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## Towards a Poetics of Culture”: A New Historic Critique of Khaled Hosseini’s Fiction

### Abstract

*This paper, informed by the approaches of New Historicism, attempts to examine fiction by Khaled Hosseini in the context of Afghan culture and history. The main body of this paper consists of the analysis of Khaled Hosseini’s two novels; The Kite Runner (2003) and A Thousand Splendid Suns (2007). Although his novels may be read and interpreted by using different theoretical prisms, the objective of this research is to review these novels from the new historical angle. This research has drawn upon theories of New Historicism as proposed by Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, Stephen Orgel and Robert Weimann. By focusing on the era of the late 90s and early 2000s, with the wake and rise of Taliban, we intend to see the struggles of various ideological discourses. We examine in Hosseini’s fiction how the author, through his novels, challenges the narratives of history as written in political history books and how his stories prove to be a re-telling and deconstruction of the Afghan history as he targets the gaps and silences left in the political, historical texts. We argue that these texts shape and align the readers’ perception of the social, political and cultural state of Afghanistan with the established ideas and also entirely contest and challenge it.*

**Key Words:** New Historicism, Re-telling History, Politico-historical Texts, Afghan Culture and History, Ideological Discourses

### 1. Introduction:

*The Kite Runner* is Khalid Hosseini’s debut novel, published in 2003. It narrates the story of a father-son troubled relationship and a similar sort of relationship between two step-brothers, Amir and Hassan. It shows how they deal with their guilt and forgiveness and how the social, political, cultural and historical facts of Afghanistan play a strong role in their lives.

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) by the same author is a story about two women Mariam and Laila, their relationship with each other and their joint struggle against the tyrannical power of men. It also shows how Afghanistan of that particular era alters their lives. The novel is set against the volatile events of Afghanistan's last thirty years, from the Soviet invasion to the reign of the Taliban to post-Taliban rebuilding that puts the violence, fear, hope, and faith of this country in intimate, human terms. It is a tale of two generations of characters brought jarringly together by the tragic sweep of war, where personal lives, the struggle to survive, raise a family, find happiness - are inextricable from the history playing out around them.

Both *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* are famous because these novels helped change the opinion of the world about Afghanistan, by providing many readers their first real sense of what is the reality of the Afghan people and their daily lives. One of the strengths of both the novels is that the novelist has successfully weaved the narrative thread with the famous events in history. Hence the stories provide us with the detailed knowledge about the said era. New Historicism also takes the piece of text as a cultural and historical construct and believes that the history can be re-written by critically evaluating a piece of literature according to the setting provided.

#### 1.1 Research Objectives

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This research has the following objectives;

1. To explore New Historic approach and its aspects in Khalid Hosseini’s selected fiction
2. To analyze the development of the major characters in Hosseini’s fiction according to New Historicism

### 1.2 Research Questions

Following are the research questions of this study;

1. How is the new historic approach demonstrated in Khalid Hosseini’s fiction?
2. How Hosseini’s major characters portray the new historic technique through the development of the novel

### 1.3 Problem Statement

This research paper explores the effects of New Historicism on the selected fiction of Khalid Hosseini. *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* serve as the primary source for this study.

### 1.4 Research Methodology

This is a qualitative research and by using the technique of close textual analysis, this study reflects on Khalid Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. These novels are explored by using New Historicism’s lens as proposed by Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, Stephen Orgel and Robert Weimann.

## 2. Literature Review:

This study explores and examines the selected fiction by Khaled Hosseini in the context of Afghan culture and history. The main novels are; *The Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). Although Hosseini’s novels may be read and interpreted by using different theoretical prisms, the objective of this research is to review these novels from the new historical angle. This research draws upon theories of New Historicism as proposed by Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, Stephen Orgel and Robert Weimann.

There have been many studies linked to Hosseini’s fiction and the theory of new historicism, some of which are discussed here.

