



## **Queering “Hybrid” identities in Khaled Hosseini’s *And the Mountains Echoed***

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### **Abstract**

This essay attempts to conceptualize the notion of hybridity as a border-crossing to define subject-object positions, identities, power (social) relations at its onset. It uses these theoretical ideas to explore hybridity and fractured identities in Hosseini’s novel set against the backdrop of a complex history of Afghanistan. Since identity is a temporal construct, the essay analyses how queering of identity problematizes further the concept of hybridity.

**Keywords:** *identity, hybridity, queering*

This paper aims to study ‘hybrid’ identities in Khaled Hosseini’s novel *And the Mountains Echoed*. “Hybridity” is a central theme in most postcolonial texts. The term “hybrid” basically implies a “person whose background is a blend of two diverse cultures or traditions”. In postcolonial studies it refers to the schizophrenic state of the immigrant individual who seeks to identify with two competing cultures and languages often without sacrificing either. Hybrid identity could take various forms such as “split-consciousness between two identities, multiple identities and solidarities or a reassertion of “native” cultural identity” (Nayar, 197). Hybridity in textuality offers social situations, to study the issues of displacement and disorientation in the contemporary world. Hybridization in a cultural context could be described as the final product of ‘deculturalization’, ‘acculturalization’ and ‘reculturalization’ yet always at a flux resulting from the interaction between different cultures and adaptation to changing circumstances (Bysiecka, 10). The concept of the “hybrid” therefore falls along the lines of “discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentering, indeterminacy and antitotalization” both in terms of identity and textualization of it. (Hutcheon, 3)

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Homi Bhabha understands hybrid spaces as zones of transition. He uses the idea of the border as “in-between” spaces where identities can be recast. Through a range of terms that suggest borders and indeterminate spaces Bhabha rejects any notion of a fixed, rooted or binary identity. He also contests the ideas of “original” identity. He explains identities as processes of negotiation and articulation. Stuart Hall speaks of “new ethnicities” where critical reflection on the representation of non-whites results in an assertion of multiple identities. According to Hall race is no longer a marker to describe “Blacks” or “Asians” since neither category are homogenous and to use a rubric as such is unfair or equivalent to stereotyping or misrepresentation. He puts that there is no essential “blackness” and one needs to study the “real heterogeneity of interests and identities” (Nayar, 202) Hall proposes that one must look at identity categories such as race intersected by other markers of identity such as class, gender, and the ethnicity. Identities thus are not to be seen as monoliths but as constructions teeming with disruptions and differences.

Hybridization is not only the result of migration and movement between different worlds and cultures. It is also the consequence of being rootless, due to the change in the subjects’ spatial locations and movement from their insulated worlds to the borders. The effect of mass migrations, to use Salman Rushdie’s observations, is the creation of new types of human beings—people who root themselves in ideas rather than places because there is no place to call home on any map. Such people experience unions of two selves, “unions between what they were and where they find themselves” (Rushdie, 124-125). At this position which is the intersection of heterogeneous histories, geographies and cultures the subjects have to adjust themselves and as a result, gain plural cultural identities. They are forced to become cultural hybrids, uprooted from their motherlands and yet not assimilated to the new surroundings. The characters cross borders (literally and figuratively) and it is this border-crossing, as Henry Giroux claims that offers the hybrid “the opportunity for new subject positions, identities, and social relations that can produce

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resistance to and relief from the structures of domination and oppression” (Giroux, 15-26). Hybridity, then, becomes not only a state of being but also a process of becoming.

Bhabha puts in *Locations of Culture* that living at the border requires a new “art of the present” (Bhabha, 1-7) Borders are thresholds replete with contradiction and ambivalence. They are intermediate spaces where one contemplates moving towards the “beyond” by crossing the barriers of time and space. Bhabha defines that the “beyond” is the in-between site of transition. “It is neither a new horizon nor leaving behind of the past...we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.” The space of the “beyond” is often described in terms such as “liminal”, “interstitial” or “hybrid”. (Bhabha, 1-7) For Bhabha the “in between” spaces provide the terrain of explicating strategies of selfhood, either individual or communal. Identity is a discursive production thus subjectivity of an individual is constantly fashioned in innovative ways.

The novel *And the Mountains Echoed* by Khaled Hosseini explores the hybridity of identities against the backdrop of a complex history of Afghanistan and fractures in the subjectivity of the characters. Khaled Hosseini, who was born in Afghanistan but eventually moved to the United States speaks the diasporic discursiveness of his identity through the different characters in the novel. Hybridity in the novel is explained through a sense of uprootedness and splits in identities of the characters along the lines of class, sexuality, gender, nationality, etc. Since identity is not fixed but in a state of flux, it is also a temporal construct always in the process of becoming. This calls for a queering of identity to further draw a relation with the concept of hybridity.

