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Cultural Experiences in Confronting the Dilemmas of Takfir in the Islamic World

Case Study: Afghanistan

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Abstract

In the vast scope of mankind's socio-political life, extremism has appeared in various forms including both political and cultural aspects related to race, ethnicity, and religion. Considering that extremism is a highly broad phenomenon, this article intends to focus on religious extremism and possible reactions to this phenomenon. In the world of politics, religious extremism is demarcated as an immediate source of violence and insecurity. Political actors' attempts in decision making over policy and security issues are mainly concentrated on coping with this phenomenon thus controlling this issue is prioritized in their agenda. Nevertheless, minimizing reversibility is considered as the most central issue in resolving the dilemma of extremism in crisis management. In addition, non-military responses, represented in cultural products such as films, novels, and music, can play a constructive role in introducing remedies for limiting the re-emergence of extremism and its spread. Accordingly, applying a descriptive-analytical method, the present study aims to explain how Hussein employs novels, as a cultural form of a political response, to address various dimensions of religious extremism. It is presupposed that novels, by illustrating various religious interpretations and perceptions, inform the audience about the presence of multiple interactions of actors regarding restricting the reversibility of extremism in the process of cultural-political changes.

Keywords

Communicative Action, Cultural-political development, Critical Theory, religious tradition, the period of 1990-1998.

Introduction

In political jargon, dealing with extremism, as an exigent crisis, has constantly been indicated as one of the most important concerns. More precisely, coping and crisis management are two prevalent methods associated with the minimum and maximum ranges of the aforementioned crisis. The former inclines toward military confrontation because it regards insecurity as an impending consequence of the increasing advent of extremism. Subsequently, a military response is prioritized in political actors' agenda as an immediate measure to impede the expansion of insecurity in the peripheral environment. However, military control does not guarantee a stable condition for preventing the reemergence of extremism and insecurity as an aftermath. On the other hand, some political actors preside their measure based on the latter, confronting extremism in order to minimize the possibility of the reemergence of extremism crisis through crisis management (Brecher, 1993). Consequently, accomplishing the above-mentioned target requires the engagement of various non-military strategies entailing multidimensional prospects.

Extremism inevitably inaugurates the pedestals not only for discrimination but also for violence and hostility since it, in whatever form it takes, is an affirmation of 'the more the better'. This phenomenon exists in different countries in the Islamic world, whether democratic or not (Ayoob, 2011), and it seems that Wahhabis and Salafism intend to develop their territory both mentally and geographically. As a result of this expansion in the Islamic countries, there should be a response to this radical extremism because it introduces an extremely negative and limited interpretation of Islam to the world. Therefore, there is a need to inform the rest of the world about the fact that true Islam is highly distinctive from the one that is represented by the extremist.

Accordingly, this study seeks to demonstrate that the culture formation of a society is interconnected with the dynamic interaction of various social and political factors. It further discusses that the crises in Afghan society and the dilemmas related to the emergence of extremism cannot be solved through

political actors' military intervention of internal or external forces. Furthermore, the study highlights that Hussein does not regard religion as a source of violence, hostility, or suppression. However, extremism and the prejudiced interpretation of Islam cause crisis not the true religion of Islam. Takfir can have various consequences since it is regarded as a form of extremism resulting in Islam phobia worldwide.

Books and articles addressing Hussein's novels have comprehensively focused on the issue of women's discrimination and their marginalization in Afghanistan. For example, Pultar (2014) in "Imagined Identities: Identity Formation in the Age of Globalism" discusses identity in Afghanistan and asserts that patriarchy, violence, and oppression are the factors that affect the process of identity making in Afghanistan. Likewise, Istikomah (2015) addresses gender discrimination by applying feminist literary criticism and elaborates that passive reaction leads to self-destruction as in the case of Nana whereas active participation helps individuals to resist discrimination. Nonetheless, the socio-political role of extremism and Hussein's outlook toward various interpretations of Islam are dismissed in the above-mentioned studies.

