A JOURNEY TOWARDS HOME WITH HOPE —“ A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS (2007)”

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ABSTRACT

What hurts you blesses you

Darkness is your candle

Your boundaries are your quest

-Rumi

‘Movement’ and ‘relocation’ are not new to human lives. The flux could be attributed to a political turmoil or an economic crisis. By chance or by choice, man moves away from home and is ‘displaced’. The geographical relocation doesn’t imply a mental relocation too. There is some space which is filled with the writer’s past home or a yearning for it. This space provides the impetus for a specific expression being termed as the literature of the exile. Homi Bhabha says, “These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborate strategies of self-hood- singular or communal that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (Bhabha 1994).

The writer starts weaving bridges between the two places with an eagerness to ‘connect’ through his ethnic consciousness which emerges and spells itself in intense expressions. These projections form part of a thematic shift and “…perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees_ these border and frontier conditions-may be the terrains of world literature” (Ibid. 1994) The entire process gains a paradoxical significance in the case of Khaled Hosseini i.e. (i) the writer moves his ‘soul’ home to link himself with the’ local’ but (ii) also tries to grow out of it to mirror the predicament of man and shows the most sought after universal ingredient.. ‘hope’ through ‘A Thousand Splendid Suns’.

Apart from being a physician, Khaled Hosseini is presently working as a U.S envoy for UNHCR, the UN refugee agency. He says “ Working with the UNHCR to help refugees has been one of the most rewarding and meaningful experiences of my life. For almost three decades now, the Afghan refugee crisis has been one of the most severe around the globe. War, hunger, anarchy and oppression forced millions of people-- like Tariq and his family in this tale- to abandon their homes and flee Afghanistan to settle in neighboring Pakistan and Iran. At the height of the exodus, as many as eight million Afghans were living abroad as refugees”( Hosseini 2007). In A Thousand Splendid Suns, Hosseini unfolds the human struggle against all odds in his home country Afghanistan which is ravaged by war, poverty and religious puritanism. His spirit of displacement is enriched with his attempt of paving a more progressive way to his homeland.

The paper attempts to deal with this facet of displacement that connects itself to home with hope, thus upholding the indestructible will of human beings particularly the collective will of women and the power of love. It is as if the writer is changing boundaries and undertaking a journey back home with a purpose of adding another dimension to the phenomenon of displacement that includes a spirit of emancipation. The wider significance of ‘Changing Boundaries…’ encompasses a humanizing experience by illuminating the paths of revival and reconstruction.

KEYWORDS: Displacement, Hope, Changing Boundaries, Collective Will, Ethnic Consciousness
INTRODUCTION

The condition of being displaced is not new to man and many a sensitive writer has given a physical form to his/her feelings of exile. Displacements are both voluntary and involuntary. Involuntary displacements usually carry the histories of nations and their fears and tears which move one to seek refuge and solace in another land. Sometimes it is simply to search for greener pastures. Whatever it is, a calling from home always exists deep within the displaced writer’s psyche and he answers it in his own language. The magnitude of exile literature proves its universality showing that the internal loneliness of the exiled soul is an integral part of human experience.

During the 1970s writers like Frank Chin and Lawson Fusao Inada went against Asian-American literature that promoted assimilation to the point of cultural self-denial. In their anthology Aiiieeeee (1974) they portrayed their rejection of surrendering to the mainstream American values. Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior (1976) became a bestseller with its dynamic protagonist; a Chinese American girl. The book discusses the conflicts of immigrants through her storyline which makes use of the Chinese beliefs and myths. Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club (1989) also received wide acclaim. The immigrant experience was also vividly felt in the works of Shirley Geok-Lim Lin from Malaysia and Bharati Mukherjee from India who settled in America. Bharati Mukherjee’s The Tiger’s Daughter (1971) focuses on her autobiographical journey to India while her Jasmine (1989) portrays the journey of her protagonist to America. The novel tries to combine mythical strategies to ascertain and redefine the protagonist’s identity. Jhumpa Lahiri; another Asian-American writer from India authored Interpreter of Maladies (1999) which won her the Pulitzer Prize. She wrote about the immigrant experience through her collection of short stories Unaccustomed Earth (2008) which zooms in on the generational conflict between the parents who are from India and their offspring who are born in America.

