

AFGHANISTAN'S SOCIAL HISTORY IN CONTEXT: A STUDY IN THE FICTION OF KHALED HOSSEINI AND SIBA SHAKIB

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... the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;

Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach"

Introduction

The extract from the poem, "Dover Beach," represents the real condition of Afghanistan, a country marked by "mere anarchy" and "blood dimed tide," where people have lost hopes of a peaceful life amidst the fight between militants and government forces, and where even the breeze bears the repugnant smell of ammunition. It is in this political mayhem that people of Afghanistan to quote Matthew Arnold "Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain". In Siba Shakib's words, Afghanistan is a land where God comes only to weep and this anarchy reigned state is truly the least likely place for a common person to step in.

Looking back at the political situation in Afghanistan in the twentieth century, disbelief and tumult have been common features on the political front throughout twentieth century. Afghanistan attained political independence at the beginning of the twentieth century after a century of European imperial encroachment. In the years, from 1901 to 1973, when monarchy was inhaled in the political scenario, the country witnessed an opposition to the government reform programs as majority of Afghans were still bound to traditional patterns of life. Following this, the Soviet socialist imperialism in the country under the umbrella of republic and modernization met with severe resistance. With the almost bloodless coup of 1973, Muhammad Daoud Khan officially abolished monarchy and proclaimed a republic, the first in Afghan history. His refusal to be a Soviet puppet brought his fall and changed the political scene after the Saur Revolution of 1978 (*A Brief History of Afghanistan* 129-148). For almost three decades from the Saur Revolution of 1978 to the fall of Taliban in 2003, the country has been in a total mayhem affecting not only the political situation but deteriorating the physical and psychological

state of the people in the lawless, entropic world where fraction in political opinions among the power mongers (between the leftists and right wing, between insider and outsider modernists, and religious traditionalists) took a heavy toll on the masses. (*Islam and Politics in Afghanistan* 227-300).

All efforts for a centralised nation by monarchs, social democrats and traditionalist Islamists not only disturb the normal life of people but triggers a loss of faith among masses in religion, law and the state. Moreover, the attempts towards a centralised state bring havoc on the minority community who suffers the most whether it is a minority on the basis of ethnicity (Hazaras), religion (Shi'a), gender (women) or class (household workers). The present chapter seeks to explore “daily chores,” “war experiences” and the psychological state of people in a war torn condition in Afghanistan as reflected in Khalid Hosseini and Siba Shakib's fiction. It exposes the effects of political instability on those for whom life is a struggle to make their livelihood, and how the experience of continuous war creates, what Fanon calls, “mental disorder”.

***The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*: Interfacing Text with Context**

Hosseini's novels embody the state of civil strife, war experiences, state politics and international hegemony in Afghanistan. In both of the novels, Hosseini explores the issues of racism and ethnocentrism, gender inequality, gender stereotypes, domestic abuse as well as the self-centred policies of governments, economic injustice and references to capital punishment. The novelist mingles the private lives of the characters with the public life of Afghanistan in such a way that both the novels seem to narrate the general condition of the nation rather than merely a story of two childhood friends, love, devotion, deception and the traumatic struggle of two women against their husband's whims.

The novel appeared two years later in 2003, with the United States immersed in wars with Afghanistan and Iraq. Hosseini's American audience was ready to learn about this country. With *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini provides the Western reader, the historical background to the thirty years of war and instability in the country with an intimate look at Afghanistan's culture and people. With *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the reader learns about day-to-day life in Afghanistan, the urban and rural tensions that exist and that bear responsibility to the era of violence and upheaval, and the devastating effects of each wave of war on Afghanistan's people and culture (Reading *Khaled Hosseini* 65-66). In an interview with Riverhead Books, Hosseini describes what he hopes readers will get out of his novel:

I want them to see that Afghan people existed before there was a war with the Soviets and before there was a Taliban. I want them to understand that the things we're seeing now in Afghanistan – the tribal chiefs vying for their own interests and the various ethnicities colliding with each other— have roots that go back several centuries.... I want readers to have a really good time reading this story. I want them to be touched by it because to me novel writing, first and foremost, is storytelling.... And I want people to simply remember Afghanistan. If the book is successful at all in sparking some dialogue on Afghanistan, and keeping in the public consciousness, then I think it will have achieved a lot (“Author Interviews: Khaled Hosseini”).

