

Moving Towards Peace and Stability: Afghanistan through Literature

**Dr Namita Singh*

Basheer Sahakhwaz an Afghan writer asserts that the development of a nation cannot be judged by the number of hidden books in secret cellars or even the burning of their very existence but rather it depends upon their distribution to the readers. At the same time, a nation can only reach its peak expression only when it produces writers and philosophers who fight for the cause of the nation's soul and its peoples' belief. The humanitarian values of these philosophers and writers become the values of the ordinary people in the nation and they are the messengers who spread the sole of their nation into the world with the help of pen. They represent their nation and people through their works hence contributes to the nation building in a way.

Afghanistan has historically produced a huge number of thinkers who played an immense role in influencing the nation to fight for freedom and for their country. These thinkers in the form of poets, writers and philosophers became a source of inspiration for the war waked people of the country. During the continuous war in Afghanistan most of the literary heritage of the country was either burned or destroyed and resulted in educational shortcoming, the lack of libraries, the missing records and non evidence of living poets and writers. War proved to be the cultural destruction of the country and especially the literature of Afghanistan paid a terrible price for a long period of time. Not only Afghan literature but also Afghanistan as a Nation was almost forgotten during past several decades and it came into limelight with the incidents of 9/11 after several years. Afghanistan, its people and war on its land became the major issue for discussion. Several writers came forward with their writings about Afghanistan from all over the world. Amongst them were the Afghan Diasporic writers who had left Afghanistan during war owing to the unfavorable socio-political reasons. After leaving their homeland the communities of these Diasporas settled in the countries like America with a hope to find a democratic and safe environment to live. But their hopes were shattered soon after the terrorist's attacks on the twin towers of America.

The Afghan-American-Muslim minority or the diasporic community residing in America was deeply affected as the ramifications of the attacks of September 11, 2001 were felt throughout the United States. Since the attacks on the World Trade Center, Muslims especially Afghans residing in the United States have experienced violations of economic and political rights as well as ongoing social discrimination. Media stereotypes and government legislation continually aggravated the human rights abuses and established social, economic and institutional discrimination against them in American society. There were clear misunderstandings about Islam and those who

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practice the faith. This treatment provoked the hasty production of a great amount of writings about the political and socio-cultural dynamics of Afghanistan by dissatisfied academics, travelers, journalists, and aid development workers.

These writers showed their sentiments and concern about the lost homeland in their writings and dealt with the issues of Afghanistan's association with Terrorists and Taliban and their impact on the common people of the country who suffered without being guilty of any crime. War has torn their socio-cultural structure apart and they were devastated. Afghanistan's association with Terrorism and the process of nation-building by America after the destruction caused by the incidents of 9/11 also became the central issue in these writings.

In order to fight for the protection of the community's civil liberties, these writers raised the question of legitimacy of the First World interventions in Afghanistan and their process of Nation-building in the country. In order to convince their sense of belonging and duty towards their homeland they wrote about the situations prevailed there and made an attempt through which people around the globe became aware of the condition of Afghanistan.

The question of America's turning a corner in the treatment and understanding of Afghan Muslim minorities has also been raised and these Afghan diasporas, revealed a vibrant, active, and intellectual Afghan American community in their discourse. Although these Afghans left Afghanistan yet they trace back their socio-religio-cultural roots to their childhood memories. Their concern towards the Nation building of Afghanistan is visible in their works.

Two of these Afghan Diasporas considered here are Khaled Houssine and Tamim Ansary, who are continuously presenting conditions of their country through the medium of their writing and presenting the perspective of their homeland.

Interviews with these diaspora reveal that they began to write about Afghanistan for the sake of creativity and also to facilitate awareness among the fellow countrymen. They intended to inform the world about the political and social scenario of Afghanistan. Their literary writings give a vivid description of the conditions that prevailed in Afghanistan and how this country gradually moved away from peace towards violence and destruction.