The work of the diasporic writer seems to emerge from the binary influences of his present physical location and the other; the location where his roots lie. Most of the diasporic works have shown their protagonists’ struggle and tenacity to fit themselves in the new setting. They have accepted the challenges of cultural displacement in their own ways and they stand sometimes as victims and sometimes as heroes in the process of defining or redefining their existence. The Asian-American writers have immensely contributed to this genre and we find writers from India, China, Korea, Philippines, Japan, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan and now from Afghanistan.

DISCUSSIONS

A Discord within the Self

Most of the literature of the Diaspora has echoed the voices of its protagonists with a focus on their experiences in the displaced land or the influence of the other land on their experiences in their own country. There is a discord within the self and all efforts are made to narrow down these zones; but there is still some space left and that is the point from which their stories have emerged. Many writers have tried to resolve this conflict in their own ways and Khaled Hosseini; an Afghan American writer has tried to lay a bridge for himself to travel back ‘home’. There seems to be a change in his perspective in which his protagonists are rooted in their home country (some characters including the protagonist do go to Pakistan as refugees but return) and it’s the author who goes to them to understand them and through them revisit his country. The immigrant writer’s pulse continues to throb but with a slight difference of making its presence felt by bringing the people of his country into focus. The duality and instability of exile find an expression in hope in seeking a balance with a futuristic vision for his ravaged country and this is what makes Khaled Hosseini stand out. Andre Aciman says in this connection:
"What makes exile the pernicious thing is not really the state of being away, as much as the impossibility of ever not being away – not just being absent, but never being able to redeem this absence.” (see the Internet sources in works cited)

But Khaled Hosseini tries to look at this paradox from the point of view of ‘redeeming his absence’ by revisiting his homeland with an eagerness to show the tenacity and hope of his people. Apart from being a physician, Khaled Hosseini is presently working as a U.S envoy for UNHCR, the UN refugee agency. He says,

“What working with the UNHCR to help refugees has been one of the most rewarding and meaningful experiences of my life. For almost three decades now, the Afghan refugee crisis has been one of the most severe around the globe. War, hunger, anarchy and oppression forced millions of people -- like Tariq and his family in this tale-to abandon their homes and flee Afghanistan to settle in neighboring Pakistan and Iran. At the height of the exodus, as many as eight million Afghans were living abroad as refugees” (Hosseini 2007).

The Story of Human Being’s Quest for a Home Away from Home

In A Thousand Splendid Suns, Hosseini unfolds the human struggle against all odds in his home country Afghanistan which is ravaged by war, poverty and religious Puritanism. His spirit of displacement is enriched with his attempt of paving a more progressive way to his homeland. In fact, it is the story of human being’s quest for a home away from home. It is a celebration, of human being’s indomitable inner desire to move, to walk on and on and on (Prasad 2008).

Khaled Hosseini walks towards his literary calling which he terms as ‘a voice in the head’ and he had ‘surrendered to that compulsion’ (in an interview with Firoozeh Dumas; an Iranian American writer) of writing. It’s a journey from the conflicting ‘where do I belong’ to ‘I belong to…’ and here lies the essence of his novel A Thousand Splendid Suns which is his quest for belonging in terms of meaning and relevance.

Khalid Hosseini’s story emerges from the traumatic encounters with war and guides us to make sense from these experiences. It is the war within the protagonists that gives way to a demonstration of physical, mental and spiritual strength nurturing a dying hope to save themselves and their country.

When today’s world; a hotbed of violence and destruction seems to move towards darkness, delusion and despair, we search for hope and stories such as these prove to be a healing salve for the community and might help reinforce the human connection. The tears of dying hope and the tears for reviving hope find a proper metaphor not only in the healing of the individual but the healing of a country through Maria, Laila and Tariq who remember, mourn and reconnect to the community in their own ways. Thus the novel demonstrates the literature of survival and shows how deeply it can touch lives.

The novel moves between two time frames; those of Mariam and Laila; the protagonists of the story. The events in the story encompass the three decades in Afghanistan that has witnessed the worst periods in its history. The novel begins with Nana calling her daughter Mariam harami; an illegitimate child. Jalil is her father who doesn’t claim Nana to be his wife as he is already married. Nana’s harsh realism is contrasted with the colorful world that Jalil brings along with
him when he comes to visit Nana and Mariam. Nana discourages Mariam from going to school and she wants Mariam to learn to endure. This issue of education for girls rings throughout the novel and underlines the loss that the women had to face due to the lack of the same. Mariam’s first independent steps are towards Herat where Jalil lives with his family.