John Brannigan discusses the connection between history and power relations as New historicism critically interprets the texts of all kinds. As a critical practice it treats literary texts as a space where power relations are made visible. The visibility of power is an important concept when considering Elizabethan theatre and its relationship to the state (6). The text, through the representation of the power relations, sometimes, attempts to subvert the power structure by its description of power.

Similarly, Peter Barry writes that New Historicism also focuses on the subversive nature of text. According to him, New historicism tends to be anti-establishment, always implicitly on the side of liberal ideals of personal freedom (112). Hence, the connection between New Historicism and power relation is made clear by various critics and authors of literary theory.

David Carter also points out this relationship in his book *Critical Theory*, he says that the historical period of a text has to be studied in detail to determine what power relations (or, in Foucault’s terms, which discursive practices) were operating and how they affected the text. New historicism seeks its evidence anywhere, not only in the text. Everything which constitutes part of a culture can be analyzed like a text (134).

Apart from power and authority, Hosseini’s fiction also deals with themes of loss of home, sense of belonging etc. For instance, Elena Spirovska in her article “Memories and Stories of Returning Home in Khaled Hosseini’s Novels *The Kite Runner*, *And The Mountains Echoed*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*” analyzes the acts of returning home, thinking about home and the significance of home and returning home in Khaled Hosseini’s novels *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and in the novel *And the Mountains Echoed*.

The major characters in Hosseini fiction are men at large, but there has been a portion of female characters as well in her novels. So Priyanka Choudhry in her article, “Layers of Discourse and Gender Relation in Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns*” explores the gender relation and coercion on the marginalized section—women primarily due to socialized stereotypes in Hosseini’s bestselling *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The paper deciphers discrimination among the Muslim society of Afghanistan. It leads to how the filial and societal norms, which women are expected to upkeep, gradually develop revulsion and motivation for resilience to bring peace in filial relations (21).

Choudhry’s article makes the researchers realize that there are both male and female perspectives to the novels that are important. Moreover, there can be other perspectives also. Dilnoza Ramatjanovna in her study, “Perspectives in the novels by Khaled Hosseini” focuses on the analysis of the novels *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, *And the Mountains Echoed*. She discusses the historical perspective in literature. The literature scholars and researchers are highly interested in Afghan-American literature as representing the diaspora features. In his novels Hosseini could depict Afghanistan in terms of three perspectives: childhood, womanhood and family reunion in pre-in-post Taliban periods. Her study investigates how the major perspectives of Afghanistan have been employed to represent Khaled Hosseini’s literary image as a writer (36). This study is an effort to unfold the significance of literary characteristics of the novels mentioned above. It will help to decode the essential perspective peculiarities of Hosseini’s works by applying historical perspective method.

Similarly Marhaeni Kartika has written “An Analysis of The Major Themes in Khaled Hosseini’s Novel *The Kite Runner*”. This study analyzes the major themes in the said novel. Some of the major themes are friendship (fathers and sons); betrayal and guilt; redemption and friendship. In every conflict there’s an easy choice, and then there’s the right choice. This is a story of redemption where a boy takes the easy path, and pays for it, until he can finally become a man and right what he has wronged.

One such theme, the loss of homeland and the love for it is discussed in Rim Souissi’s study, “Drawing the Human Face of a Homeland: A Reading of Khaled Hosseini’s Novels; *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and *And the Mountains Echoed*”. The study discusses that apart from being set in and being representative of Afghanistan’s multilayered society and complex history, Hosseini’s fiction is linked to the country’s turbulent historical and social background. Hosseini’s fiction penetrates the cultural boundaries between the east and the west (42). Thus he represents his country as home even for the foreigners.

After reading all the above mentioned studies, this study found a research gap to study Khaled Hosseini’s fiction from the perspective of new historicism.