The Kite runner is a story of fate mixing elements from Afghanistan's political history with eternal themes such as guilt, freedom and love. Hosseini presents the story in such a way

that it appears to be easily read however, without being sensational. He personally experienced the miserable escape from Afghanistan to US, because of political turmoil in his homeland. Therefore, *The Kite Runner* is based on personal experience but not private in any sense. The story about the rich man's son Amir's friendship with the poor servant boy Hassan appeals to everybody, and it tells more about living as a refugee and the existence in the unstable Afghanistan than most newspaper articles and documentaries reveal. The novel is divided into twenty-five chapters and is narrated both as flash-back and in a chronological order. It is old fashioned in narration but contemporary in its theme—the devastating history of Afghanistan from 1970s to the fall of Taliban; the novel commences with the first person narrative, "I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975" (*The Kite Runner* 1). The narrator of the novel Amir is a privileged Afghan child living alone with Baba, his father, in a large house in the prosperous Wazir Akbar Khan district of Kabul in the early 1970s. There is a servant's shack on the property where Ali, Baba's servant, and his son, Hassan live. Hassan is a *Hazara*, a marginalized ethnic minority in Kabul, treated poorly by *Pashtunes* in the country. The narrator here focuses on *Hazara*, the minority community of the country, their domination by the *Pashtunes* "with unspeakable violence." About this racial discrimination, Amir says in the novel, "Because history is not easy to overcome. Neither is religion. In the end, I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara, I was Sunni and he was Shi'a, and nothing was ever going to change that. Nothing" (22).

The Kite Runner on the surface tells the story of Amir, a boy from a middle class Afghan family, who is haunted by the guilt of having betrayed his childhood friend Hassan, the son of his father's servant. On deeper level as Mir Hekmatullah opines,

The book can be read as a three part novel. In the first part, Hosseini engages in nostalgic childhood recreation of a lost Afghanistan during the last days of the monarchy of Zahir Shah and the regime that overthrew him. The second part explores emigration during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the tragedies of a displaced and tired people living in cultural bubbles of the past; it describes the process of migration and character of the expatriate community. The last part explores the Taliban's Afghanistan. It deals with the horror humans can inflict on other humans and stresses the underlying tone of standing up to repression [...] (59-60).

The story begins in 1975 and is set against the backdrop of the fall of monarchy in Afghanistan, the Soviet invasion in 1979, the mass migration of Afghan refugees to Pakistan and the United States and the coming to power of the Taliban in 1996 to American interference in the country's politics in 2003 to counter 9/11 attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. The first part of the novel proceeds as the two boys Amir and Hassan grow up in Kabul, flying kites and going to cinema. Amir reads passages from the Persian epics to the illiterate Hassan. There is an intimate bond of love, friendship and sharing between two boys who are of different class, status and ethnicity. Amir is a Pashtun by birth which comprises the majority of Afghanistan and Hassan is a Hazara by birth which is a minority ethnic group in the country. This is an important aspect of the novel, because of the inflexibility of the social division between Baba and Ali and Amir and Hassan. Amir's father, Baba, loves both boys, but often favours Hassan. He is critical of his son, and Amir begins to think that his father blames him for his mother's death (she died in childbirth). Baba's best friend and business partner, Rahim Khan, is a more sympathetic figure in Amir's life, as he seems to better understand him and supports his love of writing stories.

Assef, a violent older boy with fascist sympathies, taunts Amir for mixing with Hassan, who is a Hazara, a traditionally persecuted minority. According to Assef, the Hazara are an inferior race that should live only in Hazarajat. Hassan is a “kite runner” for Amir, so-called because he runs to fetch kites Amir has “defeated” by cutting their strings. He seems to know instinctively in which of the many streets and alleyways the kite will land as it makes its long descent. One day, Amir wins the local tournament and with it Baba’s much sought-for praise. Hassan goes to collect the last cut kite, but runs into Assef and his two henchmen. Hassan refuses to give up Amir’s kite, so in order to teach him a lesson and to avenge a past slight, Assef assaults and rapes him.

This particular event which happens “on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975” sets the tone of the novel. While the narrator, Amir navigates his relationship with Hassan and with his father, many important events happen in Afghanistan. In the political scenario of the country the former Prime Minister Daoud overthrows King Zahir Shah, his cousin, in a bloodless coup and the country changes from monarchy to the republic. After the terrifying event of kite fighting tournament, the bond of friendship between Amir and Hassan loosens as Amir finds himself unable to face the loyalty of the latter. Amir traps Hassan in a strategy to get rid of “his goddamn unwavering loyalty”. Hassan, in accordance with Amir’s trap, submits and leaves for Hazarajat with his father. The first section of the novel ends as Amir and his father migrate to USA via Pakistan to escape Soviet Invasion.

In second part of the novel, the discussion is on Afghan people migrated to USA and about the terrible situation in Afghanistan and their hidden wish to return to their homeland after the situation becomes normal in the country of their birth. As General Taheri who after getting fired from his post in Afghanistan migrated to USA, believes, “sooner or later, Afghanistan would be freed, the monarchy restored, and his services would once again be called upon” (154). The publication of the narrator, Amir’s novel in 1989 coincides with the political turmoil in Afghanistan after “...the *Shorawi* completed their withdrawal from Afghanistan. It should have been a time of glory for Afghans. Instead, the war raged on, this time between Afghans, the *Mujahedin*, against the Soviet puppet government of Najibullah, and Afghan refugees kept flocking to Pakistan” (160). Furthermore, the details of Amir’s life, whether joyful and sorrowful, are, as in his youth, dwarfed by events in Afghanistan. General Taheri asks his daughter Soraya to choose law as career option rather than teaching so that she can serve the country in its law making policies in the coming days when life will become normal in Afghanistan.

