

Women in the Shadow: The Cultural Identity of Afghanistan Women in Khaled Hosseini's Novel

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Abstract

This research aims to reveal the cultural identity of Afghan women in Khaled Hosseini's novel. The image of Afghan women has never been separated from the color of hegemony in social, cultural, political, and religious contexts. As a Muslim country with patriarchal dominance, Afghanistan deals with women's struggle to obtain their rights in public and domestic spaces. This issue is captured in various literary works as a reflection of the image of women. One of the writers who explores the lives of Afghan women critically, vividly, and combining beauty is Khaled Hosseini through his masterpiece entitled *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. This research uses a qualitative approach to Mary Jane Collier's cultural concept. The data in this research shows the findings of five women's cultural identities that are reflected in the storyline: 1) Modes of expression; 2) Individual, relational, and communal identity; 3) Enduring and changing aspects of identity; 4) Affective, cognitive, and behavioral identity, and 5) Content and relationship levels. Women's cultural identity greatly influences the forms of hegemony and attitudes of women in Afghanistan in everyday life. It has been passed down from generation to generation, thus becoming a social stereotype.

Keywords

Cultural Identity, Afghan Women, Khaled Hosseini

1. Introduction

The portrait of Asian women in the struggle for gender equality and empowerment has progressed in recent years, although it is full of complex challenges (Lee & Park, 2011). For instance, there has been a significant increase in the number of women in leadership positions in various sectors, and women's rights movements have gained momentum in many Asian countries. Notably, there is a growing wave of social support, carving out specific spaces for women to con-

tribute outside the domestic realm, and recognition of women's human rights is also starting to emerge (Yadav & Kumar, 2021). The roots of women's problems are never resolved. Pruned along the branches closely related to patriarchal hegemony are not reduced significantly. Scientific issues regarding the role of women have been carried out a lot and brought the idea of objectification of women, giving birth to contemporary feminism, which seeks to solve this global problem and break down the matrix of marginalization in the social realm. This effort is a concrete action to improve the status of women to a stage outside the domestic zone. The role of women in society is very complex as subjects of customs and culture (Mojumder, 2020). However, the problems and complexities of women's lives are not a singular issue; they are related to other things in society's social life.

Over the course of several decades, the universality of patriarchy has emerged and been shaped by systems, history, politics, and religious stereotypes, leading to logical consequences for women as a subsystem in society. Numerous studies have revealed inequality and hegemony in various public and domestic spheres. This gender separation has a profound impact on welfare and is closely tied to the poverty level of a nation (Rahman et al., 2018). One of the Asian countries deeply entrenched in patriarchal culture is Afghanistan. The existence of Afghan women is not only constrained by patriarchal rules but is further exacerbated by the restrictions imposed since the Taliban invasion. The Taliban not only restricts women's social access but also severely limits education (Noori, 2022). Research on cultural identity is extensively conducted to analyze various social fields (Becker, 2024; Sandberg et al., 2022; Ward et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2022). However, research that explicitly examines aspects of cultural identity in Khaled Hosseini's novels has yet to be undertaken.

1.1. The Lives of Afghan Women

In social life in Afghanistan, almost all women are required to follow men to their homes when they marry. Marriage removes them from family and environmental ties. It forces them to enter a new world that seems foreign in a new family with habits and even ways of life that may be different from the lifestyle they had in their parent family (Singh, 2007). The concept of identity for Afghan women aligns the sense of identity with the stereotyped and homogeneous image of Afghan women, which is limited in the domestic, public, and religious spheres. Various data and information show that hegemony against women does not only occur outside the door of the house. There were cries so loud and unheard that they came from inside the house, behind the walls separating the outside world from the household. The issue of women's rights in Afghanistan has historically been limited by a) the patriarchal nature of gender and social relations embedded in traditional society and b) the existence of a weak central state, which was unable to implement modernization programs and goals in the face of tribal feudalism (Moghadam, 1997). This circumstance shows how men's hegemony over women does not only include physical aspects but also non-physical

aspects that have short-term and long-term impacts on women's conditions as individuals or as part of a social entity.

The family unit, a cornerstone of Afghan society (Ghosh, 2003), is a complex network of kinship structures for women. These structures, legitimized by the authority of religion and community rules, are further bolstered by socio-cultural patriarchy. Consequently, in a country like Afghanistan, women's freedom of movement is curtailed, and they are entirely dependent on men. This is in accordance with the teachings of the Al-Quran, which stipulate that men, with their hegemony, bear the responsibility for the care of women in the family, whether they are mothers, children, or wives. Despite this, women are often portrayed as symbols of honor in a subordinate position, requiring protection, although this portrayal may not always reflect the reality (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001). The condition of Afghan women is genuinely in the chain of norms and religion that has been followed for generations so that it becomes a solid cultural system.

