



Afganistan from Within and Outside in Khaled Hosseini's Novel *And the Mountains Echoed*

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the latest novel written by the American author of the Afghan origin Khaled Hosseini. It is well known that serious political and social changes occurred in Afghanistan in the twentieth century. Since the beginning of the Taliban's rule, Afghanistan has been ranked not only as the country with an unstable political system but also began to associate as the center of terror and wars connected with nationalism and religious disagreements. All the cultural heritage of the country was left in the past. Khaled Hosseini tries to destroy the stereotypes about the country formed in the modern Western world. His novel *And the Mountains Echoed* came out six years after the publication of *Thousand Splendid Suns* and is very different this and previous ones. The action takes place not only in Afghanistan but also in USA, France, and Greece. The heroes are not only Afghans but also the representatives of other nationalities, whose fate is connected with Afghanistan. The previous Hosseini's works had such success, that the third novel came out in eight countries simultaneously in the corresponding translations. The ideas of *And the Mountains Echoed* are universal, based on human life, regardless of where the person was born, and to what nation, race and religion he belongs. The image of Afghanistan still plays the great role in Hosseini's novel, but now he also refers to human destinies and characters.

Key words: Afghan American author, Afghanistan, Civil War, stereotype, Woman poetry, the image of the country



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Introduction

There are nine chapters in the novel. Hosseini decided to write a novel in a fragmentary form so that each of the nine chapters is presented from the point of view of this or that character. The plot is revealed through folk parables, letters, interviews, and other narrative techniques. Wendy Smith, a critic of *The Los Angeles Times* compares the structure of the novel with *A Thousand Splendid Suns* [1]. This novel is a collection of related short stories, each of which has its own storyline — “a series of epiphanies and revelations,” Hosseini says, which “add to each other and illuminate what happened before” [2]. Hosseini wrote the book not about personalities or images or country, but about humanity. There are no positive or negative heroes in the novel, no right or wrong choice. One thing is clear: all people make mistakes, and the war is the most terrible thing that can happen to the mankind. The first novel *The Kite Runner* focuses on friendship and atonement, the second – on the images of Afghan women and their survival in the harsh world of men. The third novel does not tell us the story of love or friendship; it is not only about the horrors of the war and its consequences for Afghanistan. It is about the human duty to himself, to his people and to his family. The peculiarity of the novel is the focus on a special culture of relations. Hosseini wrote a story about the people humbling themselves with a sense of duty and thus acquiring human dignity. Afghanistan in the novel is portrayed from different sides, from within and outside: in the village of Shadbagh people live on the basis of the foundations of society; in Kabul, Nila Wahdati writes poetry that is very different from the already familiar gazelles of Rumi and Hafiz, listens to jazz and smokes cigars; in the military part Amra Adamovich and Marcos Varvaris are fighting for the lives of the Afghans. Even the war is described differently. If Hosseini's past works are full of historical references and information about the real events from within, here everything is presented through the eyes of foreigners who came with a good purpose, former citizens of Afghanistan who moved to the other end of the world, and, of course, through the eyes of the victims of the war. Hosseini describes the Afghans not only as victims in the course of military operations. For example, the girl Rosha became a victim of a household quarrel, which terrifies Idris. If it could be blamed for the Taliban, Bin Laden, society, everything would be much easier. Another example is the story of Parvana and Masuma, who suffered because of her sister's jealousy. The writer shows that people do not always unite in grief, some pursue their own profit and are ready to do everything for it. One more example of this is the story of the boy Adil and his father, who became rich on the sufferings of the common people. It is interesting that the narrative of the novel begins with the Afghan parable, which already sets a fairy tale theme. This indicates that



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the writer offers different views on the same things. Various artistic techniques and genre specificity are the main difference of this novel from the previous ones. The characters of the heroes are revealed not through dialogues and personal experiences, but through letters and interviews. So, for example, Pari learns about the experiences, thoughts and feelings of Nila Wahdati from her interview. If the first two novels showed full emotional expression of the characters' feelings, then *And the Mountains Echoed* is full of graceful understatement, which makes it even more surprising. If we talk about genre specificity, we may identify the elements of several genres in the novel. This was applicable to the two previous novels, but none of them combined elements of the epistolary genre, the parable novel, and the historical novel. The third novel combines the themes of the first two and expands its problems to the general human history against the backdrop of tragedy, showing the growth of the author's skills.