### 3. Text Analysis:

As according to the New Historicists, a text is a cultural and historical construct, and New Historicism is a re-writing of history through the text (whether literary or non-literary) by giving due importance to the social condition of its production, meaning, impact, and its interpretation and evaluation. So, a literary text is produced and actualized in cultural and historical circumstances, not in a vacuum. As Stephen Greenblatt (1989) puts it in his book, “New Historicism is an approach to literary criticism and literary theory based on the premise that a literary work should be considered a product of its time, place and circumstances of its composition rather than as an isolated creation of genius.” (24)

Tyson (2006) also explains New Historicism as the retelling of history itself. History is not closed or final, as traditional historians would claim, but is found in acts of explanation that can negotiate new readings of the textual traces of the past; so, the new historicist’s primary question about an incident would be; “what has been inferred of the event and how? And what do these interpretations inform us about the interpreters?” (278). According to Tyson, New Historicism is against the concept that history is a series of events having a linear, causal relationship (278). Hence, we are the subjective interpreters of what we observe. History is no more only a milieu but a discourse, and as a discourse, it is not objective because each discourse is ideologically loaded and not any is

an absolute truth. New Historicism argues about the parallel readings of fictional and historical or official texts of the same period in history. No history is closed or final. Both the novels by Hosseini portray this believe. This paper presents a parallel reading of the texts as well as some political history books along with several World Reports.

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* takes place over almost forty years starting from the early 1970s, where Mariam is seen as a teenager, an illegitimate daughter of a wealthy businessman who belongs to Herat. Her father was not courageous enough to marry her mother after “dishonoring” her. Fifteen years old Mariam is married forcefully to a cobbler Rasheed, thirty years her senior. Rasheed loses hopes of fathering a son after Mariam suffers several miscarriages. Regarding Mariam as responsible of this, he distances himself from her and mistreats her. The second part of the novel is about Laila, the daughter of a university teacher who has inherited her love of art, literature, and culture from her father. After her childhood love Tariq leaves Afghanistan due to the war, she marries Rasheed but soon loses her respect and love by giving birth to a girl. She develops a friendship with Mariam and joins her in her struggle against their brutal husband. The novel ends in 2003 when Laila is shown as settled at last in Kabul with her family. This is the turbulent time in Afghanistan with a series of violent, brutal wars and numerous political coups. The story begins with a political coup in 1973 and then comes the Soviet invasion in 1979. Ten years after this invasion Soviet forces withdraw and Taliban take over. The story ends with the US occupation of Afghanistan after 9/11. By interweaving historical facts, often with dates and leaders’ names included, with the fictional narrative, Hosseini helps to breathe life into history. He also shows the extent to which politics has impacted every Afghan person’s life over the past several decades.

Moreover, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is about these two women’s hopes, dreams and disillusion, their inner and outer lives and the life situations through which they come closer. It tells how the two ladies determine to endure the toughest times and how meaningful and powerful their relationship grows even as ‘the world around them unravels and slips into chaos.’ Khalid Hosseini in one of his interviews said;

I realized that telling the story of these two women without telling, in part, the story of Afghanistan from the 1970s to the post-9/11 era simply was not possible. The intimate and personal was intertwined inextricably with the broad and historical. And so the turmoil in Afghanistan and the country’s tortured recent past slowly became more than mere backdrop. Gradually, Afghanistan itself—and more specifically, Kabul—became a character in this novel, to a much larger extent, I think than in *The Kite Runner*. But it was merely for the sake of storytelling, not out of a sense of social responsibility to inform readers about my native country. That said, I will be gratified if they walk away from *A Thousand Splendid Suns* with a satisfying story and with a little more insight and a more personal sense of what has happened in Afghanistan in the last thirty years (‘A Conversation with Khaled Hosseini’, *The Malta Independent* 2007).

*The Kite Runner* is also set in Afghanistan, America being another setting. The novel shows direct links with the history, geography, and ethnicity of Afghanistan as it is about the Soviet invasion, the rise of the Taliban, 9/11 and the US invasion. Hosseini describes the Afghans as an independent and proud nation which has always defended their country and countrymen against all invaders in all odds. The novel portrays the country’s sufferings under the tyranny of the Taliban. Amir, the protagonist of this novel, comes across this rule when he goes back to his home, having hope to help Hassan and his family. The final part of the book comprises of “haunting images: a man, desperate to feed his children, trying to sell his artificial leg in the market; an adulterous couple stoned to death in a stadium during the halftime of a football match; a rouged young boy forced into prostitution, dancing the sort of steps once performed by an organ grinder’s monkey” (197).