Cultural Materialism as an Analytical Framework

This section attempts to analyze political issues and challenges such as extremism and Takfir facing Islamic societies based on a cultural theoretical framework. This study aims to identify the cultural roots of political challenges and demonstrate how using cultural strategies can pave the way for changes and developments in political affairs. It seems that the political change due to cultural modifications is lasting and widespread and may result in more favorable consequences in the long run. There are two main debates in crisis management. First, from the viewpoint of the crisis theory, an issue is regarded as a crisis when it poses a real threat to the categories of interests, values, and identities (Brecher, 1993). In this regard, extremism is considered to be a crisis that threatens all three (material) interests of fundamental values in the Islamic world, along with the identity of different

societies. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of this event is required for dealing with this crisis in order to restrict the damage it imposes on the three dimensions of interests, value, and identity.

Second, one of the fundamental problems in resolving the crises in the Muslim world is that the approach to different categories of crises, including Takfiri, is not a process-based one. Therefore, coping rather than crisis management is probably the preferred reaction for suppressing the crisis. The difference is that in coping, only suppression and prevention are employed to deal with any crisis. Therefore, short-term solutions or, more precisely, direct and limited confrontations are on the agenda. During the last century, confrontation with the crisis in the Islamic world has been based on the first option, namely, the military confrontation. However, crises should be analyzed basically and comprehensively thus management is demanded instead of coping. The fundamental difference between the two approaches is that there is only temporary military deterrence and prevention in coping which merely hinders crisis enhancement. Contrarily, in crisis management, the focus is on the irreversibility of the crisis and thus the society involved in the crisis is safe and secure from its reappearance (Richardson, 1988). Therefore, regarding crisis management, limiting the possibility of reversibility is necessary by using all elements from negotiation to cultural affairs. Accordingly, this study focused on understanding how Husseini represented cultural elements for addressing the socio-political influence of extremism in Afghanistan.

Any human society has encountered various challenges in the process of making and remaking the culture, leading to its regeneration or decline. In the vicissitude of this process, societies have experienced unprecedented progress at specific junctions of their civilizational history and encountered a decline in some other eras. The human beings' contribution to movements toward a decline or progress is considered as the common and focal point in this civilizational process. It should be noted that human contribution is not only limited to political participation although non-political partnerships (e.g., socio-economic, cultural, and the like) may have political consequences.

The most important consequence during this contribution is the change in the identity of a society including its political identity. In this situation, identity is regarded as a social rather than a pre-social entity. Accordingly, Searle (1995) claims that social realities are not fixed entities but they revolve around collective intentionality which relies on a conversation. This means that culture as part of the social world is constructed by human actions, and the outcome of this action is formed in a process which is identifiable and observable, allowing a person to act consciously. Additionally, this conscious action is the product of the reciprocal understanding of the individuals of a community.

The awareness arising from remaking or reconstructing identity out of the cultural-action change emerges in political realms. First, it causes a political change in the individual and his or her view of the surrounding world and then in the political identity of society in the long run. Therefore, understanding is formed out of the mutual interaction of human beings with the surrounding outside world. In other words, the man affects the socio-political world and is simultaneously affected by this world, meaning that there is a reciprocal influence from both sides. Thus, this consistency of mutual interaction considers the socio-political world and the existing parts as a cultural construction. In this regard, analyzing the historical and political conditions of the interaction of multiple cultural elements leads to a better understanding of the process of socio-political changes. In addition, literary and artistic works can be influential in representing the process of the formation or reformation of the socio-political culture.

Gramsci pointed out that the capitalist world, using cultural elements, could ensure hegemony on the lower classes of society. More precisely, culture reproduces hegemony and its continuity through indicators such as literature, art, cinema, media, and the like (Gramsci, 1976). Gramsci's theory of hegemony is a turning point in the study of nonmaterial issues (e.g., literature) in Marxist theories. From this perspective, literary works are evaluated based on historical and political contexts where they are created so that to indicate how one seeks to free himself from a particular type of

exploitation and oppression (Eagleton, 2006). Brannigan (1998) pinpoints that in the light of cultural materialism, literature is not just a medium for reflecting the historical knowledge but rather it is an active part of a peculiar historical moment. He further adds Sinfield's idea indicating that literary texts are the vehicles of power that function as beneficial objects of study in which they have similar potential for power and subversion as the one which typically exists in society.

