



Revolt of the Abject: Images of Women in Khaled Hosseini's Selected Novels

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Keywords

women, abject, revolt, domestic abuse, gender stereotypes, gender equality.

Abstract

The present study aims to investigate Khaled Hosseini's representation of women in *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* using the concepts of "abject" and "revolt" of Julia Kristeva side by side with the major themes that are common between the two novels. Hosseini is one of the contemporary novelists who produced three prominent novels namely, *The Kite Runner* (2003), *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), and *The Mountains Echoed* (2013). He is the most famous Afghan- American novelist. All his novels are recently published and we are waiting his fourth novel which is announced to be published soon. The two novels under study are reflections of the political events in Afghanistan. Both are a representation of Hosseini's motifs in order to shed light upon his homeland with all its culture, language, history and political turmoil. Hosseini's books reflect a wide variety of important events and contemporary issues, although the themes of his novels can be seen as peculiar to the country of Afghanistan. Hosseini presents problems of ethnocentrism, racism, as well as migration and exile. He also sheds light on issues of domestic abuse, gender stereotypes and gender equality.

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1. Introduction

For many people in the West, Afghanistan is synonymous with the Soviet war and the Taliban. I wanted to remind people that Afghans had managed to live in a peaceful anonymity for the decades that the history of Afghans in 20th century has been largely pacific and harmonious. (barnesandnoble.com, 2007)

Hosseini's previous words express his fond of his homeland although he had not lived more than eight years there. He always wanted to write fictional works that describe fairly the status of Afghan people. He has presented to his readers a new perspective to look at Afghan people. Hosseini is always eager to show the world of Afghanistan as the background of his novels. He is very keen in showing the smallest details of his motherland in his writings: the norms, culture, custom, traditions. His fiction appears to be a mirror in which he tries to reflect the real Afghan society as it is in his eyes. In his fictional world, he clearly shows the historical and social context of Afghan society to announce a general principle; when the country suffers, every native of it suffers. Hosseini draws his pictures professionally like one of the greatest artist in showing the contrast between the situations in Afghanistan before and after Taliban Rule. He expresses his dream of pure and comfortable life with love but the opposite is the real

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picture with suffering, a lot of pain and the fragrance of hatred everywhere in his home. He has managed to employ his unique style and structure so perfectly to make his novels not like a mere tale by some characters but like a reflection of a whole world. Thus, in his novels *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousands Splendid Suns* and even *And the Mountains Echoed*, he draws that picture to show different relations like friendship, love, suffering and ultimately the salvation of his characters.

2. Khaled Hosseini

Afghanistan is full of story tellers, and I was raised around the people who were very adept at capturing an audience's attention with their story telling skills. I have told that there is an old fashioned sense of storytelling in *The Kite Runner*. I would agree it's what I like to read and what I like to write. (Azad, 2004)

The above quotation is by Khaled Hosseini in one of his interviews to describe himself as a story teller. In fact, he is one of the best storytellers in the world today. He was interested in telling stories from a very young age (Stuhr, 2009). His first novel, *The Kite Runner* (2001) remained more than 100 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list (Stuhr, 2009). His next novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2009), and his third novel, *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013) have an equal successful and spent about a year on the bestseller list (Arab World English Journal for Translation & Literary Studies, eISSN: 2550-1542 | www.awej-tls.org). Hosseini was born in 1965 in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan as the oldest of five children in his own family. He took a degree in biology from Santa Clara University. He belonged to a wealthy family, and they lived in the Wazir Akbar Khan district of the capital city, an area famous for high-end residents. It was an era and area in which women were treated equal to men and could work with them, go without hijab in the open. Hosseini's father worked with the government, in the foreign ministry department. His mother taught Persian literature. As a result, Khaled grew quite fond of Persian poetry and developed a deep love of non-Islamic, pagan past of Afghanistan and the regions around his country. He lived in Iran for a brief time, when his father worked in the Afghan embassy in Teheran, Iran's capital. He deepened his knowledge and love for Persian literature there. He came to know how deeply Afghanistan owed to Persia, in terms of literature. He loved reading novels in foreign languages and always enjoyed a good story. Soon he started writing on his own. The cook who worked with his family was from the Hazara community in Afghanistan, a community which has more Turkic features than Persian. Due to this they are highly discriminated against. He taught the cook to read and write. It was a time when he became politically conscious to the faults of his own country, faults embedded deep in the religion and politics that his country espoused (<http://www.bloomsbury.com/author/khaled-hosseini>).