The third section of the novel begins in June 2001 after Amir gets the phone call from Rahim Khan. Amir decides to go to Pakistan to see Rahim Khan. On reaching the place the narrator Amir comes to know of the worsening condition of Afghanistan through Rahim Khan. Rahim Khan tells the narrator how and when the Northern Alliance took over Kabul between 1992 and 1996, different factions claimed different parts of Kabul. He says,

If you went from the Shar-e-Nau section to Kerteh-Parwan to buy a carpet, you risked getting shot by a sniper or getting blown up by a rocket—if you got past all the checkpoints, that was. You practically needed a visa to go from one neighbourhood to the other. So people just stayed put, prayed the next rocket wouldn’t hit their home (174).

People pore over the walls of their houses to avoid danger by looking at the streets to safeguard themselves from militant onlookers. It becomes a part and parcel of daily life in Afghanistan to experience bombings and rockets shells taking innocent lives. Rahim Khan tells

him about the political turmoil and the civil strife that followed it. Kabul was divided between Massoud, Rabbani and the Mujahedeen. Life becomes complicated when these groups start fighting for their share in politics. He tells the narrator,

The infighting between the factions was fierce and no one knew if they would live to see the end of the day...ears become accustomed to the whistle of falling shells, to the rumble of gunfire...eyes familiar with the sight of men digging bodies out of piles of rubble (185-186).

In the midst of the inter-Mujahedeen struggle and continuing instability, the Taliban emerged as a leading force in Afghanistan. Discontented with the rule of the Mujahedeen, the Taliban, a traditionalist Islamic player, initiated an internal jihad campaign starting in 1994, with the aim of achieving some form of order and implementing Sharia, Islamic law, in the country. 14 People celebrate when Taliban drives out the Northern Alliance out of Kabul. The regime faces severe criticism when it attempts to restrict people's minds and behaviour by implementing tight-noosed policies in the country. As in the novel the Taliban not only assassinates Hassan and his wife but becomes hostile to the whole Hazara ethnic group as such and "[...] in 1998, they massacred the Hazaras in Mazar-i-Sharif" (187). In his letters to Amir, which he gets from Rahim Khan after coming to Pakistan, Hassan also writes about the inhuman behaviour clamped down upon ordinary Afghans by Taliban officials. He writes,

Alas the Afghanistan of our youth is long dead. Kindness is gone from the land and you cannot escape the killings. Always the killings. In Kabul, fear is everywhere, in streets, in the stadium, in the markets, it is a part of our lives.... The savages who rule our watan don't care about human decency. (189-190).

Khaled Hosseini's second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, like his first, *The Kite Runner* is set against the background of Afghanistan's recent troubled history. The setting of the novel is in several cities across thirty years of turmoil. The novel takes place not only in Kabul but also in Herat, Bamiyan and Mariam's small fictional village just outside Herat. It is a soul-stirring story of two victimized Afghan women Mariam and Laila who are born two decades apart but whose lives are brought together through a series of largely tragic events. The novel takes its title from a poem written about Kabul by the seventeenth century poet Saib-e-Tabrizi. The novel beautifully portrays the social and psychological states of affairs of its characters affected by the political turmoil of recent years which provide a more informed and rounded appreciation of Afghan women.

In an interview to Alden Mudge, Hosseini pointed that he did not want to get too much into the history and political turmoil of those years as he eventually found that the intimate story of these characters and the bigger story of what was going on in Afghanistan twisted around each other like a "DNAstrand". Furthermore, he maintained that since these two women happen to be living in the volatile period of recent Afghanistan history, it was impossible for him to tell the story of Mariam and Laila with the same passion without telling the story of Afghanistan.

The story commences in 1974, as Mariam, an illegitimate child of a wealthy businessman from Herat, is growing up. Her father did not have the courage to marry her mother after "dishonouring" her because of her status. Her father Jalil used to bring clippings from newspapers at Mariam's kolba to make her familiar to the world outside. Though it was of slightest concern for Mariam and her mother as they had been outsiders to the society yet Jalil's description of the political scenario is an outburst of a capitalist's attitude towards the Soviet regime and its policies. Under pressure from his family, he marries off 15-year-old Mariam to

Rasheed, a brutish cobbler 30 years her senior. Repeated miscarriages dash Rasheed's hopes of fathering a son, and he subjects Mariam to cruel acts of physical punishment.

One of the strengths of the novel is the author's ability to weave historical events into the narrative. On April 17, 1978, around the time that Mariam turns 19, the event that takes place in history is the assassination Mir Akbar Khyber. Thousands of people turn out on the streets of Kabul in protest; they blame his murder on President Daoud Khan's government. Rasheed tells Mariam that the murder victim was a prominent Communist. She asks him "what a communist is...what do they want... These communists, what is it that they believe?" (97). He sneers at her for her apparent ignorance, and then makes a confused attempt to explain. It becomes clear to the reader that he doesn't know what he wishes to say either. It is clear that most people like the cobbler Rasheed discuss political matters as gossip without apparently knowing about the policies and strategies of the demagogues.