Furthermore, Williams' cultural materialism (1981) emphasizes the concepts of power and resistance, race and gender, as well as history and ideology. He represents a different outlook toward the cultural elements of societies. In addition, his main criticism on Marxism is that he regards Marxist as a reductionist approach because it only considers the economy as an infrastructure while ignoring other effective elements of the society or considering them ineffective (Inglis, 1995). According to Williams, culture is not a constant entity and the dominant culture is changing, thus literature cannot be isolated from the cultural and political context of society.

Radcliffe (2006) believes that the expression of literature is a means of illuminating values and beliefs in society. In her view, literature (i.e., novels, drama, poetry, and the like), cinema, music, and art are recorded documents that indicate the existing structure of a community (Brannigan, 1988). From her viewpoint, culture is a set of intellectual and creative works in which human thoughts and experiences are extensively explained in various ways. Moreover, it includes a set of activities which is a perfect symbol of the underlying knowledge of a community. According to him, this knowledge is part of the ontology of society and is tied to the life of society (Williams, 1981).

Cultural Response to Religious Extremism

Islam is in favor of humanity and respects individuals as human beings. On the other hand, it is against discrimination and excess and thus prevents individuals from going to extremes. According to Liebman (1983), extremism is described as the desire for expanding the scope, detail, and strictness of the religious law (social isolation and the rejection of the surrounding

culture). Religious extremism has several aspects. First, it is against religious marginalization and thus reacts against whatever seeking to push religion to the margin. Additionally, it supports extending religious laws while it is extremely hostile to those elements of society that accept no extremist norms. The third dimension of religious extremism is rejecting cultural forms and values which are not perceived as indigenous to the religious tradition. It should be noted that extremists consider all opposite ideas as evil and believe that those who behave against their law need punishment.

As argued by Iannaccone and Berman (2006), sects commonly turn into the main suppliers of social services, political actions, and coercive forces where governments and economies act poorly. These realities are reflected in the crisis that Afghanistan has faced because of the Taliban and Iraq due to the presence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham. In these countries, military groups came to power because of the weakness of the central government, and then disturbed social and civil order by employing military force and power. Therefore, a textual analysis of Husseini's novels can demonstrate how these dimensions of extremism, sectarianism, and discrimination, which were created via their ideas, ruin the destiny of a country and its individuals.

Nowadays, as a result of globalization societies the explosion of information and communication; the characteristic of this age is that soft power is as important as hard power. Most countries attempt to criticize violence and extremism related to Takfir worldwide. In other words, they believe that informing the public is the best way to prevent the extension of Takfir. In addition, they claim that employing art and literature is the best alternative for enriching public thought. Thus, criticizing Takfir should have multidimensional aspects with a global influence since artistic works are more available compared to other ways of criticism, including academic conferences. More precisely, it should be criticized in academic and elite settings, along with the public sphere. The issues are theoretically discussed in the academic sphere although it is not practically understandable for all individuals and it is not available for the public.

Considering the above-mentioned explanations, the present article

intended to demonstrate how useful the artistic means of communications (e.g., music, films, plays, literary works), in general, and novels, in particular, are in informing the public about the situation of the world, in general, and the specific situation of a certain country, in particular. Therefore, Husseini's novels entitled "The Kite runner" and "A Thousand of Splendid Suns" were selected to explain how Islamic extremism ruined the destiny of a country and how it influenced the international viewpoint about Islam. In other words, readers can learn about other cultures by reading these works (Ramone & Cousins, 2011).

Peacebuilding is a general concept that includes social, political, and cultural activities in various realms (Björkdahl, 2012). Similarly, Freedman and Shalev (2016) pinpointed the importance of the power of narrative by discussing that applying narratives can be extremely helpful in dealing with conflict management, as well as conflict analysis from the micro level of individual and familial spaces to the macro level of socio-political ranges. Throughout the narration, the problems are depicted from multiple dimensions formed by the interaction of various elements rather than being attributed to the shortcomings of one group or an individual. Consequently, these narratives can give voice to different groups of societies instead of limiting it to the most powerful ones who are suffocating marginalization in their cultural interactions.

The characters depicted in the two above-mentioned novels are not limited to one specific group. The marginal characters are even pictured in multiple versions and various stages of their lives in order to represent how their attempts for challenging the hegemony of the dominant power have been fruitful during the process of cultural formations.

