau, 2009). This representation becomes more skeptic as the source is traced to the Diasporic Orientals reconstructing, once again, the Orient to a marginal flux. Re-orientalism, she envisages, is a process where the Oriental is consigned the position of the 'Other' by the Oriental. Lau establishes this argument by analyzing the dominant standing of the Diasporic South Asian Women writers within the last half decade vis a vis their non-diasporic counterparts. The intensified unfavorable effects of Re-orientalism are the outcome of three problems generated because of some of the Diasporic writers' techniques: writings which pertain to South Asian genre, tantalization and generalization, and the negativity of their truths (Lau, 2009). Re-orientalism is a significant concept which needs to be analyzed and evaluated in the novels of Khaled Hosseini.

Representation is the stem of post-colonial paradigm. According to Karagic (2013), postcolonial literature tends to depict non-Westerners – the native Others – as a homogenous mass, portrayed as carrying all the dark human traits. The Other is often represented as, for instance, being exotic, violent, hostile and mysterious, and either stands in opposition to, or is portrayed as being completely different from the West (Karagic 2013). Discourses act as a primary medium in propagating ideologies and thus molding the reality to gain certain motives. In line with this, there is a primary role played by images and discourses in representation as they tend the societies to conform to specific modes of action by adopting the role of power structures. These power structures maintain their position by discourses rather than the physical manifestations (Barry, 2017). The term representation symbolizes an array of connotations and interpretations. The world out there is a play of signs where people know and comprehend the complexities through the act of representations. Representation is the generation of meaning. It is the bridge or connection between ideologies and language which assist people to refer to either the 'actual' world of objects, occasions, or people, or to mythical worlds of imaginary objects, people and occasions (Hall, 1997). The word representation can be termed as fabricating which in the modern times has shifted to visual arts (Salazar, 2008). These representations are not innocent, but they cannot be separated from their source cultures.

Misrepresentation refers to untrue or misleading declaration of facts or creation of deformed images to portray a person or idea. The concept of misrepresentation has substantially been used in both novels of Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Said claimed that the process of othering is multi-dimensional and complex (Said, 1994). In the opinion of Butz, Said considers the Orient which is demonstrated via Orientalism as a framework of depictions constructed by an entire set of forces which introduced Orient into Western learning, Western perception, and later-on Western regime (Butz, 1995). This has also been extended to the Arab world as stated by Shaheen (2001). In another instance, Shaheen is of the view that "Arab women in the Easternworld are depicted primarily as bell of black cloths, compliant harem spouseless or ferrying jugs on their heads. And they are always voiceless" (Shaheen, 2002).

Lisa Lau, who discusses the depiction of the Orient, paradoxically, by the Orient and not by the Occident, is the most recent voice to be added to the various patterns of the Orient's construction by the West. One direction has been recognized and assigned as 'Re-orientalism' (Lau, 2009), where 'Orientals' are portrayed to be committing Orientalism nothing less than 'non-Orientals,' in addition, committing particular and chosen form of Orientalism. Said's concept of "Orientalism" is based on how the West or Americans create both the "Orient" and the "Occident."

As stated by Said, the Orient cannot depict itself; it must be portrayed (Said, 1978). Orientalism as a paradigm addressed numerous spheres and disciplines from

which the East attempted to comprehend the Occident and portray it. "The Arabs, Africans, as well as Asians are retrogressive, exotic and normally dangerous people who have required and will continue to require the assistance of the US and direction if they are to triumphantly undergo cultural and political transformation" (Little, 2008). Said extends it that there are two categories of "Knowledge"; One that acts as "correct, pure" proficiency for scientific, non-political objective, and the one which is ambiguously organized to function as political-oriented situations (Said, 1978). American strategy followed similar path in depicting the Middle East; applying knowledge in ways that demonstrated how peculiar and uncertain the Orient was and still continues to be.

