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## **Pragmatic Approach of Cultural Materialism in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner***

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### **Abstract:**

Literature has been privileged with the power to shape and mould society and culture by inculcating social values and ideologies. Cultural Materialism recognises and emphasises the role of the productive and creative process in shaping the culture and ideology of society. This paper tries to analyse culture as a productive process in accordance with Raymond Williams, the Welsh Critic, who asserts that literary or cultural text and other forms of art such as film, television series, art, and architecture are cultural materials or cultural products. This research paper tries to portray that Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* as a cultural product, which exhibit the political and economic forces prevalent in Afghan society. Cultural Materialism began to study text by examining how themes, characters, and dialogues could be seen as expressions of dominant ideological narratives or as attempts to subvert the dominant ideologies of the society. Thus, Cultural materialism tries to situate the text in a relevant historical and cultural context to understand the text.

**Keywords:** Culture, ideology, cultural product.

## **Introduction**

Basically, Cultural Materialism is a Marxist-inspired theoretical approach studying a cultural text. It is also assumed as an extension of Marxism. 'Cultural Materialism' is a term coined by Marvin Harris, an American Anthropologist in his work published in 1968, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*. In addition to its affiliation with Marxism, it also tries to bring out the cultural differences and similarities in society. Harris's theory lays the foundation of Cultural Materialism. He used his theory to explain the cultural aspects of society in a simple way to humanity.

## **Raymond Williams: A Theorist of Great Repute**

The modern application of the term cultural materialism for anthropological study and research attributes to Jonathan G. Dollimore, the British philosopher and critic and Alan Sinfield, the English theorist, who used the term as a subtitle to their famous work *Political Shakespeare* in 1985. This term introduced as a subtitle emerges as a literary movement in twentieth century literary world. The modern development and application of cultural materialism to the sociology of literature is trace back to the Welsh author, literary critic and theorist Raymond Williams. He popularised the term 'Cultural Materialism' in 1976 in a short essay published in 'New Left Review' and he further expanded this idea in his 1977 magnum opus *Marxism and Literature*. In *Marxism and Literature*, he speaks about the influence of cultural, economic and political forces of society in producing of a literary text. He further developed the Marxist theories and established a dynamic relationship between culture and literature by introducing a new approach called Cultural Materialism.

## Exponentiation of Cultural Materialism

Peter Barry, Aberystwyth University professor, UK, defines the term 'Cultural materialism' in his book *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* thus:

'culture' will include all forms of culture ('forms like television and popular music and fiction,) ..... 'Materialism' signifies the opposition of 'idealism': an 'idealist' belief would be that high culture represents the free and independent play of the talented individual mind; the contrary 'materialist' belief is that culture cannot 'transcend the material forces and relations of production. Culture is not simply a reflection of the economic and political system, but nor can it be independent of it. (Barry 177)

This Cultural Materialist approach of Williams has a profound impact on twentieth-century literature and culture. Cultural materialism brings together Marxist and structuralist theories to demystify the literary text. The theorist, inspired by Williams, begins to approach literary text by combining two distinct modes of analysis: Historicism and Ideological and Political Analysis of the period. Historicism emphasises the significance of the cultural context in which the literary text is produced, Whereas, Ideological Political Analysis examines the relationship between the cultural text and the prevailing dominant political ideology in the society both at the time of production of text and to the contemporary time the literary text is read and understood. Thus, Cultural Materialism recognises and foregrounds the role of the productive and creative process in shaping the culture and ideology of society.

According to Raymond Williams, culture itself is a productive process. He asserts that literary and cultural text, along with other art forms such as film, television series, visual arts,

and architecture, are cultural artifacts or cultural products. These cultural products exhibit the political and economic forces prevalent in the society because people produce cultural text based on the socioeconomic condition of the country. Therefore, a Cultural materialistic critic has to situate the text in a relevant historical and cultural context to understand it. The text is analysed from a broader perspective, examining how the cultural context influences the author's perception of the world and how the economic and political conditions help him determine the text.

### **Cultural Materialism in the Pre-Globalisation**

The early 1980s and 90s are considered the early stages of cultural materialism, and the cultural materialistic critics are particularly interested in how literature and art communicate the ideologies of the political movement for their ideological purpose. The rationale behind this is that if a cultural text is a specific combination of cultural, political, and economic forces, then the literature that emerges from that particular society is more likely to reflect the dominant values and political discourses inherent in that society. Critics influenced by cultural materialism began to study text to identify ways in which themes, characters, and dialogues serve as expressions of dominant ideological narratives or as subversions of these prevailing societal ideologies. Thus, cultural material theorists explore how the power structures of contemporary society exert their power through literary texts for political purposes. Probably, the cultural materialism movement have simplified the process of globalisation. It made people worldwide to adapt themselves to encountering the impacts of globalisation.

