

Representation of the Afghan National Identity in Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

Rab Nawaz Khan*

Abstract

The current study explores and evaluates the discursive representation of the Afghan national identity in Khaled Hosseini's (2009) novel: A Thousand Splendid Suns. It also seeks to address how the novelist represents the Afghan nation in his work. The selected data is analysed from critical discourse studies perspective, and Fairclough's (1989) dialectical-relational approach to critical discourse analysis, especially description stage of his model regarding text/textual analysis, is applied for the analysis of the selected discourses on the Afghan national identity. The study concludes that the novelist as an Afghan-born American has associated various virtues and vices to the Afghans, such as pride, firmness, valour, fearlessness, hospitality, honour, dare/venture, challenge, help, slight recklessness, patriotism, rapid acquaintance-making, loyalty, love, care, courage, cultural richness, loud talking, independence-loving, exaggeration, defending nature, freedom-fighting, melancholy, war-affectedness and double standard of the Afghan men. However, racism, ethnic nationalism, gender and ethnic discrimination have been associated with the Afghans like the Taliban and the tribal and traditionalist Pashtuns. The novelist's representation of the Taliban and the tribal and traditionalist Pashtuns as racist and ethnic nationalist is exaggeratory, biased and political because ground reality, geo-political and the socio-political history of Afghanistan manifest that the racial and ethnic prejudice, discrimination and inequality always circulate in almost all the Afghan ethnic groups with varying degrees.

Keywords: Representation; National Identity; Critical Discourse Analysis

Introduction

Identity is simply defined as who and what one is and also what one does, in terms of a host of variables – colour/traits, categorization, social roles/positions, race, ethnicity, gender,

* Dr. Rab Nawaz Khan, Assistant Professor, Department of English, AWKUM, Mardan

nationalism/nationality or territory. Based on these variables, the respective identities are termed and formed. It is not only a discursive and semiotic construction and representation, but also communication, recognition and manifestation of these variables and other associated concepts and categories. Of all the symbols, signs and images used to construct, convey and communicate identities, the linguistic system of signs and symbols for identity expression is significantly a unique and shared one. Joseph assumes that “our identities, whether group or individual, are not ‘natural facts’ about us, but are things we construct – fictions, in effect”.¹ Hall rejects the hard essentialist and modernist view of identity and conceptualizes identity in terms of self and the other by integrally relating them.² He argues that “As a process, as a narrative, as a discourse, its identity is always told from the position of the other. What is more is that identity is always in part a narrative, always in part a kind of representation”.³ Wodak elaborates that identity is dynamic, relational and context-dependent. They perceive social identities as multiple, fluid, fragile and ever-changing discursively.⁴ Similarly, Pietikainen and Dufva also reject the early essentialist view of identity as monolithic, permanent, single or unitary, fixed and purely individual and psychological entity.⁵ They believe in multiple social identities in whose presence the individual identity can be recognized or challenged. They argue that language use connects the social world with “the individual realm”.⁶ They also argue that “identity is socially constructed and individually experienced”.⁷

Language and discourse, in many ways, are central and significant to the construction, communication and negotiation of identities.⁸ For her, language is not only used to “convey images of ourselves, but also to identify others, to classify and judge people, to align ourselves with them, signalling our similarities, or to distance ourselves from them, underlining our differences”.⁹ In sum, it is noteworthy that definitions of identity are as varied and diverse as theories and methods in different disciplines. Identity is positional, relational, contingent, flexible, fluid, multiple, dynamic and communicatively established and enacted. It is constructible in individual and interpersonal instances of language and discourse. It is a multi-faceted, hybrid and historically- as well as culturally-rooted phenomenon.

Research Question

How has the novelist discursively represented the Afghan national identity with focus on the characteristics of the Afghan nation in the novel under study?

