

## **Critique of Representation of Pashtuns and their Cultural Values in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner***

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### **Abstract**

*This paper is about interest-based representation of Pashtun people (Living in Afghanistan) in the novel, The Kite Runner, of Khaled Hosseini. Mahmood Mamdani's theory of "Good" vs. "Bad" Muslims and Fernando Ferrara's 'Theory and Model for the Structural Analysis of Fiction' are used as a theoretical framework for the study. Pashtun people constitute major (42 %) ethnic group in Afghanistan. A division is made between "good" and "bad" Pashtuns. "Good" Pashtuns are modern and adopt Westernization/Americanization; anti-modern Pashtuns are portrayed as "bad" Pashtuns/terrorists. Defining traits of Pashtuns (especially "bad") are savagery, immorality, and selfishness. However, the traits attributed to them do not conform to their social model image and misrepresent them. Pashtuns' code of life called Pashtunwali is ridiculed and portrayed as a code of life of brutes. Americans are shown more sympathetic and optimistic. Negative depiction of Pashtuns is for the sake of justifying Americans' growing influence. The organized violence of Americans is admired under the umbrella of liberal democracy. This paper attempts to uncover Hosseini's prejudice toward Pashtuns and his intellectual dishonesty in the novels because he considers Pashtuns and their cultural values responsible for violence and bloodshed in the country. Being influenced with Westernization and Americanization and in order to satiate his ulterior materialistic motive, he valorizes their cultural superiority.*

**Keywords:** Pashtunwali, Surface Structure, Middle Structure, Deep Structure.

### **Introduction**

The event of 9/11 has caused much debate about representation of Muslims generally and Pashtuns of Afghanistan specifically. They are portrayed in various literary texts much under label of terrorists. As they

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resist actively against American occupation of Afghanistan, their representation in literary texts is also significant.

This paper analyzes representation of Pashtuns after 9/11 in the novel, *The Kite Runner*, of Khaled Hosseini. Aim of the study is to know if the novel represents Pashtuns and their cultural values truly. The study is important because after 9/11, Pashtuns have been pushed into a new war in the name of war against terrorism. The war has affected their political status since they constitute major ethnic group<sup>1</sup> in Afghanistan.

The event of 9/11 has attracted many writers; more literature has been produced about Afghanistan and its people, especially Pashtuns. Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan-American writer, is also one of them. He has written three novels so far after 9/11. His novels are about Afghanistan and its people; his novels are about Afghans and mostly Pashtun people. This paper analyzes Pashtun people and their cultural values after 9/11 in the novel under study.

The paper focuses on two research questions mentioned below. As this paper is about representation of Pashtuns, therefore, it is necessary to know about politics of representation which is mentioned under heading of 'Representation'. It is followed by Pashtuns' code of life called *Pashtunwali* and its main features. The section of theoretical framework discusses theoretical principles used in the analysis. Next section is about analysis of the novel *The Kite Runner*. The section 'Misrepresentation of Pashtuns' develops critique of the biased representation of Pashtuns. The paper ends with conclusion which mentions the main implications of the study.

### Research Questions

1. How are Pashtun characters represented in terms of traits, social personality and cultural values in the novel of Hosseini?
2. Why are Pashtun characters categorized in to "good" and "bad" Pashtuns?

### Representation

Representation of the colonized people and their cultural values is an important subject both for colonizers and colonized. 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. Edward Said argues in his book *Orientalism*<sup>1</sup> that the West, Europe and the US look at the peoples of the Middle East through a lens called Orientalism. This lens

distorts reality of these peoples. Peoples of the Middle East are shown as a threat to peace of the world.