1.2. Khaled Hosseini

Afghanistan's political and social chaos over the past few decades has not only been reflected in various social media and international newspaper reports. However, it has inspired novel writers to produce literary works that seem to contain the reality of homeless Afghan women who do not find a place to accommodate them. It's potential in the contestation of life. Afghan feminists such as Malalai Joya and Khaled Hosseini have discussed in their writing how the political turmoil in their country has occurred. Lowering the status of women in their country (Mohanty, 2017).

Khaled Hosseini succeeded in telling the story of the struggles of women's lives in Afghanistan (Hosseini, 2017). In the novel *Kite Runner*, he tells the character of Amir, a reflection of Hosseini himself, and his perspective is projected throughout the novel. For instance, the character of Soraya, a woman who faced societal pressure and judgment due to her past, is a vivid portrayal of the struggles women in Afghanistan often face. Amir, too, realized that his general viewpoint needed to be reflected in the religious obsession that was rife in Islamic Afghanistan. He abandoned his duties and ran away for most of his life, but he realized this and later returned to his home country to compensate for his previous shortcomings (Vinodhini, 2022).

Many studies related to Khaled Hosseini's work have been carried out previously. Some review the novel as a narrative of child rescue and neo-orientalism (Al-Dagamseh & Golubeva, 2017); the findings of five gender problems in the novel *A Splendid Thousand Suns* (Harnum & Burhamzah, 2023), critical thinking of postcolonial feminism and the importance of Afghan women's cultural identity in the novel (Hosseini, 2017).

2. Method

This research approach was qualitative and represented a reflection or subjective

view (Tracy, 2020). This research is distinct in its focus on the cultural identity of Afghan women in Khalid Hosseini's novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, based on Mary Jane Collier's theory. This novel significantly impacts the feminist role in Afghanistan, successfully opening the international world's view of the country's actual conditions. The research's primary aim is to urgently uncover the hidden aspects of patriarchal hegemony and men's oppression of women, using a social perspective intertwined with cultural identity. Many other studies concentrate on religion and various forms of oppression, often overlooking the potential for such oppression to stem from societal culture, which harbors deep-rooted stigmatization of women. The analysis technique for this research incorporates the perspectives of Miles and Neuman and the Creswell validity test (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3. Result and Discussion

From **Figure 1**, data were collected in textual format and subsequently classified into various categories based on Mary Jane Collier's cultural identity theory. Following this classification, the percentage representation of the dominant cultural identity within the narrative was analyzed and quantified to make it more clear about the cultural identity both implicitly and explicitly described in the novel. Mary Jane Collier's cultural identity in Khaled Hosseini's novel is reflected in 5 diverse aspects: 20% mode of expression; 28% Individual, relational, and communal identity; 16% Enduring and changing aspects of identity; 28% Affective, cognitive, and behavioral identity; and 8% content and relationship levels. In Khaled Hosseini's novel, individual, relational, and communal identities are as numerous as affective, cognitive, and behavioral identities. These two things can be seen in the story's actions, habits, and speech.

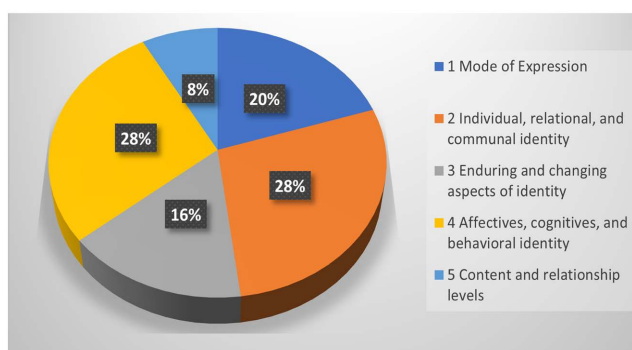


Figure 1. Mary Jane Collier's Cultural Identity in Khaled Hosseini's Novel.

3.1. Modes of Expression

"Then what can I do? God, in His wisdom, has given us each weaknesses, and foremost among my many is that I am powerless to refuse you, Mariam Jo," he said, tapping her cheek with one arthritic finger.

But later, when he broached Nana, she dropped the knife with which she

was slicing onions. "What for?"

"If the girl wants to learn, let her, my dear. Let the girl have an education."