### **The Impacts of Cultural Materialism in Afghanistan**

This paper tries to analyse Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* as a literary product or cultural artifact that reflects the political and cultural ideologies of 1980s and 1990s Afghanistan. Khaled Hosseini, an Afghanistan born American writer and physician, portrays

the reality of war-torn Afghanistan in his works. Afghanistan is a conflict-affected country for more than four decades. This literary text discloses the social experience and gives a voice to the established ideologies and the oppositional forces in society. The culture and the ideologies of Afghanistan have always remained dark to the world outside Afghanistan. This paper attempts to bring out the cultural, political and dominant ideologies of Afghanistan disclosed in this literary work.

Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* is a powerful reflection on the economic, political, and environmental context of the society in which the text was created. Furthermore, the paper examines the impact it creates on the readers while reading this text as a cultural product in the background of globalisation and modernisation. Thus, these texts became the cultural products of the war-affected country Afghanistan.

### **Application of Cultural Materialism in *The Kite Runner***

Hosseini discloses the social practices and voices their opposition to these established ideologies and oppositional forces of the Afghan society through the portrayal of Sanaubar in *The Kite Runner*. In Afghan society, gender disparity and social injustice against women are considered normal. In Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* Baba, Amir's father takes his Hazara servant Ali's wife Sanaubar and gives birth to Hassan. After the birth of Hassan, she deserts the child and leaves him uncared. Sanaubar is considered a flirt and even Hassan has to face the disgrace his mother has brought on him, meanwhile, Baba is regarded with great respect. People greet him in the streets and regard him with great respect. On the day he opened his orphanage, people were happy. Amir says: "When Baba ended his speech, people stood up and cheered. They clapped for a long time" (Hosseini, *Kite Runner* 14).

Afghanistan is a highly patriarchal society where social justice is a rare commodity. Soraya's love for a man before her marriage to Amir has been teased even after her marriage to Amir. Society never misses an opportunity to degrade her about her morality. However, the same society has no issues when it comes to men. Soraya points out this social injustice thus:

Their sons go out to nightclubs looking for meat and get their girlfriends pregnant, they have kids out of wedlock and no one says a goddamn thing. Oh, they're just men having fun! I make one mistake and suddenly everyone is talking *nang* and *namoos*, and I have to have my face rubbed in it for the rest of my life. (Hosseini, *Kite Runner* 164)

International migration was a dominant component in Afghanistan in the early 1980s. The most dominant ideology of the Afghan society during the period was to migrate to developed countries for a secure life. Afghan people started to migrate to developed and developing countries to have better prospects in life. The cultural, political and economic circumstances of Afghan society have fostered the belief, whether consciously or unconsciously, that migrating to a developed nation offer better prospects in life. Hosseini's literary texts reflect the dominant ideologies and political discourses inherent in Afghan society.

The literary work or literature is a powerful tool through which social and cultural changes are brought to society. Hosseini tries to change the patriarchal nature of Afghan society and culture. Hosseini's Amir is a way through which Hosseini wants to bring some changes in society. Amir's migration and his life in America have produced visible changes in his attitude to life. He has a different perspective on life. Rahim Khan could sense it when he met him in America. He says: "I see America has infused you with the optimism that has made her so great. That's very good" (Hosseini, *Kite Runner* 186).

Amir's realisation and change in perception, stemming from his new life, make him more humane and ready to shoulder the responsibility on his shoulders to find a solution or remedy to the situation. He openly addresses Hassan as his half-brother and he adopts Hassan's son to be his son. Moreover, his attitude to life and women also has changed. He becomes mature enough to accept Soraya even after understanding her past. He could see the strength in her to accept the reality which he could not do in connection to Hassan's issue. He says: "I envied her. Her secret was out. Spoken. Dealt with" (Hosseini, *Kite Runner* 152). He deviates from Afghan culture to judge a person. He could see her as a better person than him. He is free from the prejudiced nature of pure Afghans. He says: "I suspected there were many ways in which Soraya Taheri was a better person than me. Courage was just one of them" (152).

The main characters of Hosseini are rational in expressing their disenchantment with Afghanistan and articulate the ways to break free from Afghan's social and cultural situation. Moreover, migration is considered by the native Afghans as a blessing in disguise. Even though some external forces like the Russian invasion and the tyranny of the Taliban are some factors that force them to migrate, The Afghan people made use of the political situation of the country to migrate for better prospects in life. The Afghans consider migration to be the right decision during political turmoil. Moreover, migration is the door that opens a meaningful life in this world and makes their life worth living.

Amir in Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* considers it as a great opportunity in his life to taste success. He says "America was a river, roaring along unmindful of the past. I could wade into this river, let my sins drown to the bottom, let the waters carry me someplace far someplace with ghosts, no memories, and no sins" (Hosseini, *Kite Runner* 126). He was not successful in Kabul; it was Hassan who was more skilled in kite flying than Amir.

### **Cultural Materialism in Afghanistan Migrants**

A clear sense of ideology prevails among the people that the culturally rich Afghanistan is destroyed and the golden epoch of Afghanistan is gone. The Afghans have lost hope in their country. The glory of Kabul is lost, and it is no longer a city of happiness and peace. Every Afghan is regretting the loss of their city. Hassan in Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* regrets the loss of Amir and Hassan's Kabul in his letter to Amir writes: "Alas the Afghanistan of our youth is long dead. Kindness is gone from the land and you cannot escape the killings. Always the killings" (Hosseini, *Kite Runner* 200)..