“Diasporas are sometimes the source of ideological, financial, and political support for national movements that aim at the renewal of the homeland.”(Sociology of Diaspora, 24)

These writers have also been trying the renewal of their homeland by challenging the stereotype image of Afghans as terrorists through their writings and also making the world aware of the real face of war torn Afghanistan and its people. These writers have been re-examining the Diasporic

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movement in terms of nationhood, geographical locale, cultural moorings, issues of home, roots and exile consciousness along with the concept of identity and divided loyalties as well as understanding and embracing new modes of citizenships while living in a multicultural society through their writings.

Tamim Ansary's novel *West of Kabul, East of New York* is in the form of a memoir that depicts a journey towards self realization. The writer through his memories draws on his Afghan background, Muslim roots, and Western and Afghan sources to explain history from the inside out, and to illuminate the long, internal struggle that the outside world has never fully understood. Memories are said to be the lifeblood of personal histories that are responsible for its constitution. Myriad memories are employed in the *West of Kabul; East of New York* that interlock and intertwine over a period of time. The selective memories of the writer are the axis of his knowledge of self and of his identity. They hold clues to the answers related to the question of identity and sense of belongingness. Tamim Ansary's experiences span the Islamic and the Western way of life in the novel. Beginning with a look at historical existence of Islam in Afghanistan, The writer explores the reformist currents of the last two centuries.

Ansary undertakes the journey in the novel across his childhood Afghanistan through memories. This journey is followed by a physical journey to the Islamic countries to understand Islam and finally a spiritual journey that led him towards the self-awakening. Tamim Ansary's journey through the experiences of interventions of foreign and domestic agents in Afghanistan, traces the socio-cultural and the political scenario from past to present in a conversant manner providing information of cultural specifics. Each and every aspect of the country in term of governance and socio-cultural customs are explained, and the writer uses this information to aware the readers regarding the attempts made by various foreign powers over the centuries to govern the Afghan people and the reason of failure of these attempts as well. He also asserts that the community owns us and we should be obedient towards the community or we would be punished.

The writer's journey is an attempt to formulate a theological approach to Islam relevant to contemporary situation. He undertakes a journey to Islamic nations like Tangier, Algeria, Turkey, Istanbul and Morocco in an attempt to understand Islam. In the course of these journeys he hides his identity as a writer and posed as a "... lapsed Muslim looking for his roots..."(123) to ensure proper response from people about Islam. He compares the knowledge of Islam received during childhood to the understanding of it arrived at during the journey through Islamic nations.

From the act of remembering to experiencing and finally arriving at self-awareness, Tamim Ansary has used the memoir's inclusive quality to interrogate the commonalities and the differences between the ambiguous present and the recollected past. He explores how the self emerges from them. Wide emotional range of experience is explored. The memoir is more about the extractions from sections of his life that account for his life as a whole.

Homi Bhabha argues that in addition to the removal of national languages and national states in the global environment, we should also discard the singularities of class and gender as primary conceptual and organizational categories. He states:

The move away from the singularities of class or gender as primary conceptual and organizational categories has resulted in the awareness of subject positions of race, gender, generation, institutional location, Geo-political locale and sexual orientation that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world. What is theoretically innovative and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond the narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood singular or communal that initiates new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself"

Tamim Ansary has explored the Afghan society and culture in search of his self. The memoir is divided into three parts in which Tamim Ansary has presented several incidents and phases of his journey through life. His life in America, his childhood spent in Afghanistan and the journey undertaken to the Islamic countries are included. Through the novel that explores the past and present scenarios of Afghanistan, the writer aims at an alternative perception of the country to counter its stereotypic association with terrorism. When Tamim Ansary was an adolescent, his father accepted a job in America, moving the family, thus taking them away from their Afghan roots. While the reminiscences of his Afghan childhood in the novel are replete with description of peaceful aristocratic life spent with extended family, it also highlights the devastation of the country due to war. His novel is a diasporic account of the situations of his homeland based on his memories.

