

An Ethnoscopic Reading of Khalid Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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Abstract

*For the last two decades, the novel *The Kite Runner* (2003) had become an active site for facilitating discussions on religion, gender and identity in the third world countries. The work gained prominence as several accolades poured in from various parts of the globe for being one of the pioneering works to subtly trace the evolution of the Taliban and other political administrations that battered the lives of the individuals. Studies on themes of culture, identity, relationship, betrayal have been extensively carried out by researchers but not much work has been done in the realm of conceptualising the nation state and identity. Therefore, this research paper intends to focus on the construct of nation-state and its various manifestations or realisations. In this, connection, this paper uses the theoretical framework of Arjun Appadurai to look into the formations of ethnoscapes in Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*. The paper will also use ideas of culture and nation proposed by Homi. K. Bhabha to study the means by which identity(ies) gets perpetuated.*

Keywords: Nation-state, Globalisation, Ethnoscapes, Identity.

Arjun Appadurai in his *Modernity At Large* has construed those national identities are prominently influenced by the production of ethnoscapes, technoscapes mediascapes, ideoscapes, financescapes. Ethnoscapes indicates The landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourist, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree (MAL 33)

Ethnoscapes gain prominence to view the concept of nation for the anthropologist and sociologist view nation as a recent transient political phenomenon, consciously fashioned by elites via various processes and organisations, to play an important political role in the international arena (Anderson, Breuilly and Hobsbawm). Nation state is the current scenario cannot be understood as a fixity (Brubaker Rogers 1996). The facets that constitute a nation are not only revised and continually reinterpreted, but also subject to dialogue. By positioning oneself within these ethnoscapes, the self (through multiple narratives) attempts to theorize one's cultural experiences and ideological standpoints. The shifting ethnoscapes act as indicators that are fundamental to the disjunctures created by culture, media and technology. Arjun Appadurai states that the scapes, "continuously inject new meanings streams into the discourse of democracy in different parts of the world" (37).

The novel *The Kite Runner* has been thoroughly perused using different perspectives of gender, friendship, religion and freedom. Hosseini's, this

study attempts to read the idea of the Afghan nation, its evolution and metamorphosis in the contemporary times. The *Kite Runner* brings to fore the contemporary crisis and challenges in imagining Afghanistan. Hosseini has portrayed Afghanistan as the quintessential third world space which struggles for the prerogatives of nation building and yearns for the necessary intervention of the expatriates to reinstate normality. While paying little attention to the Afghan legacy, the novels highlight the Taliban brutality unleashed on the populace. Though many aspects of nation have been brought in by Hosseini, he reinforces the idea of Afghanistan as largely being a gendered construct. In this connection it is interesting to look at the conception of identities (ethnic and gender) as represented in *The Kite Runner*. Despite the fact that Afghanistan has never come under a colonial regime it has always been troubled with ethnic tensions and clash among ethnic minorities claiming for parts of the country. The very idea of nation couldn't be realised in the context of Afghanistan, because the Afghans (ethnic and tribal groups) had always resisted any form of homogeneity. The country has always sported repulsion towards any kind of centralized state apparatus moreover, the nation was also a plural society – as Hyman states, “congeries of different ethnic communities, linguistic groups and tribes” (301). Afghanistan was not only affected by the internal colonialism (i.e.) domination of the Pashtun tribal elite but also by neo-colonial factors, as early as 1940's (Hyman). Afghanistan as a nation-state has always remained divided by factions.

The narrative in *Kite Runner* is a blend of the historical past and the nationalist discourses that went into making of the nation. The problem with the idea of nationalism in Afghanistan was, it “was an elitist-Kabuli idea meant for the elites in Kabul” (Shir 6). The elites, who reinforced religious practices, also conceded ‘modernity’ to some extent. This attitude was challenged by the communist in the late 70's and 80's as they tried to assimilate the minorities and women into the nationalist discourse of Afghanistan. The religious zealots believed that the Marxist with their Western ideological postulations would ruin the national sovereignty of Afghanistan. In the early 90s the armed forces of mujahideens took over the country and started governing a religious nationalism with sharia laws. These historic vicissitudes are mapped in Hosseini's text.

The textual narrative of the nation is impacted within the narrative of the protagonist Amir. The Pashtuns - a dominant tribe in Afghanistan espoused a masculine nationalism in which the ethnic minorities and women are deliberately excluded.