The term “queer” is not simply an indicator of a spectrum of identities but also a concept that seeks to destabilize various categories of identity. Queer identities question institutions that are based on the assumptions of heterosexuality which is presumed as the cornerstone of “stable” relationships. Nation for instance is also an identity that is neatly based on the idea of a heteronormative family

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that legitimizes only one kind of sexuality which is sustained in the social imaginary of the national community.

The idea of puritanism associated with the Afghan culture especially with the rise of the power of Taliban during the Soviet-Afghan war betrays homosexual desire prevalent in Afghan culture. The idea of queerness exhibits a heteroglossic image of Afghan life, especially gender relations and community organization. In the novel *Mr Suleiman Wahdati*, an upper-class man, who is uprooted and distanced from the passions of a heterosexual life secretly desires his servant Nabi. Nabi and Mr. Wahdati are divided by class and the baggage of culture which is why Mr Wahdati never vents his feelings to him openly. His personal life is a life of repression that his sketches offer an outlet to. A sense of in-betweenness also haunts him owing to the pressures of projecting himself as a married heterosexual man.

The Afghan culture tends to be conformist and due to the lack of compassion, is coping with a sexual identity crisis. An unclassified study from a research unit in southern Afghanistan details how homosexual behavior is unusually common among men in the large ethnic group known as Pashtuns, though they seem to be in complete denial about it. The study found that Pashtun men commonly have sex with other men, admire other men physically, have sexual relationships with boys and shun women both socially and sexually, yet they completely reject the label of "homosexual." According to the report, Pashtun men interpret the Islamic prohibition on homosexuality to mean they cannot "love" another man but that doesn't mean they can't use men for "sexual gratification." The Pashtun populations are concentrated in the southern and eastern parts of the country. The report also detailed a disturbing practice in which older "men of status" keep young boys on hand for sexual relationships. One of the country's favorite sayings, the report said, is "women are for children, boys are for pleasure." (Fox News)

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Mr. Wahdati's sexual repression thus could be caused by the desire to belong to the larger Pashtun community. However, this desire to belong too meets with fractures in terms of the class and privilege that Mr Wahdati enjoys and despite that cannot cut across the cultural restrictions posed by his community. Mr Wahdati thus struggles to reconcile his identity within the larger imaginary of the desired subjectivity of an Afghan citizen.

Nila Wahdati the wife of Mr Wahdati who is much younger than her husband is an upper class "liberated" woman. The couple never has a positive relationship. She enjoys the company of her servant Nabi who secretly desires her. Nila goes freely to parties and wears what she desires. Nila also writes poems on physical love and defies all patriarchal expectations on women. Her lifestyle is never a cause of disruption in the already fractured relationship of the couple. It could also be interpreted that her marriage was a disguise for the kind of life she chose to live. The institution of marriage thus publicly legitimizes her identity as an acceptable married woman which alone allows her the freedom she seeks to enjoy.

Class in the novel is a complex site for negotiation with ideas of hybridity and queerness. Class is not only a marker of monetary status of an individual but also a series of powerful choices one makes to choose a standard of life for himself. The novel complicates the ideas of class with gender offering a radical critique of the contemporary social reality of Afghanistan. Nila is a woman who goes to parties, recites her poems publicly which no doubt are also celebrations of physical love and also cannot bear a child. She is the "other" in the patriarchal imaginary of an "acceptable" woman in Afghan culture. Nila subverts the heteronormative expectations of a married woman through her desire of choice of life. Her marriage though a façade, despite the suffering she undergoes could also be an exchange for the kind of life she wanted to live which no other but Mr Wahdati could provide. Her choice to adopt Pari on her own volition and move to Paris advocates a rebellious subjectivity of feminist and queer assertion against the norms of patrilocal kinship organization and institutional relationships. However, her individual foibles and abandonment of

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Pari pushes her to a zone of indeterminateness cutting across her personal life and her responsibility towards Pari.

The poetics of the novel *And the Mountains Speak* could be read against contemporary history of Afghanistan that marks the tussle between progressive and regressive political forces in Afghanistan. Politics in Afghanistan still is largely determined by tribal laws which has taken precedence over constitutional rationality. Tribal power is founded on honor of the patriarch of a group and all communal transactions feed on the sustenance and maintenance of this androcentric and patriarchist ideology. The reign of Amanullah in 1923 and the later formation of the communist-backed Peoples' Democratic Party of Afghanistan had tried to usher in modern changes on gender and governance which met severe backlash from the conservative forces leading to the war between Afghanistan and Soviet Union, the birth of Mujahideen and the decline of the status of women. Afghanistan has thus often rejected modernity at the cost of keeping the patriarchal relations of production alive.