The second part of the story begins in the spring of 1987 and is centred on Laila, the daughter of a high school teacher. The policies implemented by the Russians do not get positive reception from the natives as the new laws advocate equal status for women in the country and are resented by the people. Though educated people like Babi welcome the implementation of Russian policies, especially their initiative for women education in the country yet Mummy abhors them as she has lost her two sons in fighting against them. The pictures in Mummy's room describe the havoc caused by the Russians in the country:

One photo, Laila remembered, showed a man in a long white coat handling a lollipop to a legless little boy. The caption below the photo read: *Children are the intended victims of 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. The father could not join the jihad then; he'd have to stay home and care for the child....a young Mujahid was saying that Soviets had dropped gas on his village that burned people's skin and blinded them (the italics are in the original 121).

The continuation of war in the last thirty years killed millions of people, left thousands orphaned, homeless, widowed and crippled. Hosseini skilfully incorporates the facts about the huge massacre in his narrative that makes it appear real. Laila's brothers, forced to join war, die during bombing. Her childhood friend also loses one of his legs in bombing. There is hardly any family which has not suffered terrible loss and pain during three decades of war.

The novel opens a window in the socio-political scenario of the country by synthesising public life of characters in the novel with political history of the country. For a western reader, the novel is able to draw attention to the chaos and disharmony which gripped the people of Afghanistan in a synoptic way. The novel is set not only in Kabul but also in Herat, Bamiyan, and Mariam's small fictional village just outside of Herat. Through Rashid and Laila's father, the reader receives the details about the happenings in the political scenario of the country along with Mariam, Laila and Tariq. Chapter 15 of the novel begins with the description of the agitation resulting from the assassination of Mir Akbar Khyber, a prominent "communist" belonging to the opposite camp of President Daoud Khan. Two days later "there was a huge demonstration in Kabul. Everyone in the neighbourhood was in the streets talking about it" (96). Taraki, the leader of the Khalq branch of the PDPA, the Afghan communist party was on the streets "giving rousing speeches to the demonstrators" (97). On 28 April 1978, the PDPA, led by

Nur Mohammad Taraki, Babrak Karmal and Amin Taha overthrew the regime of Daoud Khan. In the novel Rasheed listens on radio Abdul Kadir's announcement stating that,

A revolutionary council of the armed forces has been established, and our *watan* will now be known as the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan...the new regime will maintain the utmost respect for principles, both Islamic and democratic (100).

The PDPA being more liberal with Taraki as the head of the state implemented a socialist agenda in the country and replaced religious and traditional laws with secular and Marxist ones. It invited the Soviet Union to assist in modernizing the country. Laila's teacher Shanzai nicknamed as Khala Rangmaal tells her students "That's why our Soviet comrades came here in 1979. To lend their neighbour a hand. To help us defeat these brutes who want our country to be backward, primitive nation" (111). Laila's father tells her about how the "communists" have improved the lives of the women of Afghanistan with their insistence on education for all. He maintains that it is now the time to get education as certain liberal rights are enacted under the aegis of the Soviet-backed regime in the teeth of entrenched opposition from a religiously conservative, mainly rural section of the population—the same backward-looking social layer that was being encouraged and militarily armed by US-sponsored forces. According to Babi, providing education was one thing that the Soviets had done right, but ironically, it was also one of the causes of their downfall, "*Of course, women's freedom...is also one of the reasons people took out their arms in the first place*" (121).

The secular nature of the PDPA government met with unforgiving condemnation and severe criticism from rural tribes and traditionalists especially the liberal policies for women. Traditional or tribal people congregate groups as Mujahideen or "holy Muslim warriors" in seeking revenge against the penetration into their cultural mores and practices by the PDPA government and the Russians. "In 1979, the USA covertly appeared on the political scene of Afghanistan by funding and training anti government Mujahideen through Pakistan and Saudi Arabia" (*A Brief History of Afghanistan* 153). In March 1979, Hafizullah Amin became the prime minister while Taraki remained President and in control of the army. On 14 September of the same year Amin overthrew Taraki and this led to violent incidents in the country. To cope with this, the Soviet army entered the country in December 1979 and conducted military operations in the country for nine years. The Russians withdrew its troops in 1989, but continued to aid the government, led by Najibullah. It is Babi, Laila's father in the novel who informs Laila, her mother and the reader about the Soviet withdrawal. "They signed a treaty!" he said. "In Geneva. It's official! They're leaving. Within nine months, there won't be any more Soviets in Afghanistan!" (*A Thousand Splendid Suns* 151). The Soviet withdrawal in 1989 leaves the country rudderless and in a state of pandemonium, and the government of Afghanistan is unable to handle the situation, which is like, to use lines from W. B Yeats poem "The Second Coming," "Things fall apart/the centre cannot hold ...mere anarchy is loosened upon the world." The Najibullah government is overthrown on 18 April 1992 when Abdul Rashid Dostum allies himself with Ahmed Shah Massoud, to take control of Kabul. The victorious mujahideen enters Kabul to take control over the city provoking internal agitations which resulted in a civil war. This dire factionalism is reported to by Tariq to Laila that "this road, up to the second acacia tree on the left, belonged to one warlord; that the next four blocks, ending with the bakery shop next to the demolished pharmacy, was another warlord's sector" (158). The fight among the warlords results in: "Embassies closed down. Schools collapsed. In hospital waiting rooms ... the wounded were bleeding to death. In operating rooms, limbs were being amputated without anaesthesia"