Hence Tamim Ansary raises the question of religious, diasporic and clan identity through his memoir. The other Afghan diasporic writer taken into consideration is Khaled Houssini who resides in California, U.S. and had left Afghanistan long before due to the adverse political changes in the scenario of Afghanistan. In his novel *The Kite Runner* Khaled Houssini deals with the conflict of tribal identity related to an Afghan along with the conflicts of immigrants in the host land. Afghanistan is a tribal land where people are known by their tribal identity. This tribal

identity determines their national identity. Tribes may be understood for a group of people of the same race bound together by the same history and culture. In Afghanistan they shared a history of conflict under which the powerful tribes dominated the less powerful tribes. This tribal conflict and the hierarchy resulted in socio-political upheavals in the country. Along with the influence of the First world countries, the political scenario of Afghanistan has been influenced by the tribal wars that constantly threatened and destabilized peace and stability of the land and also hindered the process of nation building in Afghanistan.

Khaled Houssini's *The Kite Runner* explores the influence of tribal identity in the construction of Afghanistan as a Nation. He has traced the socio-political changes and the Taliban insurgency that followed the tribal war in Afghanistan. The writer has also dealt through the immigrant's experiences and concerns along with a sense of nostalgia. He has written about the political and social issues yet a strain of spirituality can be seen in his writing that helps him to draw connections between his homeland and the adopted land.

The Kite Runner is the story of a young boy, Amir, struggling to establish a closer rapport with his father and coping with memories of a haunting event that marred his childhood. The novel is set equally in Afghanistan and in America tracing the political upheaval in Afghanistan through history of the fall of the monarchy and the collapse of Taliban regime along with the diasporic experiences of the author in Vermont, California. Though the main thrust of the novel is the diasporic experience of the writer in the United States with all its highs and lows, It also explores the question of tribal identity, the division of the Afghan society in tribes and the subsequent treatment, and ethnic tensions between them with special reference to the Hazara and the Pashtun tribes in Afghanistan. The other added constituents of the story are the impact of tribal identities on the human relationships and the personal guilt of the characters and their ways of atonement. The problems of the Afghan immigrants that the writer himself experienced in his real life have been presented in the novel. The characters learn to comprehend their losses in context of home and identity. Both the writings of Tamim Ansary and Hosseini are directly or indirectly influenced by the Sep.11, attacks. After the attacks on Twin Towers, world media projected Afghanistan as the center of terrorism and the people of Afghanistan were seen as the perpetrators of terror. Houssini says in his blog that the reason of writing this novel is to put a human face on the Afghan people and he aims to break the stereotype of Afghans as terrorists and fundamentalists. Through his story based on Afghanistan, Khaled Houssini attempted to make the western readers aware of the miserable plight of the war torn life of Afghans.

The fictitious aspect of the novelist has been overshadowed by the realistic experiences to which

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the reader can easily relate. The world created by him has been experienced and lived by several Afghan immigrants. The incidents presented by Khaled Houssini in the novel provide deep insights into the Afghan culture. He points out in an interview with Sadat that his memories unlike those of the current generations of Afghans are untainted by the specter of war, landmines and famine. He wrote about Afghanistan to remind people that Afghans had managed to live in peace for decades and the history of Afghans in the twentieth century has been largely peaceful and harmonious. There were poets, musicians and writers, and an influx of western culture that affected art and literature in the 60s and 70s. Kabul was a flourishing cosmopolitan city with its vibrant artistic, intellectual and culturally rich life.

Khalid Hosseini, in another interview admits the story to be an immigrant's account to some extent as there are several passages in the novel that resembles his own life. He has used many of his experiences as source materials; there are certain incidents which are taken from real life situation. In order to write a novel about expatriate Afghans returning to the land of their origin, Khalid Hosseini himself returned to Afghanistan after 27 years. He shared his experiences of Kabul in *The Kite Runner* and helped the world's perception of Afghanistan by providing the readers with the sense of life in Afghanistan. Critic Razeshta Sethna holds that *The Kite Runner* depicts the troubles in Afghanistan through the interpersonal relationships. The writer also explores the fundamental questions about nation, nationalism and nationhood through his novel.

Khaled Houssini's chief protagonist Amir yearned for the love of his Father while Tamim Ansary during his childhood yearned for his identity. Like Ansary Amir also has gone through a dilemma of his identity as a friend, as a son and as a master.