3. Theoretical Framework

The Approach that this study employs to arrive at its conclusion is based on the Kristevan concepts of "abject" and "revolt". Abject is defined in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* as "Brought low, miserable; craven, degraded, despicable, self-abasing". It is described as a "state of misery or degradation". Hence, it can be literally used to describe the state of being cast out. However, definitions are general and sometimes vague to describe what Kristeva means. Thus, it is useful to consider how abjection is expressed in Kristevan theory, "the abject is what one spits out, rejects, almost violently excludes from oneself It encompasses a kind of borderline uncertainty which is ambiguous, horrifying, and polluting" (McAfee, p. 5). For more clarification, the abject disturbs

identity, system, order. This concept must be realized metaphorically as it refers to existence of an external force within a subject. In other words, according to Kristeva's notion of abjection, the traditional sense of identity is no longer valid and the subject has to go through this self-loathing stage in order to reach a new image of self.

Barbara Creed writes:

The place of the abject is where meaning collapses, the place where I am not. The abject threatens life, it must be radically excluded from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self. (1993. P.65)

Julia Kristeva theoretically explores the complex phenomenon of the "abject" in her seminal work, *Powers of Horror*. She attaches misery and hopelessness meaning to the term 'abject' and uses it to describe the non-subject, non-object entity that exists on the boundaries of the self and society. According to Mary Klages, in her *Key Terms in Literary Theory*, to be an "abject", for Kristeva, is experience to have attitudes of subordination, inferiority, shame and worthlessness. The abject, in other words, is "what culture throws away...or its waste products" (Klages, p.3). Kristeva identifies that we firstly experience abjection at the point of separation from the mother. This idea is drawn from Lacan's psychoanalytical theory that supports her theory of abjection. She identifies that abjection represents a revolt against that which gave us our own existence or state of being. At this point the child enters the symbolic realm, or law of the father. Thus, when we as adults confront the abject we simultaneously fear and identify with it. It provokes us into recalling a state of being prior to signification (or the law of the father) where we feel a sense of helplessness. The self is threatened by something that is not part of us in terms of identity and non-identity, human and non-human. Kristeva expresses this briefly when she says, "The abject has only one quality of the object and that is being opposed to I". Thus, the link between the abject and the subject must be discussed to make the reader acutely aware of them. The border between these two positions is imaginary, and however the trails to exclude the abject it still exists. Kristeva's theory of abjection is concerned with figures that are in a state of transition or transformation. The abject is located in a liminal state that is on the margins of two positions. This state is particularly interesting to Kristeva because of the link between psychoanalysis and the subconscious mind.

For Kristeva, humans express their refuse towards things that could possibly harm them by the uncontrolled revolt as a method to protect themselves. She simplifies the idea with food loathing as a harmful entity and then she expands this idea to include all entities that compromise the existence of the self. She explains:

Nausea makes me balk at that milk cream... 'I' want none of that element... 'I' do not assimilate it, 'I' expel it...Refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. (Creed, 1993)

The abject is "the place where meaning collapses," (2) and serves to simultaneously highlight the need for, and threaten the existence of, boundaries, rules and customs. Important to note in Kristeva's work is her description of the abject as something that both terrifies and intrigues. Because the abject is so closely tied with our own

understandings of our existence as self, it is, according to Kristeva, “something rejected from which one does not part” (4). Other theorists have elaborated on this understanding of the abject as something that is simultaneously “part of us but separated from our own sense of self”, a duality that disrupts identity, system and order (Vachhani, 655). Theorist Rina Arya well describes this when she writes,

The dual nature of the abject explains the precarious nature of ‘I’. The borders of the self are neither fixed nor unshakeable. Once expelled, the ‘other’, or the abject does not disappear but hovers and challenges the boundaries of selfhood. The abject...has the propensity to shatter the unity of the self, yet...it takes us to the heart of our being, defines our identity. (6)

Fear of the other has consistently driven (patriarchal) social order. A deeper examination of that fear suggests that, indeed, it is often a fear of the other-within that has historically informed the religiosities, fears and cultural markers of difference in human societies—a theme that I will explore at a later point in this essay. Further elaborating on this complicated overlap between self, other, and the meeting of the two, Kristeva grounds abjection and the fear it inspires in the subconscious memory of the separation that takes place during birth. She writes *Abjection* preserves what existed in the archaism of preobjectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be (p. 10). This possession by, and later separation from, another being, highlights well the anxieties the abject inspires—the frightening border where the self is compromised. As other theorists have pointed out, however, “the desire to escape abjection has its roots in the fear of the mother’s body, one which needs to be understood as a construction marked by patriarchal culture.” (Vachhani, 6551) Here, we see the point at which the abject moves from a theoretical concept to a set of anxieties and behaviors with very real consequences. As Kristeva writes,

Let us enter, for a moment, into that Freudian aporia called primal repression. Curious primacy, where what is repressed cannot really be held down, and where what represses always already borrows its strength and authority from what is apparently very secondary: language. (p. 13)