(224). It is this chaos and anarchy which propels Laila's childhood sweetheart Tariq to leave for Pakistan. Also, one day a rocket hits Laila's home and kills her parents. Her life is saved by the cobbler Rashid who leaves no option to her but to marry him. He tells his wife:

She can leave. I won't stand in her way. But I suspect she won't get far. No food, no water, not a rupia in her pockets, bullets and rockets flying everywhere. How many days do you think she'll last before she's abducted, raped, or tossed into some roadside ditch with her throat slit? Or all three? (209).

To avoid social disgrace and in search of protection, she marries Rasheed but soon loses her place in his affection when she gives birth to a daughter instead of a son. In the meantime Taliban as an extremist militia and dominant force comes to power. The Taliban which comprises young boys and men of orthodox outlook have been raised in refugee camps and religious schools (madrassas) in the neighbour Pakistan. Through Mariam, Hosseini introduces the seizure of power by Taliban in a violent way. "Mariam had first heard of the Taliban two years before, in October 1994, when Rasheed had brought home news that they had overthrown the warlords in Kandahar and taken the city" (266). Life becomes a challenge in itself under Taliban but for women the regime leaves no option but to remain as a pet animal caged in four walls of their homes and denied of basic human rights. For Laila and Mariam the Taliban regime brings an era of torture and delimits their existence in the company of their unwanted husband, Rasheed. They are dependent on him not only for basic livelihood but for going out as well they are dependent on his company as sanctioned by the Taliban regime. It is because of this rule of the mandating of a *mahram* (close male relative) they get caught at the bus station by the police when they try to leave Kabul. Anupama Chowdhury recounts the atrocities faced by women under Taliban regime as, in Taliban era women were brutally beaten, flogged in public and killed for violating Taliban decree.

Two crucial events take place in the last section of the novel—one in the private life of Laila and Mariam and second on the national political scenario. On the one hand Laila and Mariam get justice by killing their cruel husband, Rasheed and at the national level a major shift occurs in the political scenario of the country. In response to the Taliban's refusal to hand over the alleged Al-Qaida operatives for the 9/11 attacks, the USA launched an attack on "war on terror" to oust Taliban, apparently to save women from Taliban's injustice. In that unstable political mayhem of Taliban's downfall on one hand US bombing on the other, the country faces another crisis. It is the continuation of bombardment and rocket firing from Taliban militants and USA allied forces that Laila with her family moves to Pakistan in search of a peaceful home.

Life behind the Veil in *Afghanistan, Where God only Comes to Weep*

Siba Shakib in her novel *Afghanistan, Where God only Comes to Weep* recounts how the novel's characters are products of the troubled history of Afghanistan. Her fiction renders the violent eruption resulting from the political instability and civil war following the Russian invasion to the fall of Taliban added with the aid programme for the destitutes run by the United Nations and USA. What is distinctive in her approach towards the portrayal of Afghanistan history is the fact that rather than making comments about survival amidst war torn country, she presents the existential crises of characters whose hard life advocates hopelessness.

On the surface Siba Shakib's book *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep* is almost like a work of fiction because of its portrayal of incredible suffering of women and "robust optimism" for the future. *On a deeper level the novel* is about an unremitting search for

normality in a world where social-patterns of life are marked by rape, murder, humiliation, poverty, disease and despair. Shirin-Gol in the novel gets the status of a heroine not because of her determination not to succumb to vicious circumstances of her existence, but because she never gives up the hope of a better future. Though the novel is about Afghanistan, it also portrays the universality of suffering in all countries where human beings are dehumanised in the name of religious and political ideology, and live in conditions of wretched poverty, disempowerment and oppression, and then are exterminated by foreign powers that slaughter innocent people in their determination to take over their governments.