Materials and methods

Another feature of the work is that Hosseini does not highlight the Afghan cultural and historical heritage, as he did in *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Although the work begins with a quote by Rumi “Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there” [3], it rather indicates a feature of the plot. But despite this, the work is saturated with Persian and Arabic words, references to the historic districts of Afghanistan, descriptions of traditional dishes and references to oriental authors. Autobiography and nationality do not allow Hosseini to dispense with these ethnic elements; besides, his goal is to show Afghanistan from the other side. Along with the Persian vocabulary in the novel, there are phrases in French, German and Spanish, which is not typical for this writer's prose.

Results

If in previous works the destinies of the heroes were shown on the backdrop of the war, in this novel the war is applied to the background of heroes' lives. The war connects them and causes them to be in Afghanistan (if we speak about the "foreign" characters), and their relocation to other countries. Answering the question why the political chaos of Afghanistan is not the central image of this novel, Hosseini says in his interview: “Part of it was as I wrote the characters, it just kind of, the way it came to me and the way they were shaped, their struggles turned out to be far more intimate and personal. I mean, often it had to do with loss — of memory, of faculty, of love — and so the impact of the toil in Afghanistan is still there, but I think its effect on the lives of the characters is less resounding” [4]. Hosseini uses Afghan heroes and foreigners to show an invisible connection between people of



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different origins upbringing, their views, and traditions. He is trying to eliminate this gulf between Western and Eastern cultures, showing how different people can be connected, how they are able to influence each other's destinies.

Discussion

And The Mountains Echoed tells the stories of twin sisters, living in Afghanistan, of the little son of a murderous, yet charitable, plastic surgeon's childhood in Greece, of two Afghan American entrepreneurs returning to the city of their birth after the downfall of the Taliban, and of a chauffeur infatuated with the wife of his employer. All these stories revolve around Paris and Abdullah, brother and sister, who were separated by fate at the beginning of the novel. As Hosseini says in the interview, at first he thought of developing only the history of the separated brother and sister. But he did not dwell only on this story and told others, it reveals the author's ability to create integral characters, no matter how insignificant at first glance the role they played.

In the novel *And The Mountains Echoed* Afghan women are represented no less vividly than in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Afghan women exist outside the Taliban regime. The image of Nila Wahdati can be considered the most mysterious and incomprehensible of all images of Afghan women in Hosseini's works. She is a gifted poetess who has her own unique style, an Afghan woman, incomprehensible to society, who writes passionate poems about love, passion, desires and losses since the 1950s, and "...it was well known in Kabul, that she had no nang and namoos" [5]. It expresses itself through poetry. The character of Nila Wahdati can mean much more: the centuries-old, ongoing and to this day struggle of women-poets of Afghanistan. Today, women-poets occupy a special place in the canon of Afghan literature. Poetry has always been a treasured form of expression in Afghanistan and its environs for both the literate and the uneducated categories of the society. As Nabi writes in his letter to Marcos Varvaris, "As you well know, we Afghans love our poetry; even the most uneducated among us can recite verses of Hafez or Khayyam or Saadi. Do you recall, Mr. Marcos, telling me last year how much you loved Afghans? And I asked you why, and you laughed and said, because even your graffiti artists spray Rumi on the walls" [6].

The action of the third Hosseini's novel takes place in the twentieth century, and the history of Nila Wahdati happens in the cosmopolitan Kabul of the 1950s. At this time, Kabul was experiencing western influence, striking a sharp contrast with the rest of Afghanistan. Since the 1920s, children from wealthy families had been educated in international secular schools, often called lyceums, opened by French, German, American and English teachers. So, Nila, with her fluent French, her love