In Kristeva’s view, the primal instincts, fears, and anxieties inspired by the abject are unavoidably marked by more tangible cultural trends, and vice versa. She references a variety of religions in which fear of the abject quite literally translates into a set of written laws, practices and customs to avoid abjection. For Kristeva, the ways in which fear of the abject manifests in culture is often through patriarchy, stemming from fear of the female, sexual other. Patriarchal power structures—often justified through religion—seek to impose borders for social safety, working under the assumption that woman, the sexual other, possessor of generative powers which posit her existence as one constantly teetering on the blurred lines between nature and society, is seen as dangerous:

Biblical impurity is permeated with the tradition of defilement; in that sense, it points to but does not signify an autonomous force that can be threatening for divine agency. I shall suggest that such a force is rooted, historically (in the history of religions) and subjectively (in the structuration of the subject’s identity) in the cathexis of maternal function—mother, woman, reproduction...a power...that might become autonomous evil but is not, so

long as the hold of a subjective and social symbolic order endures. (Kristeva, p. 91)

Thus, “what we designate as ‘feminine,’ far from being a primeval essence, will be seen as an ‘other’ without a name” (Kristeva, p. 58). This theoretical idea of abjection anxiety made manifest in culture is at the heart of why Kristeva’s work can be so useful in analyzing any texts.

Hosseini, as this study maintains, employs the “abject”, in order to disturb any sense of unity within the Taliban mandates, especially with regard to the attitudes this movement takes towards women. This abjection can obviously be in the novels of Hosseini, whereby the writer reveals the seemingly fragile identities, fears and struggles both of the subjects and the objects, so as to give voice to the women in abjection, in the Afghani culture. Nevertheless, to write about abjection does not necessarily mean that the writer transcends it. Hosseini’s language, thus may look like as if it was doing what it challenges. Nevertheless, this is not a right claim to make, as we will see with the other concept employed in this study—that is, the concept of “revolt”.

Not only is it possible for a man, according to Kristeva, to write in a “feminine” mode, or for a woman to write in a “masculine” mode, but it is also more revolutionary to do so. That is because Kristeva’s feminist views are concerned more with general differences between men and women than with biological or rather sexual differences. She rejects traditional accounts of two binary sexes, of two opposed gender identities. As quoted in Brigit Schippers’ *Julia Kristeva and Feminist Thought*, Kristeva maintains that to believe “that ‘one is a woman’ is almost as absurd and obscurantist as to believe ‘one is a man’” (Schippers, p. 36).

Kristeva’s second concept is “revolt”, but not revolution, is described in her *Revolt, She Said*, “doesn’t necessarily take the form of a clash of prohibitions and transgressions that beckons the way to firm promises” (Kristeva, p.54). The difference between “revolt and “revolution” has to be discussed to understand the Kristevan concept and show the powerful effect of “revolt”. A revolution overcomes an already established regime or system, expressly to establish a new one. “Revolt”, on the other hand, is a guarantee for the self not to lose its energy. It is to resist the “psychenumbing society”(MacAfee, 106).

4. Research Questions

The major questions this study addresses and seeks to provide some specific answers are: To what extent is woman presented, in the selected novels of Hosseini, as an “abject”? Is there any space, in these novels within which women could act in revolt against the socio-cultural conventions established? Is woman, in these novels given a voice to articulate her positions? Ultimately, how can the two concepts of Kristeva help us glean further understandings of these figures of women, in Hosseini’s novels?

5. Research Approach

The research methodology employs descriptive and analytical approaches that lead to the written up of this research from reading the novel, underlying its main characters and themes, restating its ideas and ordering the sequence of its events till extracting the main research findings. As for the research planning, it is composed of three chapters; while the first provides a review of literature which comprises definitions of concepts considered as keys to research proposal such as Feminism, abject and revolt, the second chapter mainly examines critical insights about *A Thousand Splendid Suns* plus some

approaches to its scanning as a novel reviewing hot topics about murder, suicide, rape, guilt, greed, and others, the third chapter analyzes *the Kite Runner*.

6. Research Scope

This study seeks to reveal some specific ways in which Hosseini would be claimed to be a feminist, especially with reference to his contemporaries' perceptions of woman. For this purpose, the study will employ the Kristevan concepts of "abject" and "revolt" within some specific limitations. This study focuses on the "feminist" aspects of these two concepts, without any much reference to the psychoanalytic implications of these concepts. This very definite use of the concepts will help arrive at the conclusion this study aims to provide, in order to further our multiple understanding of the selected novels of Hosseini with regard to women and gender-based roles in the Afghani society; how they were represented within the course of literature at the time and how Hosseini, as a novelist, has contributed to such representations.