According to Gayle Rubin, Kinship systems are socially organized and in relation to the woman who is transacted it is the men who are linked in the acquisition of power. Gayle Rubin in her famous essay, "The Traffic in Women" states:

If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner of it. The exchange of women does not necessarily imply that women are objectified, in the modern sense, since objects in the primitive world are imbued with highly personal qualities. But it does imply a distinction between gift and giver. If women are the gifts, then it is men who are the exchange partners. And it is the partners, not the presents, upon whom reciprocal exchange confers its quasi-mystical powers of social linkage. The relations of such a system are such that women are in no position to realize the benefits of their own circulation. As long as the relations specify that men exchange women, it is men who are the beneficiaries of the product of such exchanges—social organization. The total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and a woman, but between two groups of men, and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners. (Rubin, 58)

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The novel *And the Mountains Echoed* highlights this structure of social organization through the transaction of Pari who becomes a source of money for her father Saboor. Pari is sold off to the Wahdatis by Nabi who is nobody but her own uncle. Pari's transaction also interprets as a symbol of association, a strong link between Nabi the servant and the Wahdatis. Nabi who considers himself fortunate for the acceptance he gets from the Wahdatis also is unremorseful to separate Pari from her family. For him the relations of production matter more than human relationships which he perhaps compensates for when he leaves his property to Pari at the end. However, Nabi always lives on the "borders" as Bhabha would call, never fully realizing his interests or perhaps sacrificing his interests. The sense of in-betweenness and a difficult acceptance of his present is highlighted in one of the chapters:

I had stayed initially because Suleiman needed me, because he was wholly dependent on me. I had run once before from someone who needed me, and the remorse I still feel I will take with me to the grave. I could not do it again. But slowly, imperceptibly, my reasons for staying changed. I cannot tell you when or how the change occurred, Mr. Markos, only that I was staying for me now. Suleiman said I should marry. But the fact is, I looked at my life and realized I already had what people sought in marriage. I had comfort, and companionship, and a home where I was always welcomed, loved, and needed. The physical urges I had as a man—and I still had them, of course, though less frequent and less pressing now that I was older—could still be managed, as I explained earlier. As for children, though I had always liked them I had never felt a tug of paternal impulse in myself. (Hosseini, 120)

Sexuality and identity are intermingled with the notion of hybridity in the novel. Both the characters live on the "borders" of their subjectivity, always in a state of indeterminacy. Nila realizes the futility of her marriage when she feels the need of a child which Nabi fulfills by selling off Pari, the step daughter of his own sister Parwana. Despite having Pari she neglects her after moving to Paris owing to her own foibles. Mr Wahdati's passionless life which otherwise speaks through his homoerotic sketches suggests a fragmented sense of subjectivity that cuts through his class, interests and culture. Nabi's desires for Nila and his discovery of the sketches by Mr Wahdati

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pushes him to a zone of indeterminacy, at a “border” where he is unable to leave and reluctant to stay. Abdullah, Pari’s brother, after the death of his mother never gets love from Parwana, his stepmother and is also separated from his most beloved sister Pari. This emotional separation marks his displacement in an already war torn Afghanistan. His constant wait for Pari, the naming of his own daughter as Pari and his meeting with her in the US when he is already demented speaks of the intense desire for stability cut through by the indeterminacies inhabiting a nation in turmoil.

Khaled Hosseini’s *And the Mountains Echoed* exposes the fissures and fractures in the relationships of the characters and how they are socially organized to conform to their rebellion in their own ways but are also conditioned to their ends. All the chapters in the novel are separate stories that are linked in a larger fabric. It is important to note that Hosseini’s gaze as a hybridized, diasporic Afghan helps him see the hybridities in the complex relationships in the characters and it is through the multiple non-afghan characters like Dr. Markos Varvaris that the characters open up their mind. One comes to know the relationship between Nila and Mr Wahdati and Nabi’s desires for Nila only through a letter by Nabi to Mr Markos who he helps by giving him a place to stay.

The novel thus offers a constant negotiation with institutional and cultural identities and pits them against the discursiveness of the individuality of the characters. The characters are drawn to a state of liminality where specific identities mutate to arrive at newer subject positions. This flux is what constructs the subjectivity of the characters pushing them to newer “borders”, pluralities and hybridities.

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