A Diaspora's memory of homeland and the nature of the lost object form the basis of melancholia. Homeland is recollected through traumatic moments. The traumatic moments simply heighten the sense of mourning occasioned by a prior "death" of the homeland. Vijay Mishra asserts that trauma needs to be constantly recalled so that diasporic lives do not become footnotes to a neutral multiculturalism. An ethical relationship to the ghost of Diaspora is absolutely essential. He concludes that mourning and trauma do acquire historical depth, and are significant elements in the social lives of Diaspora. Without memory, without a sense of loss, without a certain will to mythologize, life for many displaced people will become intolerable and the theory of Diaspora would lose its ethical edge. The feeling of loss and rootlessness and search for his identity leads to the uncertainties about the self.

Hosseini is an American and considers himself to have assimilated into U.S. culture. But his novels are centered on his ancestral and natal home and illuminate that home country, by providing a broader picture of Afghanistan, to readers in his new home. He writes in English, but sprinkles

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both works with Farsi or the Afghan variant of that language, Dari. The Kite Runner, considered a novel of immigration or an ethnic novel; however, these issues are secondary to the main plot line of Amir's betrayal of his childhood friend and his quest to redeem himself. Amir and his father remain part of a cohesive Afghan community in America and within that community they share mutual respect and receive and provide protection and care as it is needed. Hosseini works into the story the struggles of the community in exile: the need to cope with a new language, the loss of status and material wealth, and the conflict of old ways amidst a population with vastly different values and customs. Since the publication of *The Kite Runner* Hosseini has received many e-mails from Afghans in exile in the U.S. who thanked him for writing the book. He explains that they feel a slice of their story has been told by one of their own. Yet there are those people who called the book decisive and objected to some of the issues raised in the book namely racism, discrimination, and ethnic inequality etc. Hosseini in return argues that if this book generates any sort of dialogue between Afghans then it will have done service to the community.

The Afghan Diasporic writers like Tamim Ansary and Khaled Houssini has shown a keen interest in the culture and history along with the conditions prevailed before and after 9/11 in their country Afghanistan. There have been several debates on the questions which influence the motivation of Afghan Diaspora living in the different parts of the world to participate in transnational activities relating to peace building in Afghanistan. The existing literature of these Diasporas could have a positive impact on the conflict in their countries of origin and the factors which affect Diasporas willingness to participate in these activities. Both Tamim Ansary and Khaled Houssini, Afghans in their blood and color and western in their culture form a diasporic identity. Their displacement due to both personal and political reasons led them towards the divided loyalty both between the homeland and host land. Both of them mapping the diasporic experience in their fiction are diasporic in their real lives. Although both of them have assimilated into the host culture and land yet the experiences of unsettlement, adaptation, language and longing reflects in their writings. Their writings deal within the space moves between home and foreign country, between familiar and strange as well as the old and new. Contrast and comparisons between the two spaces can frequently be seen in their writings. Both of them include the memory of home along with the details of childhood landscapes, historical events and people. The sense of alienation in a new society and a determined effort to retain features from homeland is obvious in their writings. Through their work these writers reflect a conscious attempt to assert ethnic identity in relation to the lost homeland while simultaneously seeking acceptance and assimilation in the new culture. There diasporic responses can be seen under the theme of Nostalgia, memory, identity, divided loyalties and representation of their imaginary homeland in their writings

The success of Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, and Tamim Ansary's *West of Kabul East of New York*; the fiction written by Afghan American writers has created interest in the works of other Afghan American writers. Several writings in the form of poetry, fiction, essays, and selections came in focus written by these poets, fiction writers, journalists, filmmakers and video artists, photographers, community leaders and organizers, and diplomats. Tamim Ansary and Khaled Houssini are the experienced writers while others are still learning to create their unique Afghan American voice. The work by these Afghan writers reveals journeys in a new land and culture. They show the way people trying to adopt a new life in exile while tracing the migration maps of their parents. The Non-Afghan Muslim writers like Nadeem Aslam and Yasmina Khadra have raised several issues regarding the interventions, nation building as well as the miserable plight of Afghans. Their writings are tracing the jagged landscape of the Soviet invasion, the civil war of the 1990s and the rise of the Taliban, and the ongoing American occupation along with their consequences.

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