7. Research Significance

Using the aforementioned Kristeva concepts of "abject" and "revolt", this study looks forwards to revealing some specific aspects of Hosseini's views of women, compared to the perceptions of women amongst his audience. It therefore seeks to provide a new understanding of how Hosseini, as manifest in his novels, is a "feminist", but in a special way that takes into consideration both the place women should be granted and the social conventions prevailing at the time. The study, therefore, will explore the moments of female obedience and submission and even female defiance and resistance, as Hosseini depicts them in his novels and as modern feminist view them. Through the conclusion, the study aims to contribute to affirming special feminist positions that Hosseini installs within his novels, as a strategy to restate women and destabilize the well-established conventions in this regard.

8. Outline of the Proposed Structure of the Dissertation

This study will be divided into three chapters and a conclusion. In "Chapter One", Kristevan concepts of "abject" and "revolt" will be discussed. Also, there is an attempt to explore the cultural, socioeconomic scene in Afghanistan. In this scene, both men and women, of almost all classes of Afghanistan, were subject to rigid, complex behavior rules governing both personal and social aspects of life. However, women were affected by those rules largely than were men; there were still enforced patterns of male dominance and female dependency.

Then, in "Chapter Two", the study moves to look deeply into the ways in which female figures portrayed in Hosseini's selected novels, whereby we can demonstrate the spaces within which these figures move. For this purpose, certain quotations of the selected novels are selected to scrutinize over how women is presented therein and the limits of such representation. Taking into consideration those representations in these novels, the study will attempt to unveil how those female figures respond to such cultural rules. The study, hence, goes further to bring into light the very moments, at which each of these figures acts, and how their (re-)acts, where in obedience or in defiance, to such conventions.

Having explored women's representations and cultural domains within the afghan society, as manifest in the selected novels, the study will, in 'Chapter Three', bring Hosseini's view of women into discussion, in light of the Kristevan two concepts

aforementioned. Hosseini's female characters, from the perspective of Kristeva and other critics, will therefore be examined, within the context of both his surrounding culture and his novels. Finally, the study will, in its "Conclusion", provide the results, interpretations and insights with which it looks forward to furthering the reader's understandings of how Hosseini's novel works, with regard to the conditions of women in the Afghan society.

9. Sample Analysis

Although Hosseini's novel centered on some historical events, they are fictional. He focuses on women's sufferings in Afghanistan. The title of his second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* can be interpreted at two levels. Firstly, Hosseini has used it to present before his readers the natural beauty of Kabul which he has used as a backdrop for the novel. On the other hand it means the shining light of women of Afghanistan which is hidden beneath the burqa (veil) and is waiting for permission to enlighten the world. The title of the novel which is suggestive to the theme of the novel is taken from the poem "Kabul" written by the poet, Saib-e-Tabriz of seventeenth century. The poem praises the natural beauty of Kabul and its loss with the passage of time. He writes:

Every street of Kabul is enthralled to the eye
Through the bazaars the caravans of Egypt pass
One could not count the moons that shimmer on her
roofs
And the Thousand splendid suns that hide behind her wall. (13-15)

The novel is the story of love, friendship, suffering, endurance and redemption set amid the war and famine over three decades in Kabul. He expresses this in his second book which is about the story of two women, their friendship, sufferings, and how love brings redemption to them. The book is fictional in nature though interlaced with historical events, with the time line ranging from about 1975 to America's invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. This novel is written by keeping in mind the condition of women in Afghanistan. Most of the subject matter and themes of his second novel are influenced by and product of his own experiences in Afghanistan during his visit. This is clear indication that literature is the reflection of society and vice versa as Lucien Goldman called as "categorical structure". The concept as evolved by Goldman is the means of an essential mediation between literary text, social consciousness and historical force. These categorical structures try to seek inner ideological structure of the work and to expose its relation to both what we call literary form and to an actual history.

In the end of this novel, Mariam redeems herself and Laila from the bondage of Rasheed by killing him. The ransom which Mariam has to pay is her life. Afghanistan too gains freedom from years of oppression and war as United States helps the local armies to fight against Taliban power. So, Hosseini has successfully presented the tale of redemption through suffering of its characters— symbolic of the sufferings of the people of Afghanistan. Even in the novel *And the Mountains Echoed*, Hosseini has presented the modern day Afghanistan, with the touch of the toil and struggles of the last thirty years that the country has gone through. The mountains in the title are symbolic of the topography of Afghanistan. Again, they act as a sole bearer witness to a couple of pivotal events. On one level they stand for the natural entity, but on the other act as a hard barrier who bear all the atrocities that befell on the people of Afghanistan.

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