Review of Related Literature

National identity, in general, is the ways and means by which and in which a nation or its members are identified and recognized as different and distinct from another nation or its members. These ways and means are national history, memories, myths, flags, deeds of heroism, cultural items and ceremonies or national sentiments and belongings. On the other hand, national identity, particularly in linguistics and discourse-oriented studies, is a discursive construction, representation, communication and identification of a nation in terms of whom and what they are, what they do, and how they can be nationally and internationally recognized. National identity is fundamentally multi-dimensional and collective.¹⁰ He argues that “National identity and the nation are complex constructs composed of a number of interrelated components – ethnic, cultural, territorial, economic and legal – political”.¹¹ Conclusively, he argues that the shared features of a nation’s national identity include “an historic territory or homeland, myths and historical memories, mass public culture, legal rights and duties for all members, and economy with territorial mobility for members”.¹² National identity functions multiply, but these may have malignant and/or benign effects and consequences for a nation or its members. National identity, first and foremost, signifies relations of solidarity among members of a nation who are united by shared memories, myths and traditions. It illustrates two main functions of national identity – external and internal –based on the two-dimensional model of the concept of ‘nation’ – civic and territorial, and ethnic and genealogical. The external functions are territorial, economic and political. One of the most vivid internal functions of national identity for individuals or members in communities aims at socializing the members as nationals and citizens through compulsory and standardized, public mass education systems for inculcating national devotion and a peculiar, homogenous culture. Another internal function is to produce a social relationship between individuals and classes by the use and provision of shared values, traditions and symbols. Such symbols are anthems, flags, uniforms, monuments, coinage and ceremonies which remind members of their common cultural heritage and blood relations, and which make them feel

strengthened and elevated by their sense of common identity and belonging. Final function of national identity is the provision of the powerful ways and means of self-definition – the recognition and location of individual selves and their distinctive culture in the world.¹³ Wodak assumed that:

“The various discursive constructs of national identity are given different shapes according to the context and to the public in which they emerge, all of which can be identified with reference to content, strategies and argumentation patterns, as well as according to how they are expressed in language (linguistic realisation)”.¹⁴

The constructed discourses of national identity always possess or signify both cultural and political elements, and the aim of discussing the distinction between the two concepts is just to highlight differences in national self-perception within a country. Wodak argue that “the national identity of individuals who perceive themselves as belonging to a national collectively is manifested, inter alia, in their social practices, one of which is discursive practice.”¹⁵

National identity of the people belongs to national collectivism. Socio-political practices, including discourse are the sites of struggle for the revelation and recognition of national identity. The slogan of national identity is both constructive for a nation-state formation, but destructive if manipulated for the disintegration of an indigenous nation or a rival native or alien group/nation. Joseph (2004) has highlighted the role of national language in establishing national identity and vice versa. In the myth of a nation-state, national language and national identity serve as factors of a nation’s solidarity and existence.¹⁶ How discourse constructs and represents (national) identity is elucidated here.

The Interplay of Discourse and (National) Identity

Language (discourse) functions multifariously and performs various roles in the socio-political network of social practices. The extreme significance of language and its intimate link with identity can be demonstrated by De Fina who argues “Although it is true that people can convey their identities through many symbols, such as clothing, demeanour, or the use of certain objects, the single most important system of symbols for expressing and negotiating identities is language.”¹⁷

Fairclough argues that discourses represent aspects of the physical world, aspects of the mental world and also aspects of the social world including social events.¹⁸ It is Fairclough who elaborates three main functions of discourse: identity function, relational and ideational functions.¹⁹ Among these functions, one function of discourse, according to him, is the construction of social identities and selves.²⁰ Therefore, it is arguable that language/discourse constructs social identities and selves, and it also constructs social relations and systems of knowledge, beliefs and attitudes. He also argues that identity construction is discernible in every social practice, and discourse (discursive practice) is one of these social practices.²¹ According to him, a social practice may be purely or exclusively discursive or non-discursive, or may be an amalgamation of the two practices.²² Apart from this, the interrelationship between language and identity is illustrated by various functions of language such as communicative, representative, expressive, phatic and performative functions.²³ So language communicates, represents, expresses, phatically communicates and performs identity in various forms of discourse. According to him language “ascribes the person within national and other corporate identities, including establishing the person’s ‘rank’ within the identity.”²⁴

Methodologically, two polarized approaches to language and identity are in practice: in the essentialist approach, “categories such as nationality, class, race, gender, etc. are taken as givens, in terms of which people’s linguistic behaviour can be analysed”.²⁵ The constructionist approach is “more interested in identity as a ‘process’ in which individuals construct categorical belonging, both for themselves and for others with whom they come in contact”.²⁶

Similarly, De Fina argues that human communication is also “about conveying to one another what kind of people we are; which geographical, ethnic, social communities we belong to; where we stand in relation to ethical and moral questions; or where our loyalties are in political terms”.²⁷ Identity is a social and discursive construct and/or work for social constructionists, and a construction of discursive processes for interactionists. Language indexes certain qualities, traits and characteristics associated with a specific group, and that social roles and identities are context dependent, and it refers to the mutual relationship between identities, contexts and practices. Social roles and their associated identities are pertinent to certain occasions and practices, but not necessarily to others.