Siba Shakib's portrayal of Afghanistan is not only of capturing pictures of ruined life in the country but one that depicts the mental disturbance of characters who feel culturally and morally alienated with the implementation of Russian rules and regulations in the country. The characters in this novel are mostly from tribal and rural areas who demand no change in normal life. Any modernization plan which asks them to wipe out their cultural rootedness does not get easily accepted and meets harsh resistance, and for this reason, Shirin-Gol's father asks his sons to join the Mujahedeen to fight the Russian invaders to save their cultural ethos and social norms which are under threat of being destroyed by modernization. He says,

We'll have to go into the mountains. In the past the English occupied our country and decided our fates, now the Russian are having a go. In the past the English cast an eye on our wives and daughters, now it is the turn of the turn of the Russians. In the past the English dishonoured and sullied our country and our religion, took away our power and responsibility for ourselves, robbed us of our freedom and polluted the soil of our homeland, now it is the Russians. We have no other way, it is time for us, too, to join the Mujahedin, go to war against the Russians, and, if it has to be, fight them to the last drop of our blood. To the last drop (12).

To save their culture from foreign infringement people like Shirin-Gol's father and brothers join the militant group Mujahedeen and go to the mountains to fight the invaders. The Russian attack on the harmonious traditional life of Afghan people, who are used to their lifestyle and religious worldview not only shatters their age old belief but also shakes their *nangs* and *namboos* (pride and respect) and leaves them rootless, cultureless and uncivilized. The cultural entropy that resulted from the Russian invasion can be compared to Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* where the harmonious life of the Igbo society is disintegrated by British colonizers. What differentiates this novel from Achebe's is the mode of control: in *Things Fall Apart* the colonizers approve their domination by employing hegemonic devices whereas in this novel the Russians sanction imperialism through the use of armed force. For instance, in the novel, the "naked woman" tells about the new government's laws in the country which states that "...anyone who doesn't want to go prison has to join the army and the Party and send his children to school and also forbid his wife and daughters to wear the whole-body veil in public" (25). The modernization policies which Russians impose on them are implanted on them by force not by choice, keeping in view the traditional Afghan culture.

The novel *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes To Weep* recounts the harrowing experience of the protagonist Shirin-Gol from the Russian invasion in the country to the fall of Taliban. The novelist meets the protagonist Shirin-Gol at a United Nations ration camp and expresses her desire to know Shirin-Gol's experience in the country of the past years for assembling material for her book. In her presentation of Afghanistan, the whole scenario is filled with wounded bodies, explosion of rocket, firings, dead bodies, noise, cripples, chaos and

various kinds of turmoil. From the very moment of the Russians' arrival in the country, people find it difficult to breathe easily in the noxious political scene. The Russians who enter Afghanistan with their modernization propaganda fail to recognise the sensitiveness of Afghans towards their cultural tradition ingrained in their minds and lifestyle. It is true that some of the policies put forward by the Russians challenged their structural domination over women as Shirin-Gol's father says about women's education in the country:

It's the devil's work. These infidels want to dishonour us. Girls who go to school become confused and curious, they know too much, they get greedy, they start demanding things, they become choosy, and what kind of a man is going to marry a woman like that." (26)

With the Russian withdrawal from the country the USA's geo strategic political mission gets completed, leaving the country in a total mayhem. The US-led and supported Mujahedeen indulges in fights with other groups to take over the reins of the country. In the novel, Shirin-Gol informs her mother about the horrendous situation of civil war in an eye-witness tone "On one side of the street some Mujahiden fighters fight, on the other side others. Everyone is fighting everyone else. Hekmatyar against Gailani, Ahmad Shah Massoud against Dostum, one Moslem brother against another" (52-53).

The thirty years of war killed millions of people, rendered thousands orphaned, homeless, widowed and crippled. Shakib subtly incorporates these facts in the novel. Shirin-Gol's brothers and her father go to the mountains and join war. There is hardly any family which has not suffered terrible loss and pain during the three decades of war. The story of the novel is a personal account of Shirin-Gol's family history which is intertwined with the nation's history of the past three decades. The protagonist and narrator Shirin-Gol uses a linear framework in narrating the events. Not mentioning particular dates about the major turns in the political scenario of the country shows that the protagonist is more concerned about recounting her pathetic story of past years in the country where the nation's history appears by chance. Furthermore, her account of her life in the past years shows how the turmoil in the political scenario brought a tragedy to common peasants like Shirin-Gol's family. The continuation of war for a long time in the country left her with hard boiled experience. As the narrator tells,

For ten years Russians, Georgians, Kazakhs and Kirghiz have been firing missiles, throwing bombs, laying mines, attacking villages. For ten years they have been killings and being killed in turn. For ten years Russians and Afghan mothers and women have wept for their sons, men, brothers, fathers. For ten years Shirin-Gol thought the Russians would never leave, the war would never come to an end." (50)

The novel is a reflection of all politicians who forget humanity for power's sake and treat power as their private property and government as the means to enrich themselves at the expense of poor men, women and children. In Afghanistan when one peeps back into the history of the past three decades, it is women, children and downtrodden people who suffered the most in the political mayhem. From among the outsiders the USA and USSR to the insiders from the various Mujahedeen factions at the heart of their actions or plans one can see the continuous effort to get power at any cost i.e. via modernization propaganda or a return to Shria. In this state of pandemonium, the country experiences street battles, missile attacks, mines and tanks, people sliced open, foetuses torn out and the soft target women abused and raped by Russians, Mujahedeen warlords and Taliban officials.