1. The Kite Runner and A Thousand Splendid Suns

Accordingly, understanding the interaction between dominant cultural and emergent elements can result in profound realization of the process of transformation and evolution of a society. This interaction is crucial in the family, which is a microstructure within a macrostructure of society. It

should be noted that it interacts with dominant political powers and is affected by the dominant ideology and enhances it. However, it initiates a conflict with the dominant ideology in other conditions and thus challenges the seemingly coherent structure of this ideology. The Kite Runner narrates the story of a young boy named 'Amir', who is narrating the memories of his childhood events. Further, the novel is set in Afghanistan, from the fall of the monarchy until the collapse of the Taliban regime, and California. In addition, it addresses social injustice, especially the unequal relationship between Pashtun and Hazara ethnic groups in Afghanistan and the violence of the Taliban (Webb, 2012).

Husseini wrote 'A Thousand Splendid Suns' during 2003-2006. This novel deals with the plight of women and narrates the lives of two Afghan females named 'Laila' and 'Maryam' (Davis, 2008). This novel portrays a vivid portrait of a country shattered by a series of ideological leaders and the imposed wars by foreign and internal forces (Stuhr, 2013).

1-1. The Kite Runner and A Thousand Splendid Suns

Islam is based on moderation and peace instead of extremism and war. Therefore, it can be regarded as a good source of peace although the extremist's version represents radical Islam which welcomes violence and radicalism. In these two novels, Husseini focuses on this duality and demonstrates how Islam influenced people's lives before the Taliban. Taliban's extremism was not limited only to Afghanistan and allowed the western media to propagate a highly negative picture of Islam. In the international political world, the west attempts to oppose Islam in one way or another. Particularly, western countries started to oppose Islam after the 9/11 attacks by using both military forces and cultural means. The latter affected people extremely quickly. Accordingly, they produced numerous novels and movies in which Muslims were antagonists and negative characters and thus were considered as terrorists. Therefore, Husseini decided to write his novels to represent that extremism, which was introduced to Afghanistan by the Taliban, is not related to moderate Islam and highly differs from that one. By

creating different characters, he demonstrated that Islamic doctrine in its essence is positive whereas the Taliban's extremism and their deviance from Islam have led Afghanistan to such catastrophes.

In the *Kite Runner*, Hussein portrays religion through different characters such as Baba, Amir, and Assef to show how extremism, along with strong ethnic discrimination uses religion to contempt people whereas true Islam does not propagate discrimination. The negative portrait of religion is typically connected with the Taliban's extremism that uses religion, particularly Islam as a means of justifying its violent actions and control of others.

Despite the existing diversity in Afghanistan, most of the population is Muslim and Muslim sects are divided into two main groups of Sunni and Shi'a. It is noteworthy that being a member of each of these sects relies on ethnicity, and most ethnic Pashtun and Hazaras are Sunni and Shi'a, respectively. Baba and Amir belong to the first group while Sohrab and his father, Hassan, belong to the latter one. Furthermore, the Pashtuns consider themselves as the "true Afghans", more precisely, the original settlers of Afghanistan (Herbert, 2007). Hussein indicates how this interconnectivity between ethnicity and religion creates a sense of distinction and discrimination and portrays the catastrophic consequences of this discrimination. He further criticizes the unsounded practices of the Taliban, especially in Assef's character. In other words, through Amir's conversion to real Islam, it is argued that Islam is a religion of peace which places importance on human beings while contending extremism and discrimination (Hayes, 2007).

Baba, who does not believe in religion introduced by Mulla, drinks alcohol, and ignores Amir when he reminds his dad that Mulla at school considers drinking alcohol a sin. Moreover, Baba considers religion as a set of beliefs open to dispute and believes theft is the only true sin (Hussein, 2003) thus, his interpretation of religion is highly personal and based on his biased ideas. In this situation, Amir faces two versions of religion. To put it differently, although Baba has his own moral code and is against religion, he

uses religion as a means of justifying his drinking and other activities.

At the beginning of the text, Amir, as a child, is doubtful about religion. In other words, he is stuck between Baba and the Mulla at school and indicates that he has not yet decided about God (). However, he becomes a devout Muslim by the end of the text. When Baba and Amir leave Afghanistan for the United States based on Amir's narration, it is observed that the Taliban's interpretation of religion is the third version of religion that Amir is faced with. According to Amir's narration, the Taliban introduced themselves as the Islamist government and sought to justify their authority by religion. Assef can be regarded as the embodiment of the Taliban by scattering the idea that killing people, especially the Hazaras is the command of God. For instance, when Assef, as the Taliban official, informs Amir that he is on a mission from God, Amir lists the crimes the Taliban has committed and seeks to know how Assef could justify these inhuman actions "in the name of Islam".