This study addresses the extent to which Re-orientalism is at work in the selected anglophone fiction by Khalid Hosseini *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by applying the framework of Lisa Lau's Re-orientalism. The analysis focusses on the characters and ethnic personalities which are revisited in the context of their cultural code of Pashtunwali by selecting the dialogues/passages from the texts focusing on Pashtuns and Pashtunwali and the (mis)representation they have been subjected to through *Close Reading* in the form of textual or content analysis.

Results and Discussion

Re-orientalism is founded on how cultural producers having Eastern affiliations concurs with the Westernized East, more so by conforming to the understood anticipations of Western audiences, by collaborating with them or by ditching them altogether. In *The Kite Runner* (2003), Amir recounts past events from his memory. The plot is established around a distressing occasion in Amir's childhood, the molestation of his best ally Hassan, the Hazara at the hands of Assef which disturbs Amir since he regards himself to have direct influence in this traumatic event because he witnessed it without making enough effort to intervene and stop it (Hosseini, 2003). This occasion is the fundamental conflict of the narrative and the occasion that affects the rest of life of Amir, as he demonstrates it, by paying the price. The three characters who are central to this novel will be assessed in this section. Hassan is the key victim; Amir is the witness, as well as Assef is the perpetrator of rape.

Reflecting the socio-political as well as war-ravaged terrain that is 1970's Afghanistan, Hassan is a Hazara, a low-class citizen predetermined for life in slavery and incapable of pursuing education. The Hazaras were oppressed and mistreated because of their low social class. As Ali and Hassan were Hazara, and were regarded as low-class citizens, children in their neighborhood used to insult him by nicknaming him Babalu. He encountered a substantial trouble from older kids who chased him on the streets, making fun of him when he hobbled by. Some children used to call him Babalu, or Boogeyman. "Hey, Babalu, who did you eat today?" "Who did you eat, you flat-nosed Babalu?" (Hosseini, 2003). Ali was described as "flat-nosed" as a result of his and Hassan's Hazara Mongoloid features (Hosseini, 2003). The Hazaras have been shown as repressed by the Pashtuns.

Amir is one of the Pashtuns, born and raised into affluent and privileged family but his character says, "I watched Hassan get raped. I did not tell anyone. Baba trembled in his sleep. Kaka Homayoun groaned. Amir felt that part of his self was anticipating someone would wake up and witness what happened so that he would not continue living with the guilt of not being able to rescue Hassan from rape (Hosseini 2003)". Amir is too afraid to interfere with the molestation of Hassan by Assef and his allies which is against the inherent trait of bravery the Pashtuns carry.

Through this encounter, the writer extends the 'Re-orientalist' stance to the

violent nature of Assef who at one time attacked and beat one of the kids using his brass knuckles until he was unconscious. Assef in this case represents the emblem of aggression which is commonly connected with Pashtuns. Yet again, Assef is from Pashtun ethnic group, a racist strongly believing in the division of Afghan society, as well as supportive to the Taliban beliefs. Assef who represents the Pashtuns is depicted as hostile and violent since he supports the segregation of the Hazaras from the Pashtuns despite Hazaras being one of the minor ethnic groups found in Afghanistan (Hosseini, 2003). Assef participates in molestation of Hassan with the help of his friends Wali and Kamal (Hosseini, 2003). This depicts the violent and backward traits associated to Pashtuns by the Western media and literature. "Friends? [...] You pathetic fool! Someday you'll wake up from your fantasy and learn just how good of a friend he is [...]" (Hosseini, 2003).

Assef brags about actively taking part in the massacre at Mazari-Sharif (Hosseini, 2003) in an event in which Taliban murdered between 2500 to 3000 Hazaras in 1998 (Jefferess, 1998). This act of participation of the Pashtuns in the massacre of Hazaras taints the image of Pashtuns in the novel leading to the negative construction of the Pashtuns in *The Kite Runner*. They are engaged in the murder of innocent souls in the name of cleansing the "the garbage," (Hosseini, 2003). They perceived themselves as superior and powerful since majority of the Pashtuns were wealthy and powerful as opposed to the Hazaras who were viewed as poor and less privileged in the society.