The discourse of Orientalism is important in order to understand representation of the Orient. Orientalism is, “The corporate institution for dealing with the Orient ‘dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.’”<sup>2</sup> The Orient is represented in order to sustain authority over them. Their image is constructed on assumptions and stereotypes. The relationship of the Orient and the Occident is based on power and domination, “There are Westerners, and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated.”<sup>3</sup>

However, after 9/11, a new mode of representation called “neo-Orientalism” has dominated Western discourse of the Orient. Neo-Orientalism focuses on new representation of Islam and Muslims

New constructions of representation characterize Muslims with dehumanized traits; anyone practicing Islam is shown as a threat to the West. Islamic cultural values are revealed as backward due to monolithic nature and thereby justifying their myth of division between superior and inferior cultures. It does not uncover political factors affecting representations of the other. This new representation of the Muslim world and Islam is, “far from giving an accurate representation of Islam and Muslims, emphasizes exclusively on what are considered negative dimensions and components of the Islamic faith and culture, or the alleged behavior of the Muslim.”<sup>5</sup>

This paper is about Pashtun people who are also Muslims living in Afghanistan. They have majority in Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup> They have ruled over the country for quite a long time. They have become focus of attention especially during war against Russia and after 9/11. Afghanistan has remained under control of various imperial powers such as the USSR in the past and is currently neo-colonized by America. As the paper is about Pashtun people and their cultural values shaped by *Pashtunwali*, therefore, it is necessary to know about these people and their code of life called *Pashtunwali*.

#### *Pashtuns and Pashtunwali.*

Pashtun people live in Afghanistan; they also in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Baluchistan and tribal belt (FATA) of Pakistan. In Afghanistan, they have majority (42 percent) as compared to other ethnic groups such as

“Tajik, 27 percent; Hazara, 9 percent; Uzbek, 9 percent; Aimak, 4 percent; Turkmen, 3 percent; Baluchi, 2 percent; and “other,” 4 percent.”<sup>6</sup> In Afghanistan, Pashtuns remained politically dominant, however, after the event of 9/11, they have been marginalized, “... at the Bonn Conference of December 2001, Hamid Karzai was installed as chairman (and subsequently president) as Pashtun ‘window dressing, while the Northern Alliance took over the most powerful sections of the government.”<sup>7</sup> The US made an alliance with India in order to strengthen position of the Northern Alliance and diminish a meaningful representation of Pashtuns. There is an organized attempt of the US in order to deny Pashtuns of their economic and political privileges in Afghanistan. Therefore, a resistance is seen in the country against an elevated “coalition of Afghanistan’s smaller ethnicities above its largest ethnic group, the Pashtuns.”<sup>8</sup>

Pashtuns are Muslims; however, they are more under influence of their unwritten code of life and cultural law called *Pashtunwali*. They do not welcome any change which disturbs their *Pashtunwali*. It is *Pashtunwali* which shapes identity of these people. Some noticeable features of *Pashtunwali* are *nang* (honor) and *namus* (women’s respect and chastity and men’s responsibility to guard them), *pardah* (the use of veil/scarf/burqa to cover women) and *tura* (bravery).

#### *Nang and Namus*

*Pashtunwali* is rooted in the features of *nang* and *namus*. Glatzer defines *nang* as ‘honor and shame’<sup>9</sup> *Nangialay* is the person who has *nang* and safeguards honor of his family. A person faces extreme humiliation in his society if he has lost his *nang*. In order to regain respect, the person has to take revenge (*badal*).

In Pashtun society, there is a dichotomy between men and women. Both men and women are bound to keep their eyes down since staring at each other is considered indecent. A man is responsible for protection of women’s honor and it is called *namus*:

“The relation to women can be seen better if we analyze the term *namus* which belongs to the complex of *nang*. It means privacy and the protection of its sanctity. In the narrower sense *namus* refers to the integrity, modesty and respectability of women and to the absolute duty of men to protect them. In a wider sense *namus* means the female part of the family, of the clan, tribe and of the Afghan society; in the widest sense it is the Afghan home-land to be protected.”<sup>10</sup>

Pashtun men are conscious about honor of their women since women are their *nang* and *namus*. In case of losing their *nang* and *namus*, they lose their dignity and respect in the society. Therefore, they have the responsibility of shielding honor of their women. Hosseini has portrayed the features of *Pashtunwali* called *nang* and *nmus* in *The Kite Runner*.

