

Othering of Afghans: A Critical Study of *And The Mountains Echoed*

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Abstract

*The powerful nations of the Western world through their powerful ideologies have long usurped the weak nations of the world. These advanced countries have employed a variety of covert and overt methods to gain control over people's minds. In the current period of neocolonialism, Western powers attempt to dominate Oriental territories hegemonically, with the help of native informants. The native informers valorize the Western civilization by misrepresenting their own culture. They market their services in the Western world by eroticizing and Orientalizing their own culture. Native informers promote the American agenda by exposing the suffering of people in their own nations. They attempt to decriminalize the American neocolonial agenda. This study examines Khaled Hosseini's role as a native informer in *And The Mountains Echoed* (2013), one of his most well-known novels in which he portrays a condescending image of Afghan culture but praises Western culture. As a native informer, Hosseini has attempted to justify the US invasion of Afghanistan by portraying Islam as a religion of hostility. He has deemed Afghan culture and its religion to be vile, which, according to him, can be reformed only by the dominant West.*

Keywords: neo-colonialism, native informers, western dominance, American invasion

Introduction

Colonial policies are prevalent throughout the world, since strong and powerful states use dominant political policies to enslave smaller ones. The colonized feel low self-esteem and dishonor by living under the suppression of the colonizers. Influential and powerful countries use strong colonial discourses to promote their policies and agendas. For attaining authority over other areas and promoting their political and economic interests, Western colonists used a variety of techniques and approaches. Powerful Western nations have evolved into neo-colonizers, employing a variety of techniques to intervene in the affairs of other countries. Many Muslim countries have become easy prey to Western nations who have labeled them as barbaric and oppressive.

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Western conquerors have their own imperial agenda of subjugating weak nations around the world, and native intellectuals embrace this imperial agenda. Mimic men and native intellectuals provide justification and grounds for supporting colonizers and they become instrumental in pursuing imperial agenda (Said, 1978). Native intellectuals suffer from inferiority complex and their cultural and social belongings are severely compromised. They offer their services for foreign missions in the name of civilizing missions while losing their originality (Fanon, 1952, p.18). Few Eastern writers have written their literary works to highlight the power and authority of Western nations, while presenting the Orient unfavorably by exaggerating subaltern issues. Such writers automatically turn out to be a part of the international commercialization of cultural alteration (Huggans, 2002, p. 37).

The worldwide political landscape has changed dramatically since September 11, 2001. The United States, as a superpower, has established its hegemony in the form of a neocolonial force by conquering Muslim countries around the world, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Libya, and Yemen. Native intellectuals play a critical role in supporting the United States' global agenda. They contribute to the legitimacy of the US invasion of Muslim countries by distorting facts and realities in their home country. Native scholars consider Western powers to be innocent victims of Islamic extremism and the radicalization of their society by Muslim terrorists. Through the politicization of sociocultural phenomena, these philosophers and writers have expressed concerns to their home cultures. Native scholars and intellectuals are declared as “native informers” and “comprador intellectuals” (Dabashi, 2011, p.12).

Native informers are Western skilled diaspora intellectuals who perform their role as agents involved in the cultural trade of international capitalism (Appiah, 1993, p. 56). These authors try to write about their own society and culture, which are unsophisticated and foreign to Western audiences. They make an effort to present their work in a genuine manner by emphasizing moral depression and decay in their own countries. Native intellectuals stimulate the minds and thoughts of the Western readers through their abysmal presentation of the enigmatic Oriental lands (Dale, 2016, p.2) The native informer is a hired man who receives political and economic benefits in exchange for assisting foreign countries' cultural hegemony and supremacy. The native informer is usually familiar with the values of dominating cultures and is bent upon serving his self-interests through abuse of his own land and people (Dabashi, 2011, p. 40).