She goes much against her mother’s wish and she returns heart-broken as she is neglected by Jalil and only to find her dead mother hanging from a rope. Jalil marries her off to Rasheed who is twice her age. She is told that “…Rasheed is healthy, and interested in you. He has a home and a job. That’s all that really matters, isn’t it? And Kabul is a beautiful and exciting city…” (44).

Mariam gets married to Rasheed; a forty-five year old shoe shop owner and gets mentally separated from her father. Rasheed a widower marries Mariam to have a son. His son from his first wife gets drowned in a lake. But Mariam suffers many miscarriages and fails to deliver. Rasheed is no longer interested in Mariam and ill-treats her. She has no other choice except “…to bear his scorn, his ridicule, his insults…she was nothing but a house cat.”(89) One of her most fearful days ends with him forcing her to chew pebbles which he shoves into her mouth in a fit of anger.(94) Rasheed all through the novel remains a male chauvinist and his undying ego forces him to show the worst side of life to both the protagonists; Mariam and Laila.

WOMEN AND THE POWER OF LOVE

Laila is the other woman protagonist in the novel who stays in the same neighborhood as Mariam. She is much younger to Mariam. She is the daughter of Fariba and Hakim a ‘university man’ (103) who work in a bread factory. He was a high school teacher before ‘the communists fired him.’(103) He is one” who could speak at length about the struggle between Britain and czarist Russia over Afghanistan.” (99) Laila is born on the day of revolution in Afghanistan when a rebel takeover ousts Daoud Khan; the president in 1978.

Laila meets the same fate of a forced marriage with Rasheed. But the contrast is Laila is the daughter of an intellectual father who insists on women’s education and comments on the importance of women attending universities. His words to Laila foreshadow her later role in the story. He says,

I know you are still young, but I want you to understand and learn this now…marriage can wait, education cannot. You are a very bright girl, truly you are. You can be anything you want Laila. I know this about you and I also know that when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, even more. Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated ..., Laila. No chance. (103)

Hosseini has put these words in italics himself, underlining the significance of Hakim’s words. Hosseini’s focus is undoubtedly on the strength of women and their role in shaping the destiny of a nation (notes 1). Hakim’s words also show the contrast between Mariam’s father Jalil and himself. But sadly, both their daughters had to go into the clutches of Rasheed.

Hakim had lost both his sons; Ahmad and Noor who joined the jihad against Russia and his wife Fariba is in a state of depression and nostalgia owing to her sons’ death. She is unhappy that her husband has not joined the fight.

Her only dream now is ‘to see her sons’ dream come true’ and she waits for the day “the Soviets go home disgraced, the day the Mujahedeen come to Kabul in victory.” (130) Hosseini intertwines the political history with his storyline and shows how the instabilities of nations affect people at a microcosmic level.
Beneath Fariba’s bed we see ‘crumpled newspaper clippings and pamphlets that Ahmad had managed to collect from insurgent groups and resistance organizations ‘headquartered’ in Pakistan.’(109). There is also a photo of a crippled boy being offered a lollipop by a man in a long white robe. Its caption reads

“Children are the intended victims of the Soviet land mine campaign. The article went on to say that the Soviets also liked to hide explosives inside brightly colored toys. If a child picked it up, the toy exploded, tore off fingers or an entire hand…In another article in Ahmad’s box, a young Mujahid was saying that the Soviets had dropped gas on his village that burned people’s skin and blinded them. He said he had seen his mother and sister running for the stream, coughing up blood. (109-110)

Tariq is one such victim and Laila is in love with him.

Fariba imprisons herself in the past memories and for her, life is a fight against the communists. But Hakim has his own reservations. He thinks that “…the communists had done right—or at least intended to ironically, was in the field of education…of women.” (121)

He is happy about the fact that the government has sponsored literacy classes for all women and also about many women studying law, medicine and engineering. (121) He tells Laila that ,”it’s a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan and you can take advantage of that Laila, of course women’s freedom…is also one of the reasons people out there took up arms in the first place”(121). By ‘out there’ Hosseini clarifies that Hakim meant the tribal areas and its leaders who rebelled against the communist policies which inclined towards women’s liberation. Hakim plays a very defining role in shaping Laila’s sensibilities. One profound statement that he makes that gathers immense significance when we see Mariam and Laila trying to fight against all odds from without, within and with each other (note2)to free themselves is “Laila, my love, the only enemy an Afghan cannot defeat is himself.”(122)