Amir, who faces these various forms of religion, decides to become an observant Muslim but not an extremist one and helps Sohrab by preventing him from committing suicide. Additionally, Amir does not contempt Sohrab, who is a Pashtun, and attempts to support him. Contrarily, Assef considers Sohrab as an inferior person because of his ethnicity and uses religion to justify his cruelty.

In his second novel, Hussein even goes further and elucidates how these extremist interpretations of Islam and their biased ideologies made life worse for individuals, in general, and women, in particular. In the first part of 'A Thousand Splendid Suns', which deals with Mariam's childhood before the Taliban, the reader becomes familiar with Mulla Faizullah, who is a religious character and the only person who treats Maryam, an illegitimate child, very kindly and with honesty. Although Jalil is very kind to Mariam, he is not honest and later on does not accept her in his house. In his book, Hussein (2007) indicates that Mariam's favorite person is Mulla Faizullah, who is the elderly village Quran tutor and an akhund. Throughout this chapter and until the end of the novel, Mulla Faizullah is described as a highly peaceful

character who is not familiar with violence and does not contempt Mariam. As explained, he kindly taught Mariam to read and told her that the Quran and the Arabic words have comforted him and eased his heart. Mariam received this kindness and support at the time of Faizullah's religious teaching when she was rejected by other people such as Nana, Jalil, and later on Rasheed. By creating Faizulla's character, Husseini explains that Islam, which is identified with terrorism and violence in western media, welcomes peace and comfort while it does not contempt people because of their gender. However, the peace of Faizullah's time is replaced by the terror and horror of the Taliban's violence. The novel further implies that Islam seeks no violence, and the Taliban's justification for their violent actions is unacceptable.

Rasheed as an embodiment of Taliban attempts to defend this group by stating that although these boys may have no past and know nothing about the world or history of this country, at least, they are pure, incorruptible, and descent Muslims and bring peace and order. Conversely, Leila is against Rasheed and does not like the Taliban and mentions that she is happy that Babi is not around to witness this situation. As explained in the novel, his father was in favor of culture and education, and the Taliban's extremism ruined everything related to culture and education. Later on, Leila called the Taliban as 'savages' when Rasheed was talking about them.

In general, Husseini pictures a religion representing a peaceful Islam in Amir's and Mulla Faizullah's viewpoints while introducing Assef and Rasheed as the embodiment of the Taliban's fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. After his conversion, Amir, along with Mulla Faizullah represents an extremely peaceful characteristic of Islam which is bereft of extremism and dogmatism. However, Islam in the hands of the Taliban, which is represented by Assef and Rasheed, is full of violence and brutality.

1-2. Identity in Afghanistan

This section discusses how the emergence of the Taliban's extremism gave rise to the political and cultural crises and affected individuals' status

and their identity in society. In these novels, Hossini seeks to address the identity of Afghanistan and thus that of the individuals who belong to this country. When a society is coherent, it has a connected identity which is called nation, namely, its national identity whereas there is disintegration when an extremist group gains power and stabilizes it. Identity implies continuity and integrity across time and space. However, Giddens (1991) indicates that the involved continuity, which is reflexively interpreted by the agent with respect to her or his biography, is the peculiar feature of self-identity. Accordingly, He suggests that a person's self-identity is reflected in her or his capacity to maintain a particular narrative. In addition, this sense of self is stable and robust in normal individuals since a sense of self-identity is frequently securely enough held to whether the main tensions or transitions in the social environment within which the person moves. However, it is simultaneously fragile because the biography that the individual reflexively keeps in mind is only one 'story' among other potential stories that could be narrated about her development as a self. On the one hand, the self is robust because normalcy or what phenomenologist call the 'natural attitude' frequently prevails for most people. Conversely, it is also peculiarly fragile due to the continuous need for constructing and reconstructing self-identity in promptly changing circumstances.