#### *Tura (Bravery)*

*Tura* in Pashtu language means a sword which symbolizes bravery in Pashtun culture. A sentimental man is ridiculed in Pashtun society. Ghani Khan, well-known Pashtu Poet, comments on bravery of Pashtun people:

*“When the Pathan [Pashtun] is a child his mother tells him, “the coward dies, his shrieks live long after,” and so he learns not to shriek. He is shown dozens of things dearer than life so that he will not mind either dying or killing. He is forbidden colorful clothes or exotic music, for they weaken the arm and soften the eye. He is taught to look at the hawk and forget the nightingale.”*<sup>11</sup>

#### **Theoretical Framework**

The novels are analyzed by using Mahmood Mamdani’s theory of “good” vs. “bad” Muslims<sup>13</sup> and Fernando Ferrara’s Theory and Model for the Structural Analysis of Fiction.<sup>14</sup> Mahmood Mamdani has critically analyzed division between “good” and “bad” Muslims in his book *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*. After 9/11, President Bush distinguished between “good” and “bad” Muslims. This was mainly to secure support of “good” Muslims in war against “bad” Muslims. The West considers Muslims as terrorists and thus according to them all Muslims are bad. In order to be good, they need to be “modern, secular and Westernized”<sup>15</sup> while “bad” Muslims are “doctrinal, anti-modern, and virulent.”<sup>16</sup> In this way a rift is created among Muslims i.e. “good” Muslims have to fight against “bad” Muslims. Thus “the West must remain a bystander while Muslims fight their internal war, pitting good against bad Muslims.”<sup>17</sup> This idea “has become the driving force of American foreign policy.”<sup>18</sup> This theory is relevant because the novel under study also divides Pashtuns between “good” and “bad” ones.

Ferrara’s model is of key importance in the paper since it considers a character very important in a work of fiction; the character is a structuring element and it is because of characters that events of fiction become meaningful. It divides the structure of the character in to three layers i.e. surface structure (SS), middle structure (MS) and deep

structure (DS). At the level of SS, traits are the units which develop the character; these traits being units of analysis are compared to a fictional model type (FM) which is an archetype. The t's of the character analyzed give meaningful data. Analysis of MS, reveals social type of the character who belongs to a specific group. Connotations of attitude (typical attitudes) and status connotations (social type) of the character are analyzed and compared to a model or type (social model image); the comparison results in meaningful indications. Analysis of DS reveals origin of the model pattern of values.

### **The Kite Runner (2003)**

The novel *The Kite Runner* portrays story of Amir (Pashtun) and Hassan (Hazara). Amir belongs to an influential family and enjoys pleasures of life while Hassan does not. Amir is the legitimate son of Baba while Hassan is his illegitimate son. He does not possess inspiring traits of Hassan; he does not exhibit bravery in the story and consequently needs support and help of Hassan. He takes credit of Hassan's daring and noble deeds. Due to the promising help of Hassan, he wins tournament of the kite running. Hassan takes the kite and is running to the home of Amir; he is surrounded by Assef (Pashtun) and his boys. Assef wants to snatch the kite but Hassan does not give him. As a punishment, Assef rapes him. Amir is there looking at his friend being humiliated by Assef, "I could step into that alley, stand up for Hassan- the way he'd stood up for me all those times in the past- and accept whatever would happen to me. Or I could run. In the end, I ran. I ran because I was a coward."<sup>19</sup> Amir is a homodiegetic narrator in the story. The passage explains character of Amir with the help of indirect presentation i.e. his passive act, and in the end direct definition by using adjective 'coward'. Cowardice is the defining trait of Amir.

Hassan makes sacrifices for the sake of Amir but he (Amir) does not do anything in order to save Hassan from being raped by Assef, "I watched Hassan get raped."<sup>20</sup> He could have confronted Assef but he runs away. He proves himself a coward person; he himself realizes that he has acted like a coward and thinks that "I was a coward". He is also a liar and a hypocrite, "... and I wanted to tell them all that I was the snake in the grass, the monster in the lake. I wasn't worthy of this sacrifice; I was a liar, a cheat and a thief."<sup>21</sup> Cowardice and hypocrisy are his defining traits which are in line with the FM of a modern hero. He remains passive due to cowardice. His hypocrisy leads to the tragic death of Hassan and his wife. His trait of cowardice is in line with the heroes (FM) of modern English novelist, Graham Greene.