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for literature, her high heels and short cocktail dresses, was the result of this period of Afghan culture. The character of Nila Wahdati presents the image of Afghan woman of the high society of the 1950-1960s. The writer refers to the images of these women as to “intimidating and alluring”. In many ways, Nila is antithetical to how the Afghan woman dresses, Hosseini said [7]. “The fact is, Afghanistan is much more diverse [than women in burkas]”. Today the tradition of female poetry continues, as well as its ambiguous reputation. As Griswold wrote, post-Taliban Afghanistan's largest women literary society, called Mirman Baheer, has “no need for subterfuge” inside Kabul. “They travel on city buses to their Saturday meetings, their faces uncovered, wearing high-heeled boots and shearling coats,” Griswold wrote. “But in the outlying provinces—Khost, Paktia, Maidan Wardak, Kunduz, Kandahar, Herat and Farah—where the society's members number 300, Mirman Baheer functions largely in secret” [8]. Creating a complex, contradictory character of Nila Wahdati, Hosseini was inspired by the courage and centuries-old struggle of women poetesses in Afghanistan, whose voices were heard. Hosseini explains that he did not care about making Nila Wahdati a pleasant character, sympathetic. “I just wanted her to be real – full of anger and ambition and insight and frailty and narcissism” [9].

As we mentioned above, not only the Afghans became the heroes of this novel. The author also tells the story of Bosnian nurse Amra Adamovich, who works in an Afghan hospital and came to the country after the overthrow of the Taliban, in order to help the victims of the war. Amra appears in the novel to show the life of foreign employees who came to Afghanistan to help the victims of the war. During his visit to Afghanistan in 2003, when Hosseini came up with the idea to embody the image of Afghan women in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the writer got to know a lot of foreigners, who left their quiet lives at home to help the Afghan people. He wanted to pay tribute to them through the image of Amra. The author admits that Amra is one of his favorite heroines. “I wanted to pay tribute to the people who have left the comfort of their lives, many of them young people who could be out clubbing, to go deliver services to the Afghan people. I’m always very touched by the international army of people who deliver aid” [7].

Having analyzed the main plot lines and the novel's particular qualities, we may say, that it differs from the previous two works in its style and genre specificity. *And The Mountains Echoed* is more than just a novel about the Afghan people. It tells us about the growth of Hosseini as a writer, shows how he improved his style still sticking to the ethnic elements defining his identity. The favorable reviews of critics and the sale of more than three million copies worldwide confirm the high reader's



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interest in the writer's work [10]. The novel is based on the author's conviction that all people, regardless of their religion, nationality, outlook or upbringing, they may be interconnected and influence the destiny of each other. This is the first Hosseini's novel where the protagonists are not only Afghans but also foreigners coming to the country. Many people left their homes and went there on a humanitarian mission to help the people affected by the war. The writer wanted to give them respect and embodied their images in the Bosnian nurse Amre Adamovich and the Greek plastic surgeon Marcos Varvaris. In this work, there are no negative or positive heroes, each of the characters makes mistakes, performs feats, follows love or duty, and also experiences envy, hatred and anger. A lot of attention is paid to the image of Afghans who left their homeland. They no longer feel as a part of the Afghan society, although the first generation of emigrants is still trying to search for their roots.

Conclusion

The twentieth century became the era of tragic changes for Afghanistan, the time of the destruction of the old life and the whole history of the nation. In modern society, Afghanistan is perceived as a country of perpetual wars and constant danger. All modern studies are devoted not to the examination of modern Afghan culture, but to the behavior of Afghans in war, the brutality of the Taliban, the post-traumatic syndrome of Western soldiers who participated in the war. Afghanistan is perceived as the country where people fell from the cultural reality and became deprived of development due to the forced planting of religion and life according to the Sharia, endless wars and shootings. According to Western society, Afghan men are very cruel to women, especially those who do not obey the laws of religion. Hosseini does not try to idealize Afghan society, on the contrary, he cancels his shortcomings and points out that the problem lies much deeper, and it is necessary to look for it in the stiffness of social principles.

Each Hosseini's novel differs from the previous one in theme, central images and problems. In one of our works we examined the key image of Afghan women in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* [11]. Although the third novel differs from the first two, it contains multicultural elements. The ethnic originality is achieved by the use of Persian words in the English text, descriptions of customs and traditions using words that have no analogs in English, and also through the detailed description of Kabul, as a native city, and the impressions from Europe and America that can only appear in the immigrant's mind. Hosseini shoes Afghanistan as an Afghan man, and at the same time, he looks at it from the point of you of an American.



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Hosseini expands his work from the multicultural to the general literary, affecting not only the problems of Afghanistan but also human problems, while maintaining ethnic identity in his prose.

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