"Learn? Learn what, Mullah sahib?" Nana said sharply. "What is there to learn?" She snapped her eyes toward Mariam.

Mariam looked down at her hands (Hosseini, 2017: p. 18).

In the quote above, the modes of expression reflect Mullah Faizullah's gentle behavior: patting Mariam's cheek with his fingers as an expression of affection for the girl. Nana's expression of surprise was seen when she dropped the knife while slicing the onions. Mullah Faizullah's complaint about Mariam's desire to go to school is something that Nana, as a mother, cannot accept and opposes. This conflict is deeply rooted in the cultural context of their setting, which can be described as the outskirts of Afghanistan, where girls rarely go to school. The societal norms dictate that girls in these places marry early and live with their husbands, adding another layer of complexity to the narrative.

Next, Nana asked why he went to school. This question did not contain a question to obtain information but rather a form of negation of Mullah Faizullah's statement. When the Mullah returned explained that if girls want to learn, then let them learn. Then Nana again responded sharply with a rhetorical question that implied that there was no point in studying at school. As a form of affirmation and seeking reassurance from Mariam, Nana turned to look at Mariam.

Mariam did not return Mariam's gaze and chose to look down. This expression is a form of cultural obedience towards the mother and implies politeness. The quote above contains many expressions that symbolize Nana and Mariam's cultural identity as a reflection of the social environment. The characters of these two figures reflect the cultural condition of women under the oppression and legitimacy of men (Fernando, 2021). The Taliban came to power in 1996-2001 and restricted education in Afghanistan (Noury & Speciale, 2016). However, legally, in 2007, there was no prohibition from the Afghan government on men and women from pursuing education (Mansory, 2007). However, the stigmatization of being a domestic woman is more of a cultural heritage and is embedded in the cultural identity of the local community. From 2002 to 2007, when the novel was published, the Afghan government, in which NATO intervened, opened access to education for men and women, but cultural factors made this progress slower than expected (Shayan, 2015).

3.2. Individual, Relational, And Communal Identity

"Now he is a little older than you, Afsoon chimed in. "But he can't be more than.... Forty. Forty five at the most. Wouldn't you say, Nargis?"

"Yes. But I've seen nine-year-old girls given to men twenty years older than your suitor, Mariam. We all have. What are you, fifteen? That's a good, solid marrying age for a girl." There was enthusiastic nodding at this. It did not escape Mariam that no mention was made of her half sisters Saideh nor

Naheed, both her own age, both students in the Mehri School in Herat, both with plan to enroll in Kabul University. Fifteen, evidently, was not a good, solid marrying age for them. (p. 47)

The data above shows that Jalil's wives persuaded Mariam to accept the proposal of a man who was 35 years older than her. Rasheed was 45 years old, and Mariam was 15 at that time. Rasheed is a friend of Jalil, Mariam's biological father. Jalil, who was looking for a husband for Mariam, and his wives were tasked with conveying this to Mariam. In Afghanistan, the family is essential in girls' matchmaking (Shabanikiya et al., 2023). As a comparison, Afsoon conveyed another fact: there was a 9-year-old girl who was proposed to by a man who was 20 years older than Rasheed, the man Mariam was going to marry. This means that the man is 65 years old. Marriage under 15 is legally prohibited in many countries, but not in Afghanistan (Coren et al., 2021). This cannot be separated from the cultural identity of Afghan women born as figures with primary duties in the domestic realm. Early marriage applied to Afghan women has social and health impacts (Coren et al., 2021).

In this data, Mariam compares herself with her sister, who comes from another mother, is both female and is the same age as her but has a very well-to-do life. She is currently studying in Herat and plans to enroll in college. There is a clear difference between girls from well-off families and girls from low-income families (Raj et al., 2011). On the other hand, boys have more freedom than girls to continue their education (Blum et al., 2019).

3.3. Enduring and Changing Aspects of Identity

Here in Kabul, women taught at the University, ran schools, held office in the government. No, Babi mean the tribal areas, especially the Pashtun regions in the south or in the east near the Pakistani Border. Where women were rarely seen on the streets and only then in burqa and accompanied by men. He meant those regions where men who lived by ancient tribal laws had rebelled against the communists and their decrees to liberate women, to abolish forced marriage, to raise the minimum marriage age to sixteen for girls. There, men saw it as an insult to their centuries old tradition, Bibi said, to be told by the government—and a godless one at that—that their daughters had to leave home, attend school, and work alongside men (Hosseini, 2017: p. 133).