It is Hakim who takes Tariq and Laila to the magnanimous Buddha statues. Tariq says” I feel so small’ (133) and Hakim helps them both ‘climb up’ (133) Hosseini gives us a feel of the picturesque quality of Afghanistan”…the foothills, bare and dusty brown and beyond those, as beyond everything else in Afghanistan, the snow-capped Hindu Khush.”(134) But later when the Taliban took over, the giant statues were destroyed. Hosseini terms them as “The Taliban’s acts of cultural vandalism-the most infamous being the destruction of the giant Bamiyan Buddha-had a devastating effect on Afghan culture and the artistic scene.” (from an interview with Khaled Hosseini. (www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/khaled-Hosseini) Later in the story, Laila

“had learned that the Taliban had planted TNT in the crevices of the giant Buddhas in Bamiyan and blown them apart, calling them objects of idolatry and sin….But when she heard the news of the statues’ demise, Laila was numb to it…How could she care about statues when her own life was crumbling dust.” (279)

Search for Safer Locations with Fear and Tears

The freedom and happiness that Laila enjoys in her outing are short-lived. All the dreams of the family are shattered. In fact Hakim too says that he wishes to leave Afghanistan “Any place it’s easy to forget. Pakistan first…May be America…”(135). This could be his reaction after the ‘bullets shredded ‘his sons’ to pieces.’(137) The Soviets finally leave Afghanistan and Fariba celebrates the’ martyrdom’ of her sons. But the “Mujahideen, armed to the teeth but now lacking a common enemy, had found the enemy in each other” (155) and ‘rockets began to rain down on Kabul.’(155) Laila is
shaken to know that Tariq has to leave “Not the neighborhood. Not Kabul. But Afghanistan altogether…Pakistan first…then I don’t know. May be Hindustan. Iran.”(162). pathetically, one’s own country’s boundaries are lost and an uncertain search begins for safer locations but not without tears. Hakim cries when they too have actually planned to move to Pakistan. He quotes Saib-e-Tabrizi; the seventeenth century poet who wrapped up the beauty of Afghanistan in his immortal lines

“One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs…Or the thousand suns that hide behind her walls” (172)

Sadly Hakim and Fariba die in an air attack that follows and Laila is the sole survivor in the family. Hosseini describes the scenes with such passion and pain even without being present there. His reaction to this observation is …

In the spring of ’03, before The Kite Runner was published, but after it was done, so in that period between the two, I went to Kabul for the first time in 27 years and spent two weeks talking to people. Now at that time, I didn’t go there with the purpose of research. I mean, it was really there for me to reconnect, see the city and fulfill some kind of nostalgic longing that I have had for years. And then to understand for myself what really happened, how it impacted people and how people coped.

(From an interview www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/hosOit-5)

His sensitive observations coupled with his imagination unfold further and we find Laila rescued by Rasheed’s family. Rasheed who is still waiting for a son finds the right partner in Laila. He exploits her vulnerable position and marries her. Laila knows that it is the only choice for her to safeguard Tariq’s child growing in her womb. Mariam doesn’t like Laila’s better status and there are fights and heated exchanges. But gradually Laila gets close to Mariam and they find ‘the woman’ in each other and try to understand each other better. A girl child; Aziza is born and Rasheed cannot bear the presence of her just because she is a girl. Both Laila and Mariam are subjected to inhuman torture by Rasheed. Laila starts stealing money from Rasheed with a plan to escape. The companionship of Mariam and Laila is strengthened by Aziza’s love for Mariam and they come together in an unexplainable bond. Anarchy and war have forced them to come together and have started binding them but the political events were only turning worse from bad with ‘…Dostum ’changing sides to join Hekmatyar.’ (221)

The ‘Collective Will’ of Women to Create an Identity of ‘Self-Hood’ and to Resist

It is the collective will of these two women that saves them to make an identity for themselves. Rasheed makes Laila believe that Tariq is dead. It’s only later that she knows he is alive when he comes to visit her. Both Laila and Mariam try to escape along with Aziza and Laila tells the police that Mariam is her mother. But fate turns against them and they are brought back to the house. Rasheed unleashes terror and violence upon them. Laila pleads and says”She didn’t want to do it. I made her do it. She didn’t want to go.” (239).