Husseini's *The Kite Runner* delves into the issue of identity through its protagonist, Amir. More precisely, identity turns into a predicament for Amir. From the very beginning and when Amir initiates narrating the story from his childhood, it is understood that he is uncertain about his identity and is truly eager to find his real self. In other words, this dual cultural identity turns identity into a dilemma for the character.

Woodward (2004) argues that identity differs from personality. In terms of personality traits, she notes that they do not need active involvement to be shaped although individuals may share some personality traits. On the other hand, she claims that identity is formed based on individuals' active engagement with their social world. In other words, it is discussed that an individual's choice can affect identity. From her viewpoint, structure and

agency are regarded as significant factors influencing the process of identity formation. It is noteworthy that individuals should be aware of similarities and differences in the process of identifying themselves with some structures in order to choose among various alternatives for creating their identities. Therefore, identity is not a subjective or a thoroughly internal concept. Conversely, it is shaped in the process of individuals' interaction with the outside world, namely, a combination of internal and external factors play a role in this respect. It should be noted that the process of constructing identity is not only inextricably entangled with the cultural condition of a society but also closely intertwined with the socio-political situation of that society.

Husseini implicitly indicated that Amir's exposure to both formal and informal texts connected to Pashtuns' cultural and political identity, together with his experience of multiple contexts prompted him to construct an extremely different identity from his parallel narrow-minded peer called Assef. Furthermore, Amir's insistence on reading and perusing his mother's poetry collection led him to decipher Hazaras existence in the written texts about Afghanistan. Throughout the revelation of different literary works, Amir decided to reproduce and reconstruct his identity by the act of writing his first story. This reproduction can be manifested in various aspects, either reinforcing the former identity or changing the former identity and tending it to another one. Amir, who is now a US citizen, is obsessed with his new identity and his previous natural and cultural identity in his own country, Afghanistan (Pultar, 2014).

In a visit to Afghanistan in his adulthood, Amir realizes that democracy, which is claimed by western countries, in the real world, does not work for his father who is now deprived of insurance in the land of opportunity. Accordingly, Amir attempts to reconstruct his identity throughout his interaction with various socio-political elements. To put it differently, Amir found his real identity after his conversion to Islam, and this helped him to reinforce his benevolent characteristic and treat others without paying attention to their sects. Thus, he could further help another person called

‘Sohrab’ in his quest for identity (Saraswat, 2014).

Conversely, identity is differently addressed in Husseini’s second novel. In the beginning of *A Thousands Splendid Suns*, Jalil talks to Maryam about poetry, art, and literature. Lila’s father also takes her to the valley of Bamiyan, and the big stone Buddhas as part of Afghan’s history representing Afghanistan’s Identity. It is also a symbol of peace and comfort. Babi explains for Tariq and Laila that he always remembers the silence and peace of this place and that he also wishes his children visit their country’s heritage and learn of its past (Husseini, 2007). However, the Taliban called these places as the “objects of idolatry and sin” as soon as they gained power and thus decided to destroy these two greatest historical artifacts in Afghanistan. Moreover, they attempted to impose traditional values representing a dogmatic version of Islam according to their personal interpretation. As a result of this dogmatism, they allowed themselves to ban and destroy whatever they assumed to be false.

Additionally, Husseini shows that how this identity, which is going to be imposed on people by Taliban, limits individual’s freedom in the name of Islam. Laila, who once adored these symbols as a peaceful symbol of her country’s past, was numb to it when she heard the news of the statues’ demise. It hardly seemed to matter since how she could care about statues when her own life was crumbling to dust.

As mentioned by Pultar (2014), reclaiming a national instead of ethnic identity is probably of necessity in the context of Afghanistan, where social and ethnic discrepancies are hidden at the bottom of extreme violence and discrimination augmented by the Taliban. Amir has taken the first step in facing his country’s history, participating in its liberation, and fighting against all discriminations and prejudices, thus beginning coming to terms with both sides of his Afghan and American identity.

Similarly, Laila and Tariq returned to Afghanistan to spend their energy on rebuilding the country. In addition, they decided to work on educating Afghani children and spend their money on rebuilding the hospitals instead of spending their energy and time over fighting. In other words, they wish to

approve that a nation's identity can be built or rebuilt by educational programs and cultural activities rather than employing military ways and guns. Characters in both novels are obsessed with individuals' identity at the time of clash since identity is considered as one of the main factors in the process of transition from one situation to another.