Coupland and Jaworski illustrate how various social groups belonging to different language communities are identified and recognized by their distinct languages – languages which embody their peculiar cultures as well.²⁸ They regard language as “a key component of many groups’ social identities. Because people belong to different groups and have many potential identities... Different codes will serve as markers or even tools for forging these identities”.²⁹

The interrelationship of both identity and narrative discourse is discussed in order to expound how literature like a narrative discourse is a site of struggle and manifestation for multiple social identities. In Georgakopoulou’s words, “narrative has served as a major methodological tool for researching people’s identities.” He also argues that “More recently, however, there has been a shift towards exploring ways of connecting narrative tellings with larger social identities”.³⁰ His inquiry is a scrutiny of the genres that narrative telling indicate, and of the particular language and interactional choices for how the tellers/narrators implicitly or explicitly express their identities, e.g. gender, ethnicity, nationalism/nationality or age, etc.

Similarly, more complicated and large-ranged narratives, especially novels as narrative discourses can be the most expressive and representative mediums of constructing and conveying social identities related more or less authentically to the social members of the society being depicted in form of the narrators or novelist and other participating characters. Most of the novels, if not all, are not exempt from identity politics. The autobiographical novels are the imaginative and creative works of the novelists portraying their own life experiences, feelings and sentiments, and their own identities with more or less other forms of identity. Literature like novel can discursively construct, represent, reproduce and share the depicted community’s culture, identity, and other social and religious values. In Cartes-Conde and Boxer’s view, “Literature can create a space in which individuals find a certain freedom to explore the full range of their cultural background, a space that is necessary for individuals to create or generate a new cohesive identity.”³¹

Research Methodology

The current study is qualitative that applies Fairclough’s dialectical-relational approach to critical discourse analysis, especially the description stage concerning text/textual analysis, for the analysis of the data selected from the novel under study.³²

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), including all its variants, is a multi-disciplinary, multi-theoretical and multi-methodological approach to the study of socio-political problems/issues in various forms of discourse. Van Dijk defines CDA as “a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context.”³³

Van Dijk argues that CDA is a viable, multidisciplinary and issue-oriented approach which has been designed to study discourse in context.³⁴ According to Blommaert, “CDA has become a popular and firmly established programmatic approach to language in society with some institutional muscle.”³⁵ Fairclough and Wodak argue that critical discourse analysis “analyses real and often extended instances of social interaction which take a linguistic form, or a partially linguistic form.”³⁶ In their view, CDA correlates linguistic analysis to social and cultural analyses. In other words, CDA correlates linguistic practices, processes, products and structures to social and cultural practices, processes, products and structures.

CDA is ‘critical’ in character because it demands critical reading which is different from other forms of reading. This very critical reading and the consequent awareness of the ways in which research interacts with practice constitutes another important feature of CDA called ‘reflexivity’ which is the researcher’s recursive and critical check and balance of his/her research processes and procedures. CDA is a systematic and dynamic approach that works on some principles practically proved by critical discourse analysts.³⁷

CDA is diverse and varied theoretically and methodologically. It is normative and more or less politically-positioned as critical discourse analysts tend to be politically active by addressing the socio-political issues, by favouring the oppressed and unvoiced marginal and powerless individuals or groups as well as by attempting to find solutions and suggestions for the investigated problems or issues. This socio-political stance of the analysts should also make them “social and political scientists, as well as social critics and activists”.³⁸ CDA is inherently eclectic in the sense that more analytical categories/tools, if relevant and required for the study, can be included in it.³⁹ Weiss and Wodak argue that:

“Gender issues, issues of racism, media discourses, political discourses, organizational discourses or dimensions of identity research have become very

prominent in the study under CDA. Moreover, one of the aims of CDA is to demystify discourses by deciphering ideologies."⁴⁰

The Dialectical-Relational Approach (DRA) to CDA

Fairclough's dialectical-relational approach to critical discourse analysis is a problem-oriented textual and social analysis that contributes to the analysis of a text at the micro and macro levels. There are three aspects/dimensions of discourse: discourse as text, discourse as discursive practice, and discourse as social practice. Based on these dimensions of discourse, Fairclough has designed his most influential three-dimensional model (CDA) to the study of discourse. This model of (critical) discourse analysis comprises three dimensions/stages: description, interpretation and explanation. As aforementioned that Fairclough's description stage about text/textual analysis is applied on the selected data, therefore, that stage of investigation is elaborated here.

Description

This stage deals with the descriptive analysis of discourse in which discourse is viewed as a text. It is text/textual analysis of discourse in which formal linguistic/textual features are identified and labeled according to the questions of this stage which are given here. However, questions 1-4 cover the experiential, relational and expressive values concerning vocabulary. Questions 5-8 comprise the experiential, relational and expressive values belonging to grammar, and questions 9-10 belong to textual structures. It is noteworthy what formal properties are used and in what ways, and the following questions can be constantly/consistently asked of a text under study by critical discourse analyst at this stage of description.