He locks them up in separate rooms and suffocates them. Laila might have lied about Mariam being her mother but figuratively, Mariam becomes more than that to Laila and her children. They are forced to marry a beast of a man and from their common predicament they discover each other and these characters expand and enlarge to reach great humanistic heights. Parallel to this dramatic action, there are the turns and twists of the political history and the Taliban takes over Afghanistan in 1996. The regime brings forth its force and violence
Men wielding pickaxes swarmed the dilapidated Kabul Museum and smashed pre-Islamis statues to rubble—that is those that hadn’t already been looted by the Mujahideen. The university was shut down and its students sent home. Paintings were ripped from walls…Television screens were kicked in….Books except the Quran were burned in heaps, the stores that sold them closed down. The poems of Khalil, Pajwak, Ansari, Rumi and more went up in smoke. “ (250)

Hosseini’s words vividly describe the doings of the Taliban and the intensity of the description makes violence a character in the story that decides, makes and breaks relationships.(notes3) Laila wants to inflict violence on herself by trying to abort Rasheed’s baby growing in her womb with the spoke of an abandoned bicycle. But she decides against it. Hosseini explains:

Laila dropped the spoke because she could not accept what the Mujahideen readily had: that sometimes in war innocent life had to be taken. Her war was against Rasheed. The baby was blameless. And there had been enough killing already. Laila had seen enough killing of innocents caught in the cross fire of enemies. (253)

The other dimension of Laila’s personality is seen in her decision. Even in her intensely private and painful moment, she thinks about the principles and larger values of life. She is led by an inner voice and she feels it’s her responsibility to preserve life. It is Mariam who helps Laila deliver the baby in the hospital in the most difficult circumstances. Stunningly, the C-section is performed without an anesthetic which is another instance of the pathetic condition of women in hospitals under the Taliban rule. Mariam gives the required moral support to Laila all through.

The fall of 1999 brings with it drought which results in an exodus of people to Pakistan and Iran. Rasheed decides to send Aziza to an orphanage and adds “Besides, you’d be surprised how much they can bring in.”(266) Rasheed always doubts if Aziza is his child and he also comments on the color of her eyes. Laila cannot bear this atrocity against Aziza and for the first time, uses her force against Rasheed. She punches him.

Suddenly it seemed to Laila that the collective hardships of their lives-hers, Aziza’s, Mariam’s—simply dropped away…It seemed worthwhile, if absurdly so, to have endured all they’d endured for this one crowning moment, for this act of self-defiance that would end the sufferings of all indignities. (267)

This moment seems to be the silence breaker. It is when Laila hits him not with her physical strength but with the power of her inner rebellion .She wishes to protect her daughter from Rasheed’s ‘raids’. We find Laila’s dream significant in which she and Mariam are digging a hole to bury Aziza against her protests saying “…it’s only for a while. It’s the raids, don’t you know my love? When the raids are over Mammy and Khala will dig you out. I promise, my love” (268). It is a heart-wrenching nightmare in which the personal and social; the microcosmic and the macrocosmic elements come together.

Laila couldn’t stop hunger from attacking her children. “They skipped meals with increasing and alarming regularity.’(272) The day had finally come when Aziza is all set to go the orphanage. Laila tells her “Here, you won’t go hungry. They have rice and bread and water, and maybe even fruit” (281) to which Aziza replies” But you won’t be here…”(281) Aziza now has to live in a place which “…smelled soap and talcum, ammonia and urine…”(281) Rasheed hardly keeps up his promise of accompanying Laila to the orphanage to meet Aziza. So, Laila goes by herself risking “…a tongue lashing or a single kick to the rear, a shove in the back. Other times she met with assortments of wooden clubs,
fresh tree branches, short whips, slaps, often fists” from the Taliban guards because a woman was not allowed to travel alone.(285). In the words Kaka Zaman; the teacher and caretaker at the orphanage,

“It’s those savages, those wahshis, who are to blame. They bring shame on me as a Pashtun. They have disgraced the name of my people. And you are not alone, hamshira. We get mothers like you all the time—all the time-mothers who come here who can’t feed their children because the Taliban won’t let them go out and make a living. So you don’t blame yourself. No one here blames you. I understand.(283)

Kaka Zaman keeps fuelling his spirit of optimism though the orphanage is ‘underfunded’, getting little or no support from the Taliban. He says to Laila” Like you, we do what we have to do.”(283) His words mean a lot to both of them…sometimes even simple words like this become part of a mission.

Aziza keeps talking about her ‘clandestine lessons’ (288) to Mariam and Laila when they visit her. She tells Mariam that Mariam is not ‘dumb’….“the shifting of rocks is deep deep down below and it’s powerful…”(288) All three of them; Aziza, Laila and Mariam experience in their own ways…‘deep down’ a ‘power’ that might make itself felt but for now it’s only ‘a slight tremor ‘on the surface.’(288) Aziza is only an extension of Mariam’s and Laila’s strength and she displays a shocking tenacity in telling them that she is quite happy at the orphanage. But the stammering that she has developed recently has something to say about her physical and insecure mental condition.