I never taught Hassan and me as friends . . . never mind that we taught each other to ride a bicycle with no hands, or to build a fully functioning homemade camera out of a cardboard box. Never mind that we spent entire winter flying kites, running kites . . . never mind any of those things. Because history isn't easy to overcome. Neither is religion. In the end, I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara, I was Sunni and he was Shi'a, and nothing was ever going to change. Nothing (22)

The Pashtun nation was challenged by the rise of the Soviet preoccupation. After 1978, the communist principles were viewed as a threat to Islam. Afghans considered that, Saur Revolution brought about a new nationalism- a mélange of the western ideals like Marxism and native values of the oppressed minority, which was a threat to hegemonic Afghan culture. For example, Aseef, the Taliban leader tells the protagonist Amir,

I spent some time in jail, at Poleh-Charkhi, just after Babrak Karmal took over in 1980. I ended up there one night when a group of Prachami soldiers; marched into our house and ordered my father and me at gunpoint to follow them. The bastards didn't give a reason, and they wouldn't answer my mother's questions. Not that it was a mystery; everyone knew that communists had no class. They came from poor families with no name. The same dogs who weren't fit to lick my shoes were now ordering me at gunpoint.... It was happening all over: Round up the rich, throw them in jail, make an example for the comrades' (247)

The Afghans, despite being in a state of instability, were reluctant to abide by a nationalist ideology offered by the Marxists. It is echoed in the text as Amir and Hassan contemplate that ‘the Hindi kid would

soon learn what the British learned earlier in the century, and what the Russians would eventually learn by the late 1980s: that Afghans are an independent people. Afghans cherish custom but abhor rules' (45). In such situation, instead of being swayed away by a common nation/nationalist ideology, each tribe came up with its own individualised conceptions of nation. One such means was the resurfacing of jihad leaders. In fact, the mujahideen was keen on uniting the different tribes and as a result aimed to construct a 'nation with a narrative of its own and to ignite the collectivity / ideology' (Brennan) of being an Afghan & Muslim. The ensuing Islam nationalism in 1996, which proliferated the pride of jihad, mainly aimed to put an end to the western infiltration into 'Afghan' culture.

As Bhabha indicates the 'ethnic cleansing' sponsored by the Taliban is made possible only through "death, literal and figurative of the complex interweavings of history" ("Location" 5). They constituted a religious nationalism that was bent on adhering to the practices advocated in the religious texts. But in producing such nationalism, they ended up producing homogenous communities (that claimed to yield stable identities). The Taliban nationalism which started off as an indigenous anticolonial nationalism opposing the elite western model ended up as a mere religious structure. Amir critiques this insular attitude, "What mission is that?" I heard myself say. "Stoning adulterers? Raping children? Flogging women for wearing high heels? Massacring Hazaras? All in the name of Islam?" (KR 248).

The Taliban created their own national identity, to hold together the 'myth' called nation. Any national identity is characterised by a political culture with its "unique symbols, flags, anthems, festivals, ceremonies" (Smith, "Nationalism Theory" 34). For instance, the novel provides details of kite flying competitions and buzkashi tournaments - as encompassing the 'Afghaness'. But this identity of being an Afghan is subjected to constant change and is severely scrutinized by the Taliban. They enforced 'Islam' to articulate an identity which would pave way for an 'imagined' collective belief system. Kalashnikovs, white flags, bearded men and silent burqa clad women came to represent a new national / Afghan identity. This shared tradition of Afghan identity was used by the elite/conservatives as a counter strategy to resist any foreign /western influences, for they positioned themselves as defenders of virtue, in opposition to the external forces. But in this stringent Islam nationalism, national identity was countered by its subjects. Their purpose of any national narrative is to incorporate 'the other' and create total cultural homogeneity (Bhabha) but it couldn't be accomplished during the Taliban reign. Most of the natives felt they had been excluded by the system. Therefore, there was an urge among the natives to flee their homeland, desperately hoping to fit into a nation that would accept them and give them possibilities to reinvent their nation. The story also traces the movement of the Afghan immigrant into America and how the first world country provides refuge for the dispossessed third world individual. Nationalism / national identity, which is absent among those who remain in the country is conspicuous among the migrants as they are bound together by a unifying sense of exile.