Assef is zealous to the extent in his quest for "ethnic cleansing" (Hosseini, 2003) of Afghanistan that he finally becomes an elevated member of the Taliban. In *The Kite Runner*, Amir recounts a society whereby the Afghans lived under frequent threat of gunfire, explosion, as well as bombings for a long period. Amir describes that the Afghans were "tired of watching Gulbuddin [...] and his regiments attacking anything that moved. This demonstrates the Pashtuns as violent and semi savages. The "violent" depiction of Pashtuns has continued for a very long time as a result of the absence of Pashtun voices in literature, and, hence, there is absence of counternarratives on colonial construction of Pashtuns (Hanifi, 2016). When Taliban rose to power and kicked the Soviet Union out, the Afghans perceived them as warriors and celebrated in the streets of Kabul (Hosseini, 2003). They anticipated for "peace at last" (Hosseini, 2003). Nevertheless, the Afghans soon came to the realization that the menace they had encountered and had survived was going to be surpassed by another, more brutal power, the Taliban. The Pashtun character, Assef, represented one of the major supporters of Taliban and he exhibited some of the traits of brutality and violence when he used to send fear to most of the kids in the neighboring residence where he lived. The character of Assef demonstrates significant extent of the application of Re-orientalism by Khaled Hosseini.

The analysis of characters in the next novel of Khaled Hosseini *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) focuses our attention to identify how Pashtuns have been misrepresented through understanding the voices of characters. The negative depiction of Pashtuns has been presented on various instances.

When Rasheed was lecturing his wife Mariam, he claimed that he is of a different breed and a small mistake can lead him to spill the blood (Hosseini 2007). These words portray Rasheed as fierce and dictatorial person who did not respect women in the Afghan society. His words also demonstrated the elements of violence since any simple action could trigger slashing blood, therefore, representing the negative image of Pashtuns in the novel. Furthermore, the utilization of the word "But" by Rasheed demonstrates the point of his crucial contention. Rasheed as a tribal, as well as traditionalist Pashtun boasts such kind of ideology and status which are divergent from

other mentioned men. The author through Rasheed's opinion, discursively portrays and represents his racial, as well as ethnic status with the declaration "But I'm a different breed of man," (Hosseini, 2007). The reiteration of "Where I come from" implies that "Where" suggests the area of the Pashtuns where spilling or shedding blood of the individual casting "one wrong look" or articulating "one improper word," is normal (Hosseini, 2007). If one wrong stare or one improper phrase can trigger blood-shedding, it implies that the Pathans such as a Rasheed are very abnormally worried about their dignity and pride. It is also the region of the Pashtuns where "a woman's face is her husband's business only," (Hosseini, 2007). This demonstrates how the Pashtuns have been negatively portrayed in the novel as a result of being quick to shed blood irrespective of magnitude of offense that one has committed against them. It portrays the strict adherence of the Pashtuns to their way of life, *the Pashtunwali*, which has been shown to subjugate women in Afghan society because majority of the time it infringes their rights and freedom.

Miriam is victimized by her husband Rasheed when he portrays her as "a car" or "a Volga," (Hosseini, 2007). Rasheed depicts the features of sexism by trying to "belittle and undermine women such as Mariam in his society as inferior, subordinated, as well as exploitable and diverse factions such as minority faction at the individual" level. Phrases utilized to represent her demonstrates Rasheed's intentional efforts to abuse and mock her wife Mariam as a subservient, subordinate, as well as sexual object. A biased comparison between Mariam and her co-wife Leila is carried out by their husband, Rasheed. Leila is depicted as "a Benz," a "brand new, first-class, shiny Benz," (Hosseini, 2007). It shows that Rasheed likes and prefers Leila who he describes as "a Benz" to Mariam, whom he describes as "a Volga" due to Leila's charm and beauty. Rasheed's comments exhibit how the Pashtuns have been misrepresented in the novel through their lifestyle or their way of life which supports sexism or male chauvinism.