- What experiential values do words have? – What classification schemes (for words) are relied upon? Which words are ideologically contested? Is there rewording or overwording? What ideologically significant relations of meaning (synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy) are there between words?
- What relational values do words have? – Are there euphemistic expressions? Is language used (i.e. words) markedly formal or informal?
- What expressive values do words have?
- What metaphors (which have ideological associations) are used?

- What experiential values do grammatical features have? – What types of process (e.g. action, event, attribution) and participant predominate? Is agency unclear? Are processes, what they seem? Are nominalizations used? Are sentences active or passive, positive or negative?
- What relational values do grammatical feature have? – What modes (declarative, grammatical question, imperative) are used? Are there important features of relational modality? Are the pronouns *we* and *you* used, and if so, how?
- What expressive values do grammatical features have? – Are there important features of expressive modality?
- How are (simple) sentences linked together? – What logical connectors are used? Is there coordination or subordination in complex sentences? What means are used for referring inside and outside the text?
- What interactional conventions (e.g. nature of the turn-taking system) are used? – Are there ways in which one participant controls the turns of the others?
- What larger scale structures (made of elements) does the text have?

Discourse on the Afghan National Identity and Power

The passage under study is a short dialogue between Babi and the driver whose ‘voices’ discursively construct and represent the Afghan national identity. The analysis of this passage is aimed at answering the research question: How has the novelist discursively represented the Afghan national identity with focus on the characteristics of the Afghan nation in the novel under study? The sentences of the selected passage are numbered for ease of reference and analysis.

1. *“Babi had Laila lean across the seat and pointed to a series of ancient- looking walls of sun-dried red in the distance.*
2. *That’s called Shahr-e-Zohak.*
3. *The Red City.*
4. *It used to be a fortress.*
5. *It was built some nine hundred years ago to defend the valley from invaders.*
6. *Genghis Khan’s grandson attacked it in the thirteenth century, but he was killed.*
7. *It was Genghis Khan himself who then destroyed it.*
8. *And that, my young friends, is the story of our country, one invader after another, the driver said, and flicking cigarette ash out the window.*

9. *Macedonians.*
10. *Sassanians.*
11. *Arabs.*
12. *Mongols.*
13. *Now the Soviets.*
14. *But we're like those walls up there.*
15. *Battered, and nothing pretty to look at, but still standing.*
16. *Isn't that the truth, badar?*
17. *Indeed it is, said Babi.*"⁴¹

Description

The passage under study contains a couple of experiential, relational and expressive values concerning vocabulary and grammar as explained in Fairclough's framework. The language used is formal and political (Question 2 of the framework). Ideologically loaded words and phrases are used (Question 1 of the framework). Pronouns are used (Question 6 of the framework). A negative has been used in sentence 15 (Question 5 of the framework). Modes of sentence used are grammatical question (tag question/negative question) in sentence 16 and declaratives (Question 6 of the framework). Most of the sentences are in active form, but passive voice has been used in sentence 5 and 6 (Question 5 of the framework). Ideologically loaded simile and metaphor are used in sentence 14 and sentence 15 (Question 4 of the framework). Remarkable logical connectors are used in sentences 1, 2, 6, 8, 13, 14, 15 and 17 (Question 8 of the framework). Means of reference are used in sentences 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16 and 17 (Question 8 of the framework).

Interpretation and Explanation

The passage under study is a discourse on the Afghan national identity and power. This is a short dialogue between Babi and the driver while passing by the "Red City" previously known as "a fortress." Babi "pointed to a series of ancient looking walls of sun-dried red in the distance" (sentence 1). The walled place is called as "Shahr-e-Zohak" or the "Red City" which "used to be a fortress" in the past (sentences 2, 3 and 4 respectively). This is what Babi says about the fortress. The pronoun "It" refers to the fortress which was "built some nine hundred years ago to defend the valley from invaders" (sentence 5). The discourse-producer has manipulated the historical discourse to discursively construct and represent the Afghan national identity. The mentioned "invaders" are the social actors – one of them was Genghis Khan's grandson who saw his death on the soil of Afghanistan (sentence 6). Genghis

Khan himself destroyed the fortress (sentence 7). The driver speaks high of themselves as Afghans because he is proud of his Afghan national identity which is discursively constructed and represented in his voice. He calls the sitting people as “my young friends,” and refers to a series of foreign invasions on Afghanistan in the expression “And that, my young friends, is the story of our country” (sentence 8).