2. The Kite Runner and A Thousand Splendid Suns

Socio-cultural elements and religious extremism imposed serious detriments toward women's improvement in Afghanistan. More precisely, these obstacles had an immensely devastating effect on their lives and led to significantly impairing quality of life and even reduced female life expectancy (Singh, 2013). According to Skaine (2001), the Taliban imposed more restrictions on women when they gained dominance. There are not many female characters in *The Kite Runner*. In this novel, Hossini does not directly address the issue of women. For instance, although Amir's mother is dead, she is present in his life by the books and texts she has left behind. Women had some rights before the Taliban but this group imposed its oppression on the individuals after gaining power.

Women and Hazara suffered most because the Taliban considered them as inferior beings who deserved no right. Amir's mother was a literature instructor although women had no choice for going out when the Taliban came into power. Further, education was banned for them and they were not allowed to work out.

In his second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hossini directs his attention to female characters and depicts Afghanistan through the life of his female characters. Throughout this novel, he attempts to demonstrate that real Islam is not the one which is represented by the Taliban, and this reality can be well-understood when it comes to the position of women before and after the Taliban. Islam never imposes such hostility on women.

This novel portrays how the discrimination of women was highlighted in the time of the Taliban. The position of Mariam and Laila as the representatives of Afghan women indicates that how they are humiliated and

abused in this period. Before the Taliban, women had rights to a certain extent while they were imposed new rules and restricted as far as possible after the Taliban came to power. For instance, they previously had jobs as teachers, and education was not banned for them. For example, Laila's mother was a teacher at school, and Laila and her friends could attend schools. According to the novel, Rasheed abuses Maryam because she cannot give birth to a child and he also abuses Laila because the baby is a girl.

Throughout the novel, women are treated extremely poorly with little or no respect and have no rights for decision making neither in society nor at home. In addition, men are superior to women in Afghan society (Sruthi, 2007) and this superiority is prevalent from the early stages of life. For instance, Rasheed treated Laila highly violently when she gave birth to her first child, Aziza, and this gender discrimination was highlighted when Laila gave birth to the second child who was a boy. Aziza was deprived of everything even the primary rights of being while Zalmi was provided with everything even unnecessary things. Further, Rasheed took him out with himself and spent time with him whereas other characters were just treated with violence because they were females. In an episode, Rasheed came back home with a big television, and the household was frightened because the Taliban had banned and put punishment for it although Rasheed endangered everyone in order to delight Zalmi.

Health care is another factor regarding the position of women which is obvious in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. For example, only one hospital in Kabul served women when Laila was prepared to give birth to her second child. Furthermore, this hospital was short of staff and lacked medicine and anesthetic, and Laila's operation had to be conducted without any sort of medication. This occurred during the time of the Taliban in Afghanistan, representing the prejudice of a male-dominated society where women were deprived of their fundamental needs (Singh, 2013). Moreover, the Taliban established rules and regulations that neglected even women's basic health care or the capacity to care for their children.

Conclusion

The importance of culture and politics is undeniable in developing the identity of individuals and consequently that of society. Accordingly, cultural activities and products can be extremely informative when confronting issues such as extremism apart from military activities that is enacted by states. Hussein's novels implied that cultural products such as literary works can reveal multiple aspects of factors that influence individuals' socio-political lives. These kinds of works at the age of communication can inform the rest of the world about the essence of true Islam which is moderate and against any kind of extremism. Additionally, the cultural development of society closely relies on the active participation of the individuals of that society. Nowadays, the interactions of individuals living in a society can affect those of others in either way in a constantly changing world. Therefore, living in such a world does not imply that conflicts and traumatic events can disappear permanently. Conversely, these types of events are inevitable worldwide. However, the point is that individuals can mitigate catastrophic outcomes by avoiding violent reactions. In the process of identity making, attention should be directed toward ever-existing issues such as love, hope, peace, tolerance instead of hate, antagonism, and war. In this regard, literary works can help individuals to raise their awareness about their interactions. On the other hand, focusing on the sense of despair or dejection in society at the time of trauma only leads to depression and hopelessness. Contrarily, explaining the process of hope and desire formation and finding a way leading to success can positively affect individuals in order to move toward improving their cultural existence.

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