Conclusion

In the novels *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini, the concept of Re-orientalism, as explored by Lisa Lau, can be seen in the portrayal of male and female Pashtun characters. Re-orientalism refers to the Western perspective that exoticizes and stereotypes Eastern cultures, particularly in relation to gender roles and power dynamics. In these novels, Hosseini presents a nuanced depiction of Pashtun characters, highlighting the impact of Re-orientalism on their lives.

Re-orientalism is used against male Pashtun characters through the perpetuation of the "warrior" stereotype. Western narratives often depict Pashtun men as inherently violent and aggressive, fitting into the Orientalist perception of the "savage other." In *The Kite Runner*, characters like Assef embody this stereotype, reinforcing the notion of the Pashtun male as a brutal figure. However, Hosseini's portrayal goes beyond this stereotype, exploring the complexity of male characters like Amir and Baba, who defy simplistic categorizations.

On the other hand, female Pashtun characters are often subjected to the Orientalist gaze that portrays them as submissive and oppressed. They are presented as victims of patriarchal structures, trapped within restrictive gender roles and cultural expectations. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, characters like Mariam and Laila navigate these constraints, facing domestic violence, forced marriages, and societal discrimination.

In conclusion, *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini reflect the impact of Re-orientalism on the portrayal of male and female Pashtun

characters as he subverts them into Orientalist stereotypes by presenting nuanced and complex individuals who defy simplistic categorizations. While Re-orientalism influences the depiction of Pashtun characters in these novels, Hosseini subverts and complicates these stereotypes by ignoring his characters' depth and individuality exhibiting homogenizing tendencies of Re-orientalism.

References

- Barry, T. (2017). Communicative strategies and tactics of speech manipulation in intercultural business discourse. *Training, Language and Culture*, 1(1), 28-45.
- Butz, D. (1995). Revisiting Edward Said's Orientalism. *Brock Review*, 4(1), 54-80.
- Hall, S. (Ed.). (1997). *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices* (Vol. 1997). London: Sage.
- Hanifi, S. M. (2016). The Pashtun counter-narrative. *Middle East Critique*, 25(4), 385-400, DOI: 10.1080/19436149.2016.1208354
- Hosseini, K. (2003). *The kite runner*. Penguin.
- Hosseini, K. (2009). *A thousand splendid suns*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Jefferess, D. (2009). To be good (again): The Kite Runner as allegory of global ethics. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 45(4), 389-400, DOI: 10.1080/17449850903273572
- Karagic, M. (2013). *Representation of the Other: A Postcolonial Study of the Representation of the Natives in Relation to the Colonizers in The Stranger and Disgrace*. Jon Koping University, School of Education and Communication.
- Khan, R. N., & Qureshi, A. W. (2018). The politics of voice in the stereotypical representation of the Pashtuns: A critical study of Khaled Hosseini's novels. *Global Social Sciences Review*, 3(2), 387-403.
- Lau, L. (2009). Re-orientalism: The perpetration and development of Orientalism by Orientals. *Modern Asian Studies*, 43(2), 571-590.
- Little, D. (2008). *American orientalism: the United States and the Middle East since 1945*. Univ of North Carolina Press.
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism: Western concepts of the Orient*. New York: Pantheon.
- Said, E. W. (1994). *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* [1978]. *Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin*, 115(03), 143.
- Salazar, N. B., & Darity, W. (2008). *Representation in postcolonial analysis*. https://www.academia.edu/1199231/Representation_in_postcolonial_analysis
- Shaheen, J. (2002, Sept. 11). Hollywood widens slur targets to Arab and Muslim Americans since. *Pacific News Service*
- Shaheen, J. G. (2003). Reel bad Arabs: How Hollywood vilifies a people. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social science*, 588(1), 171-193.