Laila thinks that it is a ‘mirage shimmering at a distance’ (291) when she sees Tariq but runs towards him when she understands he isn’t. We understand through Mariam’s words that Rasheed and Abdul Sharif; the man who visited them in the past to inform them about Tariq’s death ‘had plotted a lie’ to ‘crush Laila.’(293)Tariq says “I don’t recognize Kabul” and Laila says “Neither do I …and I have never left.”(297) Tariq has lost his parents in the refugee camp at Pakistan. He has his own share of challenges when he is put in prison. He is falsely suspected to be a bootlegger. In prison, he learns the Urdu language and writes letters to Laila and he now works at Murree; a hill resort in Pakistan.

Zalmai is not happy about another man coming to meet his mother and he reports it to Rasheed. A fight ensues and Rasheed beats Laila and Mariam and tries to suffocate Laila. This is the moment when Laila turns blue, that Mariam hits Rasheed with a shovel and kills him. She has had the longest span of torture and abuse from him and it is in her hands that he meets his end.

There seems to be a parallel between Mariam and Laila and Afghanistan. All three suffer and endure limitless torture…in Laila’s words”…that a human body could withstand this much beating, this viciously, this regularly, and keep functioning.’(287) Mariam has revolted but sadly for a country to revolt, it’s only time that can decide. Mariam though childless, becomes a mother; by bringing out the Durga (note4) in her to destroy and devour the evil that wouldn’t let life grow naturally and that force that tried to stifle the giver of life. Khaled Hosseini’s words gather significance in this context. He says in an interview:

I went into this book, as opposed to The Kite Runner, with a slightly more sense of mission…I decided that I was going to write a book about women…they suffered the same things as men did in terms of the violence and indiscriminate bombings and so on but they also had to suffer from gender-bias abuse. (www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/hosOit-9)

Mariam’s words ‘There is a way’ (315) fill Laila with comfort. Mariam takes charge of the situation and plans about
“…what needed to be done…they would be on their way to this new life, a life luxuriant with possibility and joy and welcomed difficulties. Laila was grateful that Mariam was in charge, unclouded and sober, able to think for both of them”(316)

But Mariam has other plans. She decides against going to Pakistan with Laila, Tariq and the children. She tries to convince Laila who says”…we can hide out there for a while-wait for things to calm down…”(318).

Mariam rises in her stature. She doesn’t want to put Laila and the family to trouble. She says” I won’t have the two of you living on the run, like fugitives. What will happen to your children if you’re caught?”(319) Her sense of responsibility and sacrifice make are notable and she is guilty because she cannot answer the innocent questions of Zalmai about his father’s death. Laila is helpless and “All she could do was roll herself up and bury her face one last time in the welcoming warmth of Mariam’s lap.”(320)

An ordinary woman like Mariam shows forth her determination and steadfastness in being a human. She illuminates her personality in the darkest periods of their lives to give her hand to others. Cruelly crushed by the wickedness of man and history, she goes ahead with her duty. She sees Laila and her children off and Laila turns to have a glimpse of her for the last time. Mariam is taken into custody. Her plea that she killed her husband to save another woman falls into deaf years. She moves towards her final moments; her execution. She experiences a pang of attachment and thinks about Laila and Aziza and her children in the future. But she quickly accepts the present:

“It is not regret any longer but a sensation of abundant peace that washed over her. She thought of her entry into this world, the harami child of a lowly villager, an unintended thing, a pitiable, regrettable accident. A weed. And yet she was leaving the world as a woman who had loved and been loved back. She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A mother. A person of consequence at last. No. It was not so bad…a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings. (329)

Laila marries Tariq and they settle down healing each other’s wounds. Tariq displays his unconditional love and accepts Zalmai too with equal affection. It’s the year 2002 and “The coalition forces have driven the Taliban out of every major city, pushed them across the border to Pakistan and to the mountains to the south and east of Afghanistan. ISAF, an international peace keeping force, has been sent to Kabul. The country has an interim president now, Hamid Karzai.”(344)