Amir is depicted as a “good” Muslim and Pashtun because he is Americanized. He is quite different from other Afghans, “I am so lucky to have found you. You are so different from every Afghan guy I have met.”<sup>27</sup> Soraya appreciates his optimism which makes him different from Afghan guys. He is modern and does not feel any hesitation while drinking alcohol even with his own wife, “Soraya and I celebrated with an expensive bottle of Merlot I had bought on the way home- the general did not approve of women drinking alcohol, and Soraya did not drink in his presence.”<sup>28</sup> In order to be a “good” Muslim, he absorbs influences of Western culture. For becoming a “good” Pashtun he challenges cultural values of *Pashtunwali* i.e. *nang* and *namus*, “I was fully aware of the Afghan double standard that favored my gender.”<sup>29</sup> This differentiates him from other Afghan men. Therefore, he misrepresents Pashtun people and their cultural values.

Amir is portrayed as a “good” Muslim and Pashtun because he hates Taliban and resists them. He visits Afghanistan in order to liberate Sohrab from Taliban. He appreciates and justifies invasion of the US on Afghanistan, “Soon after the attacks, America bombed Afghanistan, the Northern Alliance moved in, and the Taliban scurried like rats into the caves.”<sup>30</sup> Hosseini misrepresents Pashtuns because he has hidden materialistic motives which he wants to materialize by valorizing Western cultural values and devaluing values of his native culture.

Assef is another Pashtun character. He and Amir are of the same age. He is bold but rude and very indecent. He does not care about morality and decency. He is portrayed as a savage person.

Amir is the narrator and reveals character of Assef through his action; Assef is voiceless because he is not Americanized. He is portrayed as a brute who tortures other boys with the help of his ‘obeying friends’. He does not believe in politeness. His only way of educating somebody is to punish him with his ‘brass knuckles’. This is the reason that he is known for his savagery (his defining trait). Till the end of the story, he remains bad. He is characterized as a villain (FM) since he possesses all the traits of a villain, “I’m trying to tell you, Sohrab Jan. That there are bad people in this world, and sometimes bad people stay bad. Sometimes you have to stand up to them. What you did to that man is what I should have done to him all those years ago. You gave him what he deserved, and he deserved even more.”<sup>32</sup> Assef is characterized through speech of Amir. Amir addresses Sohrab, son of Hassan. Hassan was a servant and a friend of Amir. Sohrab, in order to save Amir, attacks Assef and injures him. Amir tells him that he is justified in

injuring Assef since he is an evil minded person. Americanized Amir perceives him as a wicked and evil person.

As Assef is non-Westernized and member of Taliban. He is depicted as a “bad” Pashtun and Muslim. The Americanized Amir sees him as a threat to peace and prosperity of Afghanistan. He tells Sohrab about evil nature of Assef, “That there are bad people in this world, and sometimes bad people stay bad. Sometimes you have to stand up to them.”<sup>33</sup> Americanized Amir is of the view that “bad” Pashtuns/Muslims such as Assef need to be eliminated from the country. In this way, Hosseini supports and justifies invasion of the US on Afghanistan. He does not expose organized violence of Americans in Afghanistan.

Assef is characterized as a racist on the model of Hitler (social model image). He hates Hazara people in Afghanistan:

*“Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns. It always has been, always will be. We are the true Afghans, the pure Afghans, not this Flat-Nose here. His people pollute our homeland, our watan. They dirty our blood ... Afghanistan for Pashtuns, I say. That’s my vision.”<sup>34</sup>*

Sunni and Shi’a Muslims do have religious differences (model pattern of values at DS). However, their differences have been exaggerated in order to misrepresent Pashtun people as racist and savages.

Amir is characterized as coward, hypocrite and liar. However, after being Americanized, he is depicted as a “good” Pashtun/Muslim. Assef is portrayed as brute, immoral and wicked; he is characterized as a “bad” Pashtun/Muslim since he is not Americanized.

### **Misrepresentation of Pashtuns**

Pashtun people live as a major ethnic group in Afghanistan. They have 42% representation<sup>37</sup> in the country. Their presence in the country has significant influence on political scenario of the country. Unfortunately, an organized struggle is made on intellectual level in order to distort identity of Pashtun people so that they are considered responsible for instability in the country.

Pashtun people live under their unwritten code of life called *Pashtunwali*. Being Muslims, they are followers of their religion Islam but it is *Pashtunwali* which shapes their life especially in case of women and land. They are very sensitive in the matters of their women’s chastity; they never tolerate chastity of their women being violated. A woman is their *nang* and *namus* and their loss means loss of something which can never be recovered. Land is also valuable for them. A man having more land especially inherited from his forefathers has



prestigious social status. The two factors i.e. woman and land, give them a solid reason for enmity and hostility.