Native informers are generally of Muslim ancestry, and they began writing following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, with a focus on documenting terror activities perpetrated by Muslims in many

parts of the world. They try to link Islam with terrorism and violence. They strive to incite Islamophobia in Westerners while also isolating themselves from their own Muslim roots. They participate in a massive trade of policies geared at portraying Muslims as opponents of the West and demonstrating Islam as a dangerous religion. In order to gain personal wealth from their Royal rulers, they slant their culture and religion:

“These figures in conundrum with many Western nations have paid an enormous negative focus and attention upon Islam, mainly as a reaction to terrorist activities conducted in the name of Islam. Among the terror activities, the most significant were 9/11 attacks. (Malik, 2018, p. 3)

In the novel under consideration, Hosseini (2013) portrays Afghan culture as isolated and primitive, thereby legitimizing the American assault on the Afghan people. He claims that American interventionism is aimed at educating regressive countries and that Americans wish to help them in order “to protect the world.....even if it means destroying it” (Dabashi, 2011, p.9). Hosseini portrays a one-sided picture of Afghan society for this reason, which is not a true portrayal of Afghan society.

Research Question

1. How is Afghan culture represented in the novel *And The Mountains Echoed*?

Literature Review

The Western World had established a very strong influence upon the East since long, through powerful discourses, based on a complex set of information and messages which had provided a dominant status to the West over the East (Oberoi, 2010, p.95). Mimic men, and exilic intellectuals have promoted the imperial agenda of the powerful Western nations during the periods of colonization (Said, 1978, p.22). The colonizers were regarded as demigods, as rightly mentioned that, “a colonized man who has been to the metropole is a demigod” (Fanon, 1952, p.9). The colonizers were declared as powerful and the torch bearers of liberty and modern civilizations while the colonized people were depicted as inferior by native intellectuals in their writings (Fanon, 1952, p.18). The legacy of superiority of the colonizers still continues in the post-colonial periods through strong Western discourses.

The native informers and comprador intellectuals of Eastern origins play the role of agents of Western nations who defame their indigenous civilizations and cultures (Dabashi, 2011). The native

informers have embarked upon promoting ideological interests of developed and powerful Western countries due to their own self-interests and getting personal benefits. The native informers discuss political, economic and social issues of their countries in their writings to the advantage of Western nations (Spivak, 1999). In the present globalized world marked by digital flow of information, the native informers have proved to be facilitators for providing information of their native countries, thus paving way for bio terrorism and piracy attempts (Spivak, 1999, p. ix). Several contemporary diasporic writers contribute to English literature on several topics which fulfill the needs of global publishing industry to benefit their Western masters. The Oriental people are responsible for the phenomenon of Neo-Orientalism and has been criticized by several post-colonial writers including Pierre Bourdieu, Lisa Lau and Graham Huggans (Davis, 2012).

The pre and post revolution situation and trends in Iran during 1979 were described in the autobiographies of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) by Azar Nafisi and *Prisoner of Tehran* (2007) by Marina Nemat which provide typical depiction of the literature of native informant. The origins of native informers in their native countries provide some basis and authenticity to their literature and approval of western readers and audience. The writings of native informants are aligned with public demand for knowledge and information on Islamic world and establishing a democratic and civilized West on the one hand and oppressive and barbaric East on the other hand (Saljoughi, 2008).

Several literary works based on one-sided view of authors regarding Islamic world are generating Islamophobia in the West and some of these write ups have been accepted by Western educational curriculum like Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2003). Several educational institutions in the United States of America have not only included in the curriculum at Secondary School level but also included in the courses of the inter-disciplinary and cross cutting subjects such as women and gender studies, political studies, history, human rights and governance (Jelodar, 2012).

Many American and British academicians and intellectuals speak irresponsibly and irrationally against Islam and attempting to depict Islam as anti-democracy and a threat to modernization as a part of a grand strategy (Medar, 2017, p. 29). The 9/11 incident created a gigantic shift in international relations and diplomacy and many genuine authors and intellectuals have started universalizing the crisis and extending the scope of sufferings of a nation or a race (Said, 2004, p.51). The role of native informers became the cornerstone of neoconservative ideology which laid

the foundations for the US imperial project under George W. Bush's administration (Dabashi, 2011, p. 60).