Post-Structuralism provides a solid ground to New Historicism to integrate social studies as knowledge product, and for this reason, New Historicism can be considered as an expansion of Post-Structuralism. This reciprocal relation between Post-Structuralism and New Historicism reminds the catchphrase of Louis Montrose: “The historicity of the text and textuality of history.” Text, he insists, (as do all New Historicist Critics) “are embedded in particular records, since we only access those histories in language” (qtd in Abrams, 2009, p. 183). This is what Hosseini has done very successfully in both of his novels. The text and the history are embedded in each other. According to the history, Afghanistan is an ethnically diverse country of about 28 million people. Pashto and Dari being two official languages are spoken by almost 85% of the people. There are, however, thirty other minor languages spoken by different ethnicities. Muslim community comprises of 99% of the whole population whereas among these Muslims, 84% are Sunnis, 27% are Hazaras, Shias, and Tajiks. Pashtuns have always dominated the country. Hazaras are Shi’ite Muslims and from the Mongolian origins. Hosseini has developed both

the plots by giving hints to all the social, ethnic and religious groups of the Afghan population. Amir and Baba in *The Kite Runner* are Pashtuns Sunni Muslims whereas Hassan is Hazara Shi’a Muslim. Baba has been a successful businessman in Kabul. Similarly, in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam, Laila, Rasheed, and Jalil are shown as residents of Herat. In Herat, there are few rich people like Jalil (owner of the theater), and some are poor like Nana (the house maid) and Rasheed (owner of a shoe shop). Whereas many like Ahmad and Noor have decided to become mujahidin to fight for the national cause against Russians.

According to Peter Novick (1999), “[t]o understand something historically is to be aware of its complexity ... to see it from multiple perspectives, to accept the ambiguities, including moral ambiguities, of protagonists, motives, and behavior” (3-4). Accordingly, both the novels are set in Afghanistan and roughly cover the period from 1964 till 2006. Within this period, the country experienced the monarchy of King Zahir Shah, Mohammad Daoud Khan’s Republic, Communist’s administration, the clash of Mujahiddins after USSR left, the onset of Taliban and the interim presidency of Hamid Karzai. The fall of monarchy known as the coup of 1973 is the most important political event in both the books. There was a gradual chaos as soon as the king was overthrown. The Taliban overtook the power in Kabul mainly, and the Soviet Union forces moved in. The Soviet Army captured Afghanistan in 1979, thus commencing an activity that would last for a decade. This historical event is discussed in *The Kite Runner* where the two major characters Baba and Amir leave Afghanistan for the US which condemned the Soviet intrusion due to its own anti-Soviet policies. Finally, with the fall of the USSR, Afghanistan was won by Mujahiddins and was transformed into an Islamic state. That was the turbulent time when even the daily life in Afghanistan was unsafe. In *The Kite Runner* (2003), Rahim Khan remembers the fear during this period by saying,

the infighting between the factions was fierce, and no one knew if they would live to see the end of the day. Our ears became accustomed to the rumble of gunfire; our eyes are familiar with the sight of men digging bodies out of piles of rubble. Kabul in those days... was as close as you could get to that proverbial hell on earth.... (181)

Similarly, in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the murder of Mir Akbar Khyber and the subsequent protest of the masses is shown. They blame President Daoud Khan’s government for his murder. Rasheed informs Mariam about the murder and that the victim of the crime was a Communist. She is ignorant about Communism and Rasheed becomes angry on her. Similarly, Laila and her father talk about communists and their efforts to improve life and status of Afghan women. According to Laila’s father, this was the right time to seek education. The novel also provides hints about Karzai regime which fails to protect women rights. Most obvious of all is Hosseini’s decision to end the story in April 2003 – just a few months before some parts of Afghanistan erupted in a counter-occupation rebellion.