One day Tariq and Laila watch the 9/11 drama unfold on T.V. and listen to people talking about Afghanistan, Taliban and Osama Bin Laden. Soon, they also watch George W. Bush declaring the war of terror on Afghanistan. Laila is worried that it will shower bombs again on Afghanistan but this time by the American forces. But the only solace they find is that there might be hope “when Bushes’ bombs stop falling”(343) But in spite of all the debate there are doubts in Laila’s mind because people will continue to suffer “…when some unsuspecting girl or boy back home has just been orphaned by a rocket as she was.”(343)

Laila hears of the rehabilitation work in Afghanistan; of schools built in Kabul, roads repaved, women returning to work and she feels that her life at Pakistan is ‘wasteful’ (345). She knows that Afghanistan needs her. This is the individual’s courage and conviction that Hosseini upholds through Laila’s character. The family arrives at Herat.Laila is on her way to Gul Daman. The taxi -drive is symbolic of the journey of Afghans and their nation. The taxi driver talks about the uprising in 1979 when the Soviets invaded and pounded their place killing thousands of people including two sisters whom he has lost in three days. One of them was twelve and it’s her photo that he has put up on the windshield. Laila marvels “…at how every Afghan story is marked by death and loss and unimaginable grief. And yet, she sees people find
a way to survive, to go on” (350) displaying as Hemingway’s (notes 5) quotes courage is grace under pressure. Hosseini lends the same hope and steadfastness to his characters in the novel who seem to be seated in a roller coaster vacillating between hope and oppression.

Changing Boundaries and Homecoming with Hope

Laila has changed boundaries by deciding to return to Afghanistan in spite of her ‘comfortable’ life at Pakistan. She returns with a spirit of participation and her present trip to Gul Daman where Mariam was born is symbolic. It represents Laila’s respect and conviction towards Mariam and the journey she undertakes is like a pilgrimage. She meets Mulla Faizullah’s son Hamza. It was Mulla Faizullah who educated Mariam about the Quran and explained it to her. Laila visits the house where Mariam lived with her mother which is now in ruins. She returns with an unopened box that Hamza gives her. It was given to his father by Jalil; Mariam’s father. Mariam in the past refuses to see her father who has come to see her in Kabul. Jalil tries to atone for his misdoings. The box has a video of Pinocchio; the cartoon film that Mariam wanted to watch as a child, an envelope and a burlap sack. The war and personal loss have made Jalil a better person and in the letter, he expresses his regret about what he has done to Mariam. He leaves behind her share of inheritance and his last words in the letter ring with irony “May God grant you a prosperous life, my daughter. May God give you many healthy and beautiful children. May you find the happiness, peace, and acceptance that I did not give you…” (360)

Laila and Tariq volunteer at the orphanage which housed Aziza in the past. They involve themselves in refurbishing the school and Laila starts teaching at the school. Education has all through played an important role in the novel; Mullah Faizullah teaches the Quran to Mariam as a child, Hakim all the time dwells on the importance of education especially for girls and both Mariam and Laila teach Aziza. It is only natural that Laila should continue ‘educating’ all the children in the school. Laila initially wants to know where Mariam has been buried so that she can visit her grave. But then she realizes that Mariam breathes through all the good work that is going on and mostly in “…Laila’s own heart, where she shines with the bursting radiance of a thousand suns.”(366) She decides to name her to-be-born baby Mariam; a symbol of hope.

Laila’s and Tariq’s mission inspired by the immortal presence of Mariam shows us how Hosseini wishes to ‘change boundaries’.

His separation from his home country and his western sensibilities assist him in penning down a sensitive novel which illuminates the faces of Afghanistan. He is courageous enough to say

“Certainly there was a survivor’s guilt about my life in the U.S….To use a tired old phrase ‘to give back’…hopefully a little bit more meaningful” (www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/hosOint-5). He is successful as he said elsewhere in the same interview “to make people think twice.”

This instinct of being attached to their country is expressed by many characters in the novel including Hakim, Fariba, Laila and Tariq who want to cling to or drift back as if their identities are merged with that of their country. Hosseini does the same though not physically but with his work thus reiterating the element of the diasporic instinct of ‘returning home’. It’s an arc that moves from separation to love and commitment.