In the novels, they are shown as brute, tyrannical, liars, selfish and immoral so that presence of American forces in Afghanistan is justified. Syed Aijaz Zaka comments, “these dangerous images and negative stereotypes do not merely remain part of public consciousness; they eventually manifest themselves in government policies, justifying wars and invasions.”<sup>38</sup> Hosseini is deeply inspired with America and the West, because for him the only real nations are “America the brash savior, Britain, and Israel.”<sup>39</sup> He is of the view that they are civilized and have the right to make others (Pashtuns in this case) civilized. He paves ground for intrusion of American army into Afghanistan. About such writers, Hamid Dabashi says that “they (writers like Hosseini) can feign authority while telling their conquerors not what they need to know but what they want to hear.”<sup>40</sup>

In the novel, American people are shown more sympathetic and humanistic than Afghans. When Rahim Khan, friend of Amir’s father, meets Amir while he (Rahim Khan) is seriously ill, Amir promises to take him to America for treatment, Rahim Khan tells him, “I see America has infused you with the optimism that has made her so great.”<sup>42</sup> For Hosseini, America is a country where people learn to be civilized. It is evident from the character of Amir who is selfish and turns out to be very positive when he shifts to America. This is the reason that the American army was deployed in Afghanistan in order to discipline the uncultured Pashtun people. The Americans launch their military operations for materializing their hidden materialistic motives under umbrella of terrorism. Hamid Dabashi comments on it, “The militant nexus of US/Israel is today the transatlantic prototype of racist white supremacy that sustains and advances the murderous myth of the white people civilizing the world.”<sup>43</sup> Their aim is not to make people cultured. They hide their racist ideology in the guise of civilizing the people and fighting Pashtuns/Muslims.

Literature produced after 9/11 distorts identity of Pashtuns in Afghanistan. The aim is to shape views of the world about Pashtuns, “Rarely before in human history has there been so massive an intervention of force and ideas from one culture to another as there is today from America to the rest of the world.”<sup>44</sup> It is evident from the diaspora writers e.g. Khaled Hossein. He portrays Pashtun people negatively.

Khaled Hosseini is a native informer. The native informers are “more effective in manufacturing the public illusions that empires need to sustain themselves than in truly informing the public about the cultures they denigrate and dismiss.”<sup>45</sup> In order to serve interests of the US, Hosseini appreciates invasion of the US on Afghanistan. Writers such as Hosseini, “feign authority while telling their conquerors not what they need to know but what they want to hear.”<sup>46</sup> He is biased against those Pashtuns who are not Westernized. He pleases Westerners by devaluing cultural values of Pashtuns/Muslims.

### Conclusion

The study unveils prejudice of Hosseini who disorients readers by distorting real picture of Pashtun people in order to satiate his concealed materialistic interests. It shows that representation of Pashtun characters is not based on the traits for which they are known; they are portrayed as cruel and socially and politically affluent. The traits of cowardice, savagery and promiscuity attributed to them do not conform to their social model images (MS). Their model pattern of values (DS) is ridiculed for inspiring rigidity among Pashtuns; their cultural values are misrepresented. In order to valorize Western/American cultural values, a distinction between “good” and “bad” Pashtuns is made; “good” Pashtuns are Westernized/Americanized and it is their point of view which is followed in the novels; “bad” Pashtuns (anti-modern) are strict followers of *Pashtunwali* and are voiceless. The aim of such depiction is to show that anti-modern (bad) Pashtuns are savages and do not deserve to rule in Afghanistan. For Hosseini, “bad” Pashtuns are evil and pose threat to peace of Afghanistan; it shows his partiality against Pashtuns. In this way, Hosseini attempts to justify Americans’ intrusion into Afghanistan; he does not refer to failure of America in bringing stability and peace in the country since the country still faces the problem of insecurity. War, started in 2002, has not yet ended even in 2018. Growing influence of America affects Pashtun people. Their role as a major ethnic group has been marginalized by giving more space to other smaller ethnic groups such as Tajik and Hazara.

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