Then in 1996, Taliban took over, but nothing changed. Despite a warm welcome given to them, Afghanistan continued to be a dangerous and unsafe place. Being Sunni fundamentalists, they massacred Shias, imposed fundamental laws and banned music, dance and restricted women’s rights. New Historicism just like Deconstruction is essentially anti-foundationalist. Deconstruction, according to Derrida, “is not a theory ‘per se’ but rather a set of strategies or a way of reading” (Klagas, 2015, 53). “De-centering” is the most important concept of Deconstruction. A deconstructive reading of a text tries to unmask the problematic nature of all centers. New Historicism, as Brannigan (1989) says, is also based on the analysis of cultural, historical, social, political, economic and moral interaction of the periods in which the text is written, and it tends to read literary texts as tangible products of particular historical conditions (*New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*, 127). Thus, just as Deconstruction establishes a close link of peripheries with the center and ascertains that center holds this position only because of the peripheries, similarly, New Historicism believes in looking for what is left or marginalized in the political discourses of historicism. According to Greenblatt, not obvious matters but less notable ones (marginals) should be handled, that is to say, beyond what is known and apparent to anyone, what is alien (the other) should also be reviewed. Deconstruction locates the gaps, absences, and silences which constitute the traces of metaphysical assumptions of textual systems. Hence, we see that Hosseini has tried to give voice to the marginalized and silenced women and children through his texts. The official narrative is a recorded history having gaps and silences in which those who suffer are not brought to the forefront; however, the cultural and fictional narrative bring voices to those silences and foreground those (women and children usually) who suffer. In Hosseini’s texts, we find a particular focus on ordinary people, women, and children who were not participants in the war but suffered greatly. In state history, only the general facts are given shape making it a grand narrative which ignores

many mini-narratives occurring simultaneously. Foucault (1969), another inspiration of New Historicism, rejects the prevailing system of historical continuity and declares;

Historians have preferred to turn their attention to long periods, as if, beneath the shifts and changes of political events, they were trying to reveal the stable, almost indestructible system of checks and balances, the irreversible processes, the constant readjustments, the underlying tendencies that gather force, and are then suddenly reversed after centuries of continuity, the movements of accumulation and slow saturation, the great silent motionless bases that traditional history has covered with a thick layer of events. (3)

So, he rejects the historicist’s attempts at constructing totalizing macro narratives and instead insists on examination of “anonymous forces of dissipation, contradictions rather than totalities, while the rhetoric of discontinuities, gaps and ruptures are favored over continuity, development, and evolution” (Woods, 2004, 163). Foucault in *Archeology of Knowledge* (1969) argues that a historian must explore how a history reveals ‘several pasts’, several forms of connections, several hierarchies of importance and several networks of determination (138).

In the 20th Century, before the rise of Afghanistan, women were striving hard to achieve equal rights with men. They already had done much, and in most areas of the country, they were enjoying equal rights regarding education and employment (*PBS.org*). More importantly, Kabul was regarded as a highly modern city of the state as before the Taliban control, 50% of the students and teachers were females. Apart from teaching, 50% of the government officials and 40% of the doctors were also women. Taliban, after taking over, institutionalized racial and gender segregation. Women were kind of house arrested unless accompanied by a male (mehrem) family member;

Attention women! You will stay inside your homes at all times. It is not proper for women to wander aimlessly about the streets. If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a mehram, a male relative. If you are caught alone on the streets, you will be beaten and sent home.... You will not laugh in public, if you do, you will be beaten. ... If you are found guilty of adultery, you will be stoned to death. Listen, listen well. Obey. Allah o Akbar! (*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 2007, 249)

According to Feminist Majority Foundation (1996), “under Taliban rule, women have been stripped of their visibility, voice, and mobility” (Report 2000). There were harsh and strict rules enforced for women. The windows of a lady’s house were even painted black, they were not allowed to leave their homes without the burqa, and they were also not authorized to work anywhere. The women could not take their life decisions. Many were forced to marry at sixteen years of age. Policemen would even beat women if they were found violating any of Taliban code, for example exposing their hands or feet, laughing loudly or wearing an improper burqa. According to the Integrated Regional Information Networks of the United Nations, one woman in Afghanistan dies every thirty minutes, 87% of the women in Afghanistan are illiterate, one in every three Afghan women suffer Psychological, physical and sexual violence and almost 80% of the women are forced into marriages (Report 2000).