Rationale

This study examines the role of Khalid Hosseini as a native informer in *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013) in which he portrays a distorted picture of Afghan culture by depicting the American invasion upon Afghanistan as a lawful and remedial action. Hosseini targets Afghan culture and religion, that, according to him, can be reformed by the dominant West. The paper has attempted to fill the research gap in the academic area.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The study utilizes qualitative research which is "viewed as an organic development dictated by the research in progress and not by a predetermined focus or hypothesis" (Seliger & Shohamy, 1995, p. 116). It aims at interpreting the novel *And The Mountains Echoed* (2013) through the theoretical underpinnings of neo-colonialism and its effects on nations and individuals. The primary source of the data is the text of the novel *And The Mountains Echoed* (2013) while various research papers and historical documents are also used as secondary data for the textual analysis of the novel.

Selected passages of the novel have been interpreted and various themes have been generated. For the purpose of generating themes of the dominance of Western culture and the demeaning representation of Afghan culture, passages related to the Afghan and the Western cultures are analyzed interpretively. The main characters of the novel have been analyzed that explains the dominance of Western culture in comparison with the Afghan culture.

Literature always plays a key role in promoting a specific discourse about the Oriental Islamic world. The image of Muslims and Islam has been tarnished in a well-orchestrated manner through creation of misguided notions and beliefs (Said, 1979, p. xix). The Western powerful governments engage multiple tools including media and writers belonging to Muslim world for developing specific narratives aimed at targeting Islamic society and culture. Western public opinion is molded about Muslims and Islamic world through false stories narrated by writers called as Native Informers. These writers present Islamic world as a threat and a danger to the western democratic values (Aswad, 2013).

According to Dabashi (2011), the Native Informers provide justifications for the military attacks of Neo-Imperialist western powers upon several Muslim countries including Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and

other Middle Eastern countries (Dabashi, 2011, p.35). Native informers lament upon the oppressed condition of women and children while putting their works at the disposal of imperialist powers to provide enough grounds for its project of hegemony disguised as 'war on terror' or the project 'white men saving brown women from brown men' (Dabashi, 2011, p. 69). Native informers prove effective in developing public opinion in favour of western imperialist powers.

Depiction of the Distant Afghans

Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan American writer, writes in the background of Afghanistan while claiming to have lived there as "native insight" (Fitzpatrick, 2009, p. 248). In his works, he portrays Afghan society as his own and lends his constructed and articulated narrative an Oriental flavour. He lived in Afghanistan for a brief time, as he himself states it, "he felt like a tourist when he went back to Afghanistan" (Dale, 2016, p.10). Hosseini's portrayal of Afghans demonstrates his sense of alienation from the country. Through the lens of Westerners, he examines Afghan cultural values and Islam. He exploits of Afghans' vulnerability and their situation and pains in order to legalize American operations on Afghanistan while simultaneously attempting to make his novels top sellers (Dale, 2016, p. 3).

Hosseini portrays Afghan culture and religious conviction as pitiful in *And The Mountains Echoed*. His story depicts the plight of Afghan children and mothers. He portrays the distressed families of backward Afghan society, as well as their longings to break free from social and cultural entanglements in order to accept a Westernized way of life. The West is seen as the true saviour, capable of resolving the Oriental problems. The novel's principal story revolves around the characters of Pari and Abdullah, brother and sister from Afghanistan's Shadbagh region. Saboor, Pari's father, has sold her to a wealthy Wahdati family which has no children. Nila Wahdati, Sulaiman's wife and now Pari's stepmother, shifts her to France, separating her from her brother Abdullah, family members, and clan. Pari was raised in the Western culture and society of France.

Hosseini (2013) portrays the well-known Afghan culture and customs in a biased manner that is devoid of ground facts. He has deftly crafted a society that is vastly different from that of Afghanistan. Through the stereotypical depiction of the Afghan culture, by focusing on terrorism, extremism, fundamentalism and women's marginalization, his purpose is to exalt the Occident (Malik, & Murtaza, 2013). Shubhi et al. (2019) state that Khaled Hosseini writes a good story, but that's all he is. On the surface, his characters and their traits help in promoting a specific agenda,