The inclusive pronoun “our” not only refers to the participating characters and the novelist, but also to all the Afghans in general. The phrase “one after another” in the same sentence refers to the sequentially mentioned list of the foreign invaders – Macedonians, Sassanians, Arabs, Mongols and the Soviets (sentences 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13 respectively). As the discourse under study refers to the characters during the Soviet regime in Afghanistan, so the Soviets’ invasion on her is referred to as “Now the Soviets” (sentence 13). The use of “But” is critical, used in sentence 14. The sentence is a discursive construction and representation of the Afghan national identity. The novelist, through the driver’s voice, has manipulated a simile when the Afghans (“we”) are likened to the fixed walls of the fortress. It is a very relevant simile in terms of how undefeatable and firm the Afghans, like those walls, are. The narrative is a discursive representation of the Afghan national identity which confirms Hall’s definition of identity which “is always in part a narrative, always in part a kind of representation” (Hall, 2009). The discursive construction and representation of the Afghan national identity in the passage under study is related to who the Afghans really are, and also to their “self-ascription and (self-) representation” and communication (Joseph, 2004).

The driver says that those walls, like we Afghans, are battered and unattractive, “but still standing” (sentence 15). The word “Battered” means how consistently the Afghans are being attacked by the foreign invaders and the phrase “but still standing” indicates that, despite their violent attacks on Afghanistan, the Afghans are still firm and unbeaten. The tag question asked by the driver regarding the validity of his statements indicates how the novelist attempts to get the truth of the driver’s statements verified not only by Babi, but also by the readers in general (sentence 16). Babi confirms the truthfulness and validity/authenticity of the mentioned statements by the expression “Indeed it is” (sentence 17). The passage under study indicates that the Afghans as a powerful nation always resisted the foreign power abuse. As mentioned earlier in this section, many nations abused their power

to conquer the Afghans, but the Afghans resisted their power with unspeakable firmness and heroism. Looking at the whole text from critical discourse studies perspective, it can be argued that the participating characters in the dialogue under study are using language to construct their strong national identity and challenge the foreign invading powers. The novelist's language indicates that power "does not derive from language, but language can be used to challenge power, to subvert it, to alter distributions of power in the short and the long term" (Weiss & Wodak, 2003). As a critical discourse scholar, it can be expressed that 'voices' of the characters in the passage under study have been manipulated by the novelist to challenge the foreign powers by demonstrating the Afghans as a firm and challenging nation.

Discursive Construction and Representation of the Afghan National Identity

The Afghans are not racially or ethnically single, but multiple. The Afghans – the Pashtuns, the Tajiks, the Uzbeks and the Hazaras – are recognized by their own peculiar characteristics which are mostly common in all the Afghan ethnicities. The novelist as an Afghan-born American has discursively constructed and represented the Afghan national identity through multiple voices and discourses in the novel under study. The entire analysis of the selected discourses on the Afghan national identity in the novel under study indicates that the novelist has represented the Afghans as proud, firm, valorous, undaunted, hospitable, honourable, daring, challenging, undefeatable, helpful, slightly reckless, patriotic, rapidly acquaintance-making, loyal, loving, caring, courageous, culturally very strong, loud talking, and independent people. In addition to these, they have been represented as melancholic and war-struck nation.

Despite all these Afghan virtues, some of their vices, like the Afghan double standard for criticizing women more than men, their proneness of exaggeration, racism, ethnic nationalism, gender and ethnic discrimination, have also been discursively constructed and represented in the novel under study. However, racism, ethnic nationalism, gender and ethnic discrimination have been associated with the Afghans like the Taliban and the tribal and traditionalist Pashtuns. The novelist's representation of the Taliban and the tribal and traditionalist Pashtuns as racist and ethnic nationalist is exaggeratory, biased and political because ground reality and the socio-political history of Afghanistan manifest that racial and ethnic prejudice, discrimination and inequality always circulate in

all the Afghan ethnic groups with varying degrees. At times, these vices, which are driven and supported by ethnic and political ideologies, are revealed implicitly or explicitly in and through the attitudes, behaviours and actions of all the Afghan ethnic groups with varying degrees.

Another aspect of the Afghan national identity is that the Afghans are inclined to exaggerate things. They magnify trivial things and present an exaggerated view of them. Moreover, the Afghans have cultural tendency to talk loudly. The Afghans talk in a high-pitched voice which is acceptable and unobjectionable in their culture. The study also highlights the Afghan double standard concerning male dominance that supports men more than women. The Afghans are also slightly reckless because, sometimes, they are unmindful of and careless of the consequences of their actions.

Notes & References

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