In the U.S. he is 'obliged to forget' the masculine Afghan nation, and the new space indeed offers him a chance to remember and imagine the possibility of other contending and liberating forms of cultural identification. In the words of Appadurai,

Imagination has now acquired a singular new power in social life. The imagination- expressed in dreams, songs, fantasies, myths and stories – has always been part of the repertoire of every society, in some culturally organized way. But there is a peculiar new force to the imagination in social life today. More persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before. (KR 53)

The lives of Baba and Amir transform as they (who had relished nobility in Afghanistan) are reduced to vagrants in America. The United States which is initially an alien place for Baba, who, "loved the idea of America. It was living in America that gave him an ulcer" (KR 109) becomes a home for Baba & Amir as they gradually became part of an 'invented tradition' which is fashioned by the modern Afghan elites and intellectuals living in America. Amir thrives as a writer in the U.S – an art which he was allowed not to

pursue in his homeland. The ethnocaspe does not only facilitate a chance to escape from the conflicted place but also his mental conflict. Only in the transient ethnoscape does Amir realise the nature of being an Afghan – he can never be a Pashutn hero like his father, but can rise to a hero by ‘his’ own standards. For instance, the crux of the novel lies in Amir’s reluctance/helplessness to rescue Hassan. Amir knowing well that the rape of Hassan would haunt him for eternity doesn’t have the courage to fight back, in fact he prefers not to, “I had one last chance to make a decision. One final opportunity to decide who I was going to be. 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” (68). But the same Amir who returns from the U.S to Afghanistan at the heights of Taliban rule to rescue his nephew Shorab adapts/adopts a different strategy. He doesn’t hit Aseef but receives the blows with incredible grit. By saving Hassan’s son Shorab (actually it is Shorab who gouges Aseef’s eye with the slingshot and saves Amir) he not only purges his guilt but also exhibits his ‘masculinity’. Amir subtly redefines the perspectives of masculinity. It is only in the U.S, he learns to relinquish his ethnic snobbery and redefine his perceptions.

The Afghan ethnoscape in the U.S. becomes a means of asserting his gallantry which was challenged in his ‘home’. The new ‘home’ - a space to obliterate conflict has been designed by his perspicacity. In the U.S. he can marry Soraya, who has been with a stranger for a few days; he can bring up a Hazara boy as his own. These things would have been a nightmare in Afghanistan. An American Afghan ethnoscape provides a chance to define or alter one’s ethnic pride or culture according to one’s own craving and the need of the hour. In fact, he is able to conceptualize his own form of nation, peopling it anew. But, Amir’s niece (i.e.) Hassan’s young son Shorab, whom Amir rescues from the Taliban has no idea of what a home/nation is. Amir reflects that, “what he yearned for was his old life. What he got was me and America. . . I brought Hassan’s son from Afghanistan to America lifting him from the certainty of turmoil and dropping him in a turmoil of uncertainty” (311). Having been abused in Afghanistan and feeling completely alienated in U.S, it becomes difficult for him to remember/ identify /imagine himself with a specific culture or space. Though he neither endures nor denies any identity conferred on him, he is uncertain of what is his national identity. As Appadurai point out, the new ethnoscapess “reproduce family as the microcosm of culture” (45), but while striving to establish that “the shapes of culture grow less bounded and tactit, more fluid and politicised, the work of cultural reproduction becomes a cultural hazard” (45) Though the conception of nation was formulated on the basis of ethnicities in the global scenario the local identities are realised through culture. In the present national is imagined as a ‘quintessential cultural product’ (Appadurai 161). Identities created by the ‘process of alterity’ (Bhabha 1990 192) in the native space are redefined to meet the need of the hour.

The natural (ized), unifying discourse of ‘nation’, ‘peoples’, or authentic ‘folk’ tradition, those embedded myths of culture’s particularity, cannot be readily referenced. The great, though unsettling, advantage of this position is that it makes you increasingly aware of the construction of culture and the invention of tradition (Bhabha 2001: 191)

As Bhabha states the idea of nation is constantly in flux and Afghanistan as the landscape is being compelled to be imagined using Appadurai’s ideas of ethnoscape which is largely imagined and reimagined by invoking memories of the past and performing traditions to cull out a specific identity. The ethnoscape becomes a means to “reconstruct their histories and reconfigure their ethnic projects” (48). The lives for the Afghans in the United States of America is not defined on the grounds of tight territories or spatial boundaries instead they are accustomed to the ‘new’ reality and accept the fact that they are not ‘culturally homogenous’ and ‘historically selfconscious’. The novel foregrounds Appadurai’s conception that ethnoscape represents landscapes comprising and representing various ethnicities in the present scenario but they can also be visualised as

Perspectival construct inflected very much by the historical, linguistic and political situatedness of different sorts of actors: nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, as well as sub-national grouping and movements (whether religious, political or economic), and even intimate face-to-face

groups, such as villages, neighbourhoods and families. Indeed, the individual actor is the last focus of this perspectival set of landscapes (33)

Amir and Shorab are mere agents who invent and reimagine a new homeland in America well aware of its fluidity. The micro identities- 'a political project of nation-state' (Appadurai) of difference manufactured in the Afghan/Pashtun context loses its hold in the U.S.

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