reinforcing the West's position as civilized and the East's stance as backward. His stories are distinguished by his gloomy attitude to the land where he was born (p. 3). While contrasting Afghan and Western cultures, Hosseini has taken a business-like attitude. He has failed to portray and compare the people and their cultures in a true and accurate manner. The Westerners are depicted as extremely civilized, while the Afghans are depicted as uncivilized, having all the Oriental defects. Saboor is portrayed as an insensitive Afghan father who breaches human rights by selling his daughter as a commodity. Another character who takes advantage of Saboor's poverty is Nila, who buys Pari, Saboor's daughter, in order to experience "some change in life" (Hosseini, 2013, p. 43). Pari is yet another character who is stereotyped as a conceited Afghan girl. She abandons her Maman when she is most in need and instead chooses to live with her Maman's ex-boyfriend. As a result, her mother is subjected to psychological pressure to the point where she commits suicide. Similarly, Parwana is shown as a vicious Afghan sister who assists her crippled sister, Masooma, in committing suicide and thus feels revived because she sees her as a barrier to Saboor's love.

The Western characters, on the other hand, are depicted as celestial beings full of goodness. They, like angels, have no human flaws. Mr. Markos, the major Western character, is portrayed as a benign and caring figure. He has been described as someone who is dedicated to humanitarian activity and serving people without regard for personal gain or agenda. The Afghans' poor behaviour has no effect on him; rather, he uses it to examine his own inner goodness. Mr. Markos expresses his thoughts as follows:

“If I have learned anything in Kabul, it is that human behavior is messy and unpredictable and unconcerned with suitable proportions. But I find a comfort in it, in the idea of pattern, of a narrative of my life taking shape, like a photograph in a dark room, a story that slowly emerges and affirms the good I have always wanted to see in myself. (Hosseini, 2013, p.330)”

According to Said's *Orientalism* (1978), the Orient is irrational, feminine, and psychologically weak and it is in contrast to the rational, masculine, and emotionally robust West. The dominating West must provide moral and psychological support to this two-sided partnership of Weak-East and Strong-West. Through stereotypical writings about Eastern cultures, native writers serve as facilitators, assisting in the

justification of the binary division between East and West. Hosseini (2013) constructs a story around the transformation of Oriental civilization into an indigenous group of sexual defects. He portrays Eastern woman as immoral, dependent, and a symbol of backwardness. The relationship between the characters of Sulaiman Wahdati and Nabi in Hosseini's novel *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013) symbolizes Oriental frailty and womanliness. Sulaiman Wahdati had extramarital affairs with his chauffeur, Nabi, and the two had been living together as "husband and wife" for years (Hosseini, 2013, p.122). Despite the fact that homosexuality is an unforgivable sin in Islamic Afghan culture and is "extremely stigmatized," Hosseini portrays it as part of Afghan culture (Muhammad, 2018, p. 36). He considers immorality and sexuality as defining traits of Afghan culture. He has made no distinction between men and women in Afghanistan, portraying them as morally inferior and weak. Nila Wahdati is depicted in the novel as an Afghan woman who embodies the Oriental frivolities and immoralities. She cheats her father, defrauds her spouse, and deceives her daughter. She writes poetry to communicate her sexually enticing emotions, which she describes as "long, scandalous poems oozing with adolescent desire" (Hosseini, 2013, p. 209).

In *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013), Hosseini attempts to justify American domination and imperialism by depicting the plight of women and children in Afghanistan. He has painted a bleak picture of Afghan society; the Afghan people, particularly women, are shown as cognitively and emotionally immature who are easily manipulated. Hosseini has depicted Afghan female characters in his story, particularly Nila, who is shown to be emotionally, ethically, and intellectually weak and unstable. They lack emotional control and are easily manipulated, making them easy prey for physical desires. Afghan women are enslaved by their sexual desires and must be disciplined lest they engage in illegal relationships with "every Ahmad and Mehmood" (Hosseini, 2013, p. 212). Nila in her dialogue mentions that the miserable situation of Afghan women is deplored in the Western world and consider Afghan women as brave enough but they cannot further tolerate their plight and sufferings anymore (Hosseini, 2013, p.182). Hosseini says:

Women who watch their desires died down and their dreams rejected and it is worst of it, if you meet them, they pretend to be smiling without any misgivings but if they are watched closely, the helpless look in their eyes can be seen which is very pathetic. (p. 183)