CONCLUSIONS

Hosseini; a doctor by profession tries to prescribe another kind of medicine through his novel thus healing many a wounded soul. He says “Writers and doctors alike need to understand the motivation behind the things people say and do, and their fears, their hopes and aspirations.” (www.bookbrowse/khaled Hosseini.htm)
The son of an Afghan diplomat and a mother who taught high school students in Kabul; Hosseini grew up in Kabul, Tehran and Paris where his father was stationed when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1980. The family was granted political asylum and moved to San Jose. It’s only after twenty seven years that he has visited Afghanistan and listened to the stories of the different people he had met on the road side. (notes6) Hosseini admires their ‘collective spirit’ and he portrays his protagonists with the same spirit. Neither the dominations at home nor the government’s policies to suppress them have affected their strength and determination to fight back. Laila’s girlhood friends, Nana and Mariam, Laila and Mariam, Mariam and another jail inmate Naghma; all of them draw support from each other to continue life’s journey against all hardships.

In Paul White’s words

finally, it must be noted that amongst all the literature of migration the highest proportion deals in some way with ideas of return, whether actualized or remaining imaginary. To return may be to go back but it may equally be to start again: to seek but also to lose. Return has both a temporal and a spatial dimension. For the individuals returning to their ‘own’ past and place it is rarely fully satisfying: circumstances change, borders in all senses are altered, and identities change too. (14)

Hosseini seems to be well aware of his journey back home. He seems to seek satisfaction in a more humanistic way through his activism and social responsibility. So the physical borders he changes only lead him to that universal borderless world of human emotion. This is the reason why he has molded his characters who wish to come back home with a sense of responsibility and rehabilitation. Hosseini’s memory, to borrow T.S. Eliot’s phrase ‘memory and desire’; leads him with a desire of a higher value. He revisits Afghanistan to plant his soul there in the land where…

One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs

Or the thousand suns that hide behind her walls.

Deep down Hosseini’s heart there is a desire to unveil those “…thousand splendid suns”… an act of spiritual homecoming to reassert and strengthen his roots.

NOTES

- Khaled Hosseini has set up the Khaled Hosseini Foundation. The Khaled Hosseini Foundation, a 501(c) (3) nonprofit organization provides humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan. The Foundation supports projects which provide shelter to refugee families and economic and education opportunities and healthcare for women and children. In addition, the Foundation awards scholarships to women pursuing higher education in Afghanistan.

- Khaled Hosseini in an interview (www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/hosOit-7) says that it was a ‘juggling act to balance what is going on in the interpersonal human stuff with the political events outside which in many ways impact those interpersonal relationships’

- In the same interview mentioned above, Khaled Hosseini says”…but I feel as a writer that writers, artists cannot shy away from things merely because it makes people uncomfortable. If subject matter makes people uncomfortable, if it touches on those that people fear, if it touches on those things that are sensitive, then maybe that is what is worth writing about.”( www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/hosOit-7)

- Goddess Durga in Indian mythology is the mother of the universe and believed to be the power behind the work of creation, preservation and destruction. She kills the demon Mahishasura and this symbolizes the victory of good over evil. (http://hinduism.about.com/od/hindugoddesses/a/durga.htm)
• Dorothy Parker and Hemingway in an interview:

Dorothy Parker: Exactly, what do you mean by ‘guts’?
Hemingway: I mean, grace under pressure.

• The following excerpt is Hosseini’s answer to the question about ‘the female point of view’ in his novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

“In the spring of 2003, I went to Kabul, and I recall seeing these burqa-clad women sitting at street corners, with four, five, six children, begging for change. I remember watching them walking in pairs up the street, trailed by their children in ragged clothes, and wondering how life had brought them to that point. What were their dreams, hopes, longings? Had they been in love? Who were their husbands? What had they lost, whom had they lost, in the wars that plagued Afghanistan for two decades?

I spoke to many of those women in Kabul. Their life stories were truly heartbreaking. For instance, one woman, a mother of six, told me that her husband, a traffic policeman, made $40 a month and hadn’t been paid in six months. She had borrowed from friends and relatives to survive, but since she could not pay them back, they had stopped lending her money. And so, every day she dispatched her children to different parts of Kabul to beg at street corners. I spoke to another woman who told me that a widowed neighbor of hers, faced with the prospect of starvation, had laced bread crumbs with rat poison and fed it to her kids, then had eaten it herself. I met a little girl whose father had been paralyzed from the waist down by shrapnel. She and her mother begged on the streets of Kabul from sunrise to sundown.

When I began writing *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, I found myself thinking about those resilient women over and over. Though no one woman that I met in Kabul inspired either Laila or Mariam, their voices, faces, and their incredible stories of survival were always with me, and a good part of my inspiration for this novel came from their collective spirit.” (www.bookbrowse.khaled-Hosseini.htm)

REFERENCES


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