

**Exploring the American Invasion of Afghanistan through Fiction: A Comparative
Analysis Between *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *Poetry of the Taliban***

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Abstract: As a result of the September 11 attacks, the United States of America invaded Afghanistan on October 7, 2001. Since then, the USA has been functioning as a governing power in the political and economic sphere of Afghanistan. This paper aims to explore the American Invasion of Afghanistan through fiction. The objective is to study how the American invasion of and its following political and economic involvement in Afghanistan are portrayed in two significant literary works- *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by the famous Afghan American novelist Khaled Hosseini and *Poetry of the Taliban*, an anthology of poetry written by some of the people involved in the Taliban movement. By giving a comparative analysis between the two texts, this paper casts light upon the different perspectives that emerged from both inside and outside of Afghanistan on the issue of the American invasion.

Keywords: American invasion of Afghanistan, Neocolonialism, the USA invaded Afghanistan, Khaled Hosseini, *Poetry of the Taliban*.

Introduction: The immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks against the United States of America was the placing of Afghanistan “on the world map again as the hotbed of terrorism” (Braakman 17). In response to the attacks, the USA, by calling itself the “largest source of humanitarian aid” of Afghanistan, started its “war on terror” with its allies on October 7, 2001 under the name Operation Enduring Freedom (Bush). The officially stated

purpose was to target the "al-Qaeda members, and to punish the Taliban government in Afghanistan which had provided support and haven to al-Qaeda" (Sabahuddin 155). Some of the immediate significant events that happened in Afghanistan after the invasion of America and its allies are as follows: the destruction of the Taliban's camps, forming of an interim government in December 2001 and a transitional government in June 2002 called for by the Bonn Agreement, allotment of provincial reconstruction team in November 2002 with UN and nongovernmental organizations, expansion of the ISAF role across the country in 2003, adoption of a Constitution and the selection of Hamid Karzai as the first democratically elected President in 2004, an agreement between Karzai and Bush on enabling the US forces to access the Afghan military facilities and ensuring Afghanistan's security, democratic election in Afghanistan on 18 September 2005 and so on. In the following years, different measures are seen taken to bring normalcy to Afghanistan by the different governments of both the respective countries, but a completely secured environment has not been achieved yet.

Objective: This paper aims to explore the American Invasion of Afghanistan through fiction. The objective is to study how the American invasion of and its following political and economic involvement in Afghanistan are portrayed in two significant literary works- *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by the famous Afghan American novelist Khaled Hosseini and *Poetry of the Taliban*, an anthology of poetry written by some of the people involved in the Taliban movement.

Methodology: The research paper investigates the proposed objective by giving a comparative analysis between the selected two texts. By not limiting only to the narrative coming from outside of Afghanistan, this paper tries to explore the perspectives that emerged from both inside and outside of Afghanistan on the issue of the American invasion.

Discussion and Findings: The writings of Khaled Hosseini are generally known for the portrayal of war, refugee crisis, terrorism search for home, etc. especially in his native country Afghanistan. In his three novels- *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and *And the Mountains Echoed*, he deals with the issues pertaining to the contemporary and the recent past of Afghanistan such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the condition of the Taliban era, the displacement of the people of Afghanistan, American invasion of and the rebuilding process in Afghanistan. In his latest book *Sea Prayer*, which is inspired by the death of the three years old Syrian boy Alan Kurdi, Hosseini delineates the miserable lives of the refugees of Syria during the time of their migration. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, through the life of Mariam and Laila, Hosseini delineates the horror of war and extreme suffering that the Afghans had to go through, especially women, during the Soviet invasion and the totalitarian Taliban regime. Towards the end of the novel, Hosseini portrays the invasion of Afghanistan by the USA and its allies and the rebuilding process that happened post-invasion. In the novel, when Tariq and Laila hears the news about George W. Bush's declaration of war in Afghanistan during their sojourn at Murree, Tariq accepts the war as a way of bringing peace to Afghanistan- "maybe there will be hope at the other end of this war" (342-343). Although Laila initially finds it very hard to accept that the war will have any good effect, later on, she also gets convinced that maybe "there *will* be hope when Bush's bombs stop falling" (343). When they return to Afghanistan, they see the "municipal parks and libraries in midconstruction, manicured courtyards, freshly painted buildings" (348). The novel ends in a classroom with Laila as a Farsi teacher who, by teaching the children, will contribute to the development and prosperity of her nation.

On the other hand, *Poetry of the Taliban*, an anthology of poetry, published in 2012, gives an opposite perspective on the USA's invasion of and involvement in Afghanistan. The anthology contains 235 poems which are written by some of the people involved in the

Taliban movement from 1980 to 2009 and translated by Mirwais Rahmany and Hamid Stanikzai. Collected from different sources such as online, cassettes, oral forms etc. the poems of this anthology are diverse in their theme, style, context, and tone. In the poems of this anthology that deal with the American invasion, the Americans and their allies who represent the recent invader in their nation are "sometimes described as a dragon from ancient lore and sometimes as a guest who ends up occupying one's home" (12). In the poem titled *Poem*, Najibullah Akrami talks about the intrusion of America and its allies in the following way: "But suddenly a guest came;/ I let him be for two days...The guest became the host" (90). The cruel and inhuman action of this illegal host is described "with an ironic reference to the human rights that coalition forces are meant to be defending in Afghanistan" in an anonymous poem titled "The young bride was killed here"- "The young bride was killed here,/...All their human rights were hurt" (12, 115). But this killing is circulated by the press as the killing of "terrorists" and "enemies" (115). In the poem "How Many are the NGOs!", the poet Matiullah Sarachawal gives a vehement criticism on the natives who work for the NGOs dominated by the foreign sponsors and Western government and have emerged as a "new class of consumers paid in dollars" and flag-bearer of Western norms in a poverty-ridden society (13). On the other hand, the poem titled "Condolences of Karzai and Bush" lampoons the end of the Bush-era in the form of a farewell conversation between two lovers. By calling Karzai a slave, this poem criticises the fawning servility of Karzai in front of the American government.