*The Kite Runner* (2003) is a story of the violation of fundamental human rights and the collapse of civil society in Afghanistan. It talks about the ethnic, racial and gender discrimination and oppression of women and children. Baba and Amir represent the real picture of Afghan refugees who have escaped war and Rule of Taliban and now live in Hayward, California which becomes "a place to bury [his] memories" for Amir and Baba, "a place to mourn his" (112).

Likewise, we see the violation of women rights represented in the novel when in 1981, Baba and Amir meet a Russian soldier on a check post who demands "a half hour with the lady in the back of the truck" (100) as a condition of their escape and Baba is angry on his shameless behavior. He asks the truck driver, "Ask him where his shame is" to which the Russian soldier responds, "There is no shame in war". Baba answers angrily, “War doesn’t negate decency. It demands it, even more than in times of peace” (ibid.). Thus in the novel, there is a contempt for the Russians for their attitude and power. It is shown that the United States helped to arm and trained the mujahideen who later made Taliban governance possible.

New Historicism is characterized by its lack of faith in ‘objectivity’ and ‘permanence’ and its stress not upon the direct recreation of the past, but rather the process by which the past is constructed or invented (Cox and Reynolds 1) This is exactly what Hosseini has attempted in both the novels. According to Khalid Hosseini, “[I] wanted to write about Afghanistan before the Soviet war because that is largely a forgotten period in modern Afghan

history. For many people in the west, Afghanistan is synonymous with the Soviet war and the Taliban” (‘A Conversation with Khaled Hosseini’, *The Malta Independent* 2007). He explains that he wanted to remind people of a peaceful Afghanistan in the Twentieth Century and how this peace was abolished by violence. It is represented in the novel when Zaman, (director of the orphanage) is visited by Amir in search of Sohrab. Zaman says,

Many of [our children] have lost their fathers in the war, and their mothers can't feed them because the Taliban don't allow them to work . . . There is very little shelter here, almost no food, no clothes, no clean water. What I have in ample supply here is children who've lost their childhood. (222)

Many children were left in Afghanistan with “little childhood” (277). Amir grows to adopt the profession of a successful writer in California and embraces the U.S.A. He finds the U.S.A as a place where he does not have to encounter “ghost”, “memories” and “sins” (297). But as his real relation with Hassan is revealed, he takes the hard journey back to his native hometown to rescue and adopt Hassan’s son whose father (being a Mongoloid Hazara and Shi’ite Muslim) is executed by the Taliban.

The characters of both the novels are trapped in the crossfire and are inundated by external forces. “Their inner lives are influenced by an often brutal and unforgiving outside world, and the decisions they make about their own lives are influenced by things over which they have no control: revolutions, wars, extremism, and oppression” (‘A Conversation with Khaled Hosseini’, *The Malta Independent* 2007). This, however, is more evident in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* than in *The Kite Runner* as Amir lives a life away from his homeland Afghanistan as an immigrant in the U.S.A for many years. The troubles, miseries, and hardships that were spared to him, Mariam and Laila, had to live through. Hence, their lives are shaped more intensely by the events in Afghanistan than Amir’s life is.

#### 4. Conclusion:

Thus, we see that Khaled Hosseini depicts the context of culture and society, politics and history of the region, individuals and their day to day life in his novels. He has successfully portrayed the major events in the political history of Afghanistan, interconnected these with his main plots and thus represented how Afghan’s lives were affected by this history. This is in real sense ‘historicity of the text’ because it textualizes the history by emphasizing on the individuals and their experience of living in a certain socio-historical context.

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