Amidst the insecure weather broadcasted in the war torn country, people flee from one place to another in search of food, peace, security and stability which appears to be a mirage for the people of Afghanistan leaving no option but to head for forced migration. Shirin-Gol, her husband and children in their search for a life of peaceful survival, travel from Afghanistan, to Pakistan, to Iran and back to Afghanistan, and find kindness only among the downtrodden. In a dreadfully vibrant way Shirin-Gol narrates the reasons which led to her family and other Afghans to set off for migration:

Shirin-Gol, her daughter Noor-Aftab, her first son Nasser, the twins, Shirin-Gol's mother, her neighbour Malalai, her mother, sisters and brothers, other girls and their mothers, sisters and brothers, grab together as much of their belongings as they can carry and flee where many of their compatriots have fled before them. To Pakistan. In cars, cabs wheelbarrows, on horses, camels. Shirin-Gol, her daughter, her son, the twins, her mother on foot. They flee the bombs and missiles that Afghans are firing on Afghans in a cruel fraternal war between Ahmad Shah Massoud, Hekmatyar, Dostem, Khalil, Gilani and all the other leaders of the various groups of the Mujahedin. The women, children, men are fleeing unemployment and hunger, mines and gunfire, the danger of being robbed and raped. (53-54)

The camps which are considered to be a shelter for refugees do not provide enough security, stability and fulfilment of basic amenities to meet demands due to corruption by the "ration-maliks" and caretakers of camps. The disorder and confusion prevail everywhere in the country including the lowest positions of the system, for instance, the ration-maliks make the female members sleep with them to get their share provided for livelihood of the family. When Shirin-Gol's husband, Morad does not get work to afford the expenditures of his family, Shirin-Gol sells her body to the "generous smuggler" to get food and money. The camp's surroundings are also filled with filth and dirt with bad smell making life difficult and unhealthy to the inhabitants. As Shirin-Gol recapitulates the hell-like condition of refugee camps,

Outside among the tents it smells of piss and shit. Everywhere there is dirty, stinking water, everywhere children are running about, with rags hanging on their bodies instead of trousers, shirts and clothes. Children with runny noses, screaming, sitting apathetically around (74).

In this state of tumult and confusion when people roam from one place to another to protect themselves from being targeted by militants, it becomes very hard for them to make their living by finding suitable work. This gives birth to illegal and prohibited means of making a living like smuggling, trafficking, theft, child-labour and prostitution. Such dangerous means of living not only hampers the development of any legitimate economic activity in Afghanistan; it also destabilizes Afghanistan's already troubled neighbours. More threateningly, Islamic extremists and other militants purchase these weapons and use it in their struggles in Afghanistan and neighbourhood countries. In the novel not Morad but many people of Afghanistan indulge in smuggling and trafficking who smuggle not only valuable things but also narcotics like opium and weapons across the border. Many women like Shirin-Gol sell their body to earn money and food in hard times. The girl-woman whom Shirin-Gol meets at Afghanistan-Pakistan border making her living by "doing this and that" not only satisfies her hunger but also helps people like Shirin-Gol's family who are experiencing homelessness for the first time. The reason for doing illegal and prohibited work for survival is easy to understand because as Shirin-Gol says, "The

fields are mined, the peasants have gone to war, people are always in flight. They have forgotten how to prepare fields, to raise sheep and cows, lay in stores” (124-125). The unending war and disorder brings misery and struggles for everyone in the country, while it is women who suffer the most by the policy makers and the policy protectors. As Shirin-Gol notes,

Women in Afghanistan have never had much. But since the Russians came to our country, since the Mujahedin have been fighting their wars, since the Taliban seized power in parts of the country, women have lost even their last rights and their freedom. They have lost everything. Their honour, their dignity, their knowledge. (125)

Furthermore, in the crucial situation while the male members of a family remain busy fighting against this side or that, it is women who are assigned responsibilities of children’s care and affording the family living. To work outside is not so easy for them and sometimes they pay a heavy penalty for that. This is what happens to Shirin-Gol in the novel—she gets brutally gang raped by police officials while returning from her work outside. With Taliban’s coming to power, life becomes more stringent especially for women in the country due to their policies.