A comparative analysis between *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *Poetry of the Taliban* reveals that both the texts are polemical in their attitude towards the presence of American military force and its long policy in Afghanistan which has its presence till today. In comparison to the socio-political scenario during Russian-occupied Afghanistan and the totalitarian Taliban regime, the scenario of Afghanistan after the American invasion is much

safer which is reflected in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* along with Hosseini's other novels. In his podcast interview with Melissa Fleming, Hosseini says that when President Bush announced the war in Afghanistan, it "was a mixture of dread and hope. Dread that there is going to be more fighting. But at the same time there was a hope that things might finally turn in a better direction". But a strong and valid criticism raised by scholars against Khaled Hosseini's writings is that his fictional world contributes to the discourse of neo-colonialism by his blind support to and attachment of too much optimism at the American invasion and thereby justifies the imposition of the Western values to the rest of the world. The "essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent", but in reality, "its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside" (Nkrumah ix). It is used to "dominate and exploit other country" by creating "either political, economic or cultural hegemony" by various ways such as invasion by military force, implementation of policy to gain profit etc. (Utari 11). According to Abdullah M. Al-Dagamseh and Olga Golubeva in the article "Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as a Child- Rescue and Neo- Orientalist Narrative", the neo-colonial power structure is "sustained by neo-orientalist rhetoric" which shows a "readiness to listen to what the marginalised have to say", but in reality, it is oriented towards creating a "refurbished form of dividing the nations into civilized and backward deals..., particularly with the Middle East"(3). A close analysis of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* reveals this neo-oriental framework where Afghanistan is portrayed as a state that "lacks independence from foreign powers" and "fails to provide a safe and nurturing environment" for its people and the American invasion with its allies is shown as a boon for the country (Al- Dagamseh and Golubeva 5) . For instance, while the situation of the orphanage was inhumane for the children during the Taliban era, after the Western allies invaded Afghanistan, Laila and Aziza could visit the orphanage as a happy family and Laila could start her career as a teacher to the orphans. This kind of attachment of optimism

towards the invasion of Western allies in Afghanistan "allows Hosseini to avoid troubling his readers' minds with questions that will challenge the widespread paradigm of universality of Western values and of benign nature of United States' involvement in the affairs of other countries"(Al- Dagamseh and Golubeva 9). Moreover, even the "carefree pastime experienced by the children in the novel is associated with foreign presence and foreign culture" (Al-Dagamseh and Golubeva 5). For instance, after returning to Kabul, Laila and her family went to a movie theatre where "at last, *Titanic* was openly screened for the people of Kabul" (Hosseini 362). Here, the screening of *Titanic* is presented as a symbol of the artistic and cultural liberation of the Afghans from the erstwhile conservative regime. An interesting comparison is given by Abdullah M Al-Dasgamseh Abdullah M and Olga Golubeva in their article between the presentation of *Titanic* and an unnamed Soviet movie watched by Laila and Tariq in the novel. In the article, the writers highlight that the "kiss shared by the couple in this unnamed Soviet movie makes the young watchers awkward... and marking the end of their innocent friendship" whereas the display of the movie *Titanic* is presented as a sign of progress. This kind of discriminatory treatment of similar material coming from western and non-Western culture "contributes to the promotion of Western values as universally fitting and beneficial for the global community" (6).

In the essay titled "Afghanistan, The United States, and the Legacy of Afghanistan's Civil War", Katherine Harvey very clearly describes the involvement of the USA in Afghanistan before the Russian invasion and during the Taliban regime. Here, he gives example of an interview given by Zbigniew Brezinski, the former United States National Security Advisor, to a French reporter in 1988 where the interviewee confirmed that the "CIA had begun providing covert aid to Afghan resistance fighters fully six months before the Soviet invasion" and it was done to provoke the Soviet Union and allure them to enter the Afghan trap. Thus, Afghanistan was used by the USA as a pawn to combat the Soviet Union.

Moreover, in the year 2006 which was the previous year of publication of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, violence erupted in Afghanistan because of the increasing suicide attacks and bombings. In the same year, cracks occurred between the USA and its allies regarding the commitment of military force in Afghanistan. Thus, despite the availability of the shreds of evidence of the USA's participation in the destruction of Afghanistan in the past and the fragile nature of the rebuilding process initiated by the USA, the questioning of Hosseini's portrayal of the American invasion as a benevolent task is very justifiable and here, the critical perspective on the USA's policy in Afghanistan reflected in *Poetry of the Taliban* seems very relevant.

Conclusion: My analysis of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *Poetry of the Taliban* casts light upon the two different aspects of the American invasion and its following political and economic involvement in Afghanistan. While *A Thousand Splendid Suns* portrays the positive impact of the American invasion of Afghanistan, *Poetry of the Taliban* highlights the flaws in the USA's involvement in Afghanistan and shows how Afghanistan is trapped again in another colonialism.

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