Hosseini (2013) has highlighted the story of Afghan women's subjugation in order to demonstrate that Afghan culture is stagnant and needs to be

enhanced by the Western world's progressive leadership. He has closed his eyes to the reality of Afghanistan's enlightened history. According to Shubhi et al. (2019), Hosseini (2013) decriminalizes the American war and depicts Americans as Afghan rescues. He portrays Orientals as sluggish and sedentary people who can be saved only by the West. Despite all its atrocities and invasions of Oriental lands, Western dominance and ideology are condoned and authorized. Their genocidal tactics and butcheries are heroically recounted and highlighted. The Western powers considers themselves as liberators and emancipators. They impose wars on weak countries. Dabashi (2011) comments on the same point and is of the view that new imperialist wars were imposed upon Iraq and Afghanistan in the name of fighting Islamic terrorism was basically a war of revenge rather than a war fought for nation building and reconstruction (p. 21). Hosseini (2013) defends the US invasion of Afghanistan by claiming that scores of international organizations and thousands of humanitarian workers arrived in Afghanistan and began developing the country, mostly in the areas of health, education, employment, and infrastructure development (p. 128).

Hosseini (2013) portrays the social and political disarray of Afghan culture through the themes of terrorism, chaos, class differences, and self-centeredness of Afghans, contrasting it with the peace-loving, equality-based, and sophisticated Western culture. Mr. Markos is portrayed as a representative of the Western world whose mission is to safeguard children and those who have been terribly damaged and incapacitated (p.128). Along the way, a character named Nabi, a poor and helpless Afghan guy, has shown gratitude to Mr. Markos for his services to children, "You have left behind your country, your friends and family and you have come to this wretched city to help my homeland and my compatriots," Nabi says in a letter to Mr. Markos (Hosseini, 2013, p.129).

By employing his self-loathing belief as a vehicle for degrading the image of Islam, Hosseini (2013) plainly endorses US imperialism. He speaks about Islam as a religion that promotes extremism and radicalizes Afghan society. He has singled out Islam and Islamic factions as the source of enmity and hostility on Afghan territory. They are portrayed as people that kill and loot for no apparent cause. Despite admitting that several wars have occurred in Afghanistan, such as the Soviet invasion, Taliban capture, and US onslaught, he blames Islam for massive damage and carnage. He claims that too many wars have been waged on Afghan land that have resulted only in destruction, deaths, and looting (p. 121). In the following lines, Hosseini (2013) accuses Taliban:

The fighting eventually ended with the arrival of
the Taliban, those sharp-faced young men with

their dark beards and Kohl rimmed eyes and whips are depicted as the cause of all the destruction of the Afghan society. Their cruelties have been well documented. (p. 124)

Hosseini (2013) has divided the world into two institutions: one that is peaceful and humanitarian, and the other that is vicious and brutal. He maligns Islam and supports the Western perspective as the ultimate code of life. In the book *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, Sam Harris (2004) claims that the West is at war with Islam, which according to the West is predicated on violence. Hosseini (2013) encourages Islamophobia for personal gain by valorizing Eurocentric worldview. According to Dabashi (2011), Hosseini "mutates into the image of Islam that has taken root in the globally alienated psyche" due to his "insatiable craving for attention" (p. 92).

Conclusion

Despite Hosseini's (2013) popularity for depicting Afghan culture in his novel, representation of Afghan characters and culture is tainted with Eurocentrism. He has distorted the image of his Afghan culture by portraying the unfavorable social environment as a cultural phenomenon rather than a product of wars and starvation. In the guise of preserving human rights and women's rights in a war-torn Afghan nation, Hosseini supports American interests (Dabashi, 2011, p.21). He portrays Afghan society as authoritarian and Afghan culture as uncivilized and backward, while praising the United States' engagement in Afghanistan for liberating the people and promoting human rights. He is of the view that the Afghan people are prone to savagery, brutality, and barbarism, and that fighting in Afghanistan is unavoidable. He supports anti-Islamic propaganda, using it to garner notoriety and personal gain. The flaws of Afghan society are accentuated in the novel to make it appealing to Western readers. By considering Western readers, he exploits the Afghans' suffering in order to promote his own ulterior benefits. He has deftly articulated indigenous stories in order to legitimize Western supremacy in both material and cultural dimensions.

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