The quote above shows an effort to change aspects of women's identity. In the more modern Kabul Region, women play a role in the education sector and work in government offices. However, in traditional areas in the Pashtun Region, which is close to the Pakistan border, women still have identical cultural identities. They are rarely seen on the streets except when wearing burqas and accompanied by men who are their mahram.

The clothing women wear outside the home in Afghanistan is a rich tapestry of styles. From the traditional burqa, known as chador, to the contemporary

Gulf-Arabic abaya (also called chaplain siah), to the fusion of large, loose dresses with pleated trousers, to the modern twist of skinny jeans paired with a long shirt or coat. This variety is a testament to the vibrant fashion culture of Afghan women. Even in recent years, it remains uncommon for Afghan women to appear in public without a head covering. The styles of hijab, each with its own cultural significance, also reflect this diversity, ranging from the long, full, Iranian-style scarves that cover the head and clothing (often called a namaz chador, as many women also wear them for prayer) to the shorter, more colorful scarves. Some scarves are worn to cover or almost cover the hair, while others are tied in a way that only the eyes are exposed (niqab) (Ahmad, 2022).

How women dress is regulated by men. In tribal-based areas, only men have rights, equality, and unlimited access to public spaces (Moghadam, 2002). Meanwhile, women see the world from behind the veil (Sahill, 2023).

3.4. Affectives, Cognitives, and Behavioral Identity

Their mothers walked in groups of three or four, some in burqas, others not. Mariam could hear their high pitched chatter; their spiraling laughs. As she walked with her head down, she caught bits of their banter, which seemingly always had to do with sick children or lazy, ungrateful husband.

As if the meals cook themselves.

Wallah o billah, never a moment's rest!

And he says to me, I swear it, its true, he actually says to me....

This endless conversation, the tone plaintive but oddly cheerful, flew around and around in a circle. On it went, down the street, around the corner, in line at the tandoor.

.....

Mariam wondered how so many women could suffer the same miserable luck, to have married, all of them, such dreadful men. Or was this a wifely game that she did not know about, a daily ritual, like soaking rice or making dough? Would they expect her soon to join in? (Hosseini, 2017: p. 64).

The data above is set in Kabul and shows different conditions compared to traditional border areas. The cultural identity of women in this city is more open so that women can carry out activities outside in groups, whether wearing a burqa or not. Like other women in general, they talk about many things and exchange stories about family problems with various complaints that are more or less the same. For example, they may need more rest time and lack appreciation after cooking or doing domestic things. Mariam, a [brief description of Mariam's role], imagined how these women—or maybe even all—could be in the same position and stuck in routines like cooking rice and making bread.

3.5. Content and Relationship Levels

Mariam pictured herself in Kabul, a big, strange, crowded city that, Jalil had once told her, was some six hundred and fifty kilometers to the east of He-

rat. Six hundred and fifty kilometers. The farthest she'd ever been from the kolba was the two kilometer walk she'd made to Jalil's house. She pictured herself living there, in Kabul, at the other end of that unimaginable distance, living in a stranger's house where she would have to concede to his mood and his issued demands. She would have to clean after this man, Rasheed, cook for him, wash his clothes. And there would be other chores as well—Nana had told her what husbands did to their wives. It was the thought of these intimacies in particular, which she imagined as painful acts of perversity, that filled her with dread and made her break out in a sweat (Hosseini, 2017: p. 49).

In the quote above, Mariam imagines all the traditional habits of women when they are married. She is far from Herat and lives in Kabul with her husband. He had never been to that place before. It is a strange new place with a man who just married her. She also has to come to terms with her husband's problems and emotions. She has to wash clothes, cook, and clean the house. One thing that made him remember what his mother said was that husband and wife relationships, in general, are sexual and intimate. He imagined how painful the relationship would be on the first night.

4. Conclusion

The cultural identity of Afghan women is reflected in 5 aspects as in Mary Jane Collier's theory of cultural identity, namely 1) Modes of expression; 2) Individual, relational, and communal identity; 3) Enduring and changing aspects of identity; 4) Affective, cognitive, and behavioral identity; and 5) Content and relationship levels. All the data reveals that even though the Afghan government is providing opportunities and starting to open up space for women, women's cultural identity factors mean they still need to open themselves to existing changes. For example, regarding the stigma and stereotype that women do domestic tasks and spend minimal time outside the home. This behavior is also extreme among Afghan border groups and in families with lower-middle-income levels. Families from the middle to upper strata are more open to change and provide opportunities for female family members to be involved in government and study at well-known campuses in Kabul with male students.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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