Anticipating no end to their nomadic life, the people of Afghanistan flee to nearby countries Pakistan or Iran in search of stability and peacefulness. They are meted out with not only the struggle to reach from one place to another but also rhetorical questions posed by officials in the country. Related to legal entry in Iran, the officials ask Shirin-Gol about her visa and passport. To this humiliation she replies, “What is legal entry? I need papers for that. Where can I get them? Should I go to the Russians, the Mujahedin, the Taleban or whoever happens to be in power in my homeland, the ones who are making our life a hell...?” (205). They reach Iran to safeguard themselves from the connected oppression posed by various regimes in the country. But here as well the ghost of Afghan identity haunts them. At the initial stage, they get a warm welcome in Iran in the name of religion, in the name of brotherhood, but when the refugees pose a threat to the normal Iranian life, they become the whims of the latter’s frustration. They become of target of Iranian politicians as well. In following rules introduced for Afghans in the country, people risk being kind, helpful and generous. But they are forced to follow government’s policies and rules and one of the most poignant incidents in the book is the scene in which a teacher is forced to implement the cruelty of the rulers and turns away Nasser, Shirin-Gol’s son, the brightest student in his class simply because he is an Afghan:

Nasser stands there for a long time in his old, ironed trousers, the white shirt, clutching his exercise book and his textbook. He can’t move, he can’t even raise his head, he can neither turn it nor raise it nor lower it, nor jut it forwards to swallow his saliva down. His head stays exactly where it was when the teacher was standing in front of him, not looking at him and speaking without a break or a comma (202-203).

Not only he is forced to not to attend the class according to Iran government’s policies but also he gets brutally attacked by some Iranian boys. The reasons Shirin-Gol mentions for coming to Iran of hundreds of thousands of Afghans like them are to escape the troops, tanks, planes, rockets, bombs, and mines of the Red Army. It is for these reasons that they like the other Afghans who have “Fled the Mujahedin and their brother-war. Fled foetuses landing with a slap in the street, women’s breasts severed, women’s stomachs slit open. Fled robbers, bandits, rapists. Fled the Taleban, the Pakistanis and the USA who set them up” (225).

Shirin-Gol also tells how the country became the battleground of Russian communists and USA’s capitalist ideologies for their cold war interests. In between these two world super

powers Afghanistan has become a buffer state : the Russians invaded the country via Iran wearing the mask of modernisation of a backward country whereas the USA exploits the Russians by creating a group of Islamic extremists named Taliban by providing them arms through Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

Thus, both writers in their portrayal of Afghanistan as anarchy and a failed state have shown that at the heart of any conflict and revolution is the desire to get power or international recognition. First the Soviets who enter the country with their modernist propaganda do not get the vote of thanks from the people of Afghanistan, therefore they start poisoning their culture and tradition with “naked ideas”. Both novelists present the encroachment by outsiders into the country in a justifiable manner according to the class and position of the characters in the novel. Baba, narrator’s father in the novel *The Kite Runner* develops animosity for Russians to the extent that he refuses to get treatment by a Russian doctor in USA. Every now and then he refers to the country as “fuck off Russia” in the novel. He is a capitalist as well as a visionary who not only abhors Russians for their communist stand but also hates them for their intrusion into Afghan local culture. He hates Islamic fundamentalists as well:

You’ll never learn anything of value from those bearded idiots...piss on the beards of all those self-righteous monkeys....They do nothing but thumb their prayer beads and recite a book written in a tongue they don’t even understand....God help us all if Afghanistan ever falls into their hands(15).

Thus, he is not only critical of the Russian invaders but also of extremist Islamists who in the name of religion fool common masses and are responsible for religious and ethnic conflicts in the country. Baba’s premonition about these extremist Islamists comes true when Taliban takes over the country and creates a hell like situation.

In his second novel Hosseini looks at the political situation through the eyes of Mariam, Laila, Rasheed and Babi (Laila’s father) and her mother. Mariam herself is illiterate and whatever little she knows is told by her capitalist father and a typical middle class Afghan husband Rasheed who himself is not well versed with political affairs. On one occasion in the novel he tells Mariam something about Russian communists in the country without knowing what exactly it means. He clears his position by shooting Mariam’s question with pre-emptive attacks. He says with his shifty eyes, “You know nothing, do you? You’re like a child. Your brain is empty. There is no information in it.”(97). Laila’s father, Babi, however is a teacher who predicts the political situation in a rational way. To some extent he likes the Russian modernization plan especially concerning the freedom of women.

Taliban’s extremist attitude gets the same vehement response from both of the novelists in terms of their portrayal of Taliban’s tyranny on the public and personal life of the characters in the novels. On the one hand, the Taliban prohibits women working outside the four walls of the home in the name honour and in the name of God and religion. On the other hand it is Taliban officials who first gang rape Shirin-Gol and in coming years disturb the harmonious life of her daughter by assassinating her husband.

Conclusion

The prevalence of war for more than over two decades has left the country in a total mayhem. A decade-long struggle against Soviet imperialism that drew inspiration more from tribal and ethnic loyalists and also the concept of religious war (jihad) seriously undermined the burgeoning movement towards Afghan nationalism. As for rural and tribal groups the Soviet

regime put into question their social and cultural mores which made the locals to turn against Soviet imperialism. The country hardly comes to normalcy following Soviet withdrawal, when intra-tribal/ethnic conflict that follows worsens the political, social and economic situation. To add to their miseries is the imposition of Islamic radicalism on obsolete tribal value systems which turned Afghanistan into a failed State. It has become an intimidating challenge for post-Taliban government to reconstruct a failed nation state.

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