### **Positive Repercussions in Migration in the Views of Hosseini**

The Afghan refugees are not seeking asylum for survival; their migration is a deliberate and planned process. For instance, Hosseini's character Baba, Amir's father in *The Kite Runner*, has a definite aim behind his decision to migrate. He always held America with great aspiration. Amir says that "Baba loved the idea of America" (Hosseini, *Kite Runner* 116). Even though Baba suffers a lot after migrating to America and Baba takes it as a process to achieve his target, he clearly specifies his objective behind this migration thus: "Besides, I didn't bring us here for me, did I?" (Hosseini, *Kite Runner* 120) He is very clear about the objective in life and he considers this as his duty to have his son's life secure. As he puts "Now America. One last gift for Amir" (Hosseini, *Kite Runner* 120).

The 'historical context' is one of the characteristics of cultural materialism as defined by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, the cultural materialist, in their collection of essays *Political Shakespeare*. Peter Barry explained this historical context in his book *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* as "the aim of this aspect of cultural materialism is to allow the literary text to 'recover its histories' which previous kinds of study have often ignored" (Barry 176).

Raymond Williams observes that the cultural, economic and historical forces of the society in which the text was produced exert an influence on the production of a literary text. The Afghan people have a deep connection to their homeland and a profound sense of nostalgia, which they hold dear, reflecting their earnest desire to share their culture and tradition to the external world. They always considered their culture with high esteem and they expressed it with great pleasure.

### **U-Turn of Hosseini's Attempts**

Hosseini always held in high esteem the culture and tradition of Afghanistan. It is their ardent desire to express the external world and the real culture of Afghanistan. His works, to a great extent, reflect this account of migration and often represent cultural and ideological changes in society from a broader perspective. Unfortunately, Afghanistan is projected to the outside world as a land of violence and extremism. These immigrant writers ought to project the realities of their tradition and culture to the outside world. Hosseini, through Baba in *The Kite Runner* tries to project that Afghanistan is not a land of religious extremism. Baba is spiritual and he is not religious, and he takes all measures to make his son aware of this and help him to distinguish between the two. He prepares his son Amir to face the realities of the world without fear. He says “But better to get hurt by the truth than comforted with a lie” (Hosseini, *Kite Runner* 54).

### **Culture as an Icon of a Nation**

Culture marks the existence of the country. Culture has the power to present the society, people and their ideologies when it is portrayed in a text. It is a compulsion and obligation for Hosseini to recover its history and project the rich culture of Afghanistan to the external world. He expresses a profound desire or urge to convey not only the richness of Afghanistan before

Russian invasions but also to depict to the external world the pain and sufferings the Afghan immigrants undergo in the migrated land as well as the plight of Afghans in their land under Taliban. Wahid, the driver insists to Amir "Maybe you should write about Afghanistan again," Wahid said. "Tell the rest of the world what the Taliban are doing to our country" (Hosseini, *Kite Runner* 218). Hosseini earnestly desires to present their culture and the greatness of their culture to the world.

Raymond Williams, the Welsh Cultural theorist, claims that culture "is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (Qtd. in Storey 1). So, it becomes a Herculean task for these writers to exhibit the Afghan culture, which remains a mystery to the external world. Hosseini tries to open the eyes of the world about Afghanistan. He successfully imparts the culture and heritage of real Afghanistan to the world.

### **Cultural Implications of Afghanistan**

The game kite fighting can be understood if the text is situated in the cultural background of Afghanistan. The significance and its cultural implication of kite running can be related only by the Afghans. The game, Kite Fighting, 'is not just a game it is a part of Afghan culture. Hosseini registers the paramount importance of it in his *The Kite Runner*: "Every Winter, districts in Kabul held a Kite- fighting tournament. And if you are a boy living in Kabul, the day of the tournament was undeniably the highlight of the cold season" (Hosseini, *Kite Runner* 46). Further Hosseini asserts the importance of kite fighting and describes its significance in Afghanistan. "In Kabul, Fighting Kite was a little like going to war" (47). Besides, he propounds that "Afghans are independent people. Afghans cherish custom but abhor rules. And so, it was with kite fighting. The rules were simple: No rules. Fly your Kite. Cut the opponents" (48). The art of kite flying is a part of Afghan culture, and it has a tremendous influence on Hosseini, which in turn gets portrayed in literary work

## **Art and Culture as Structure of Feelings**

Raymond Williams called this relationship between art and culture as the “Structure of Feelings”. This concept was first introduced in his book *Preface to Films* in 1954, and he analysed the concept further in his work *Long Revolution and Marxism and Literature*. Williams observes the “Structure of Feelings” in his book *Marxism and Literature* as “It is that we are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt and the relations between these and formal or systematic beliefs are in practice variable” (132). Peter Barry considers ‘Structure of Feelings’ in his book *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* thus: “Instead of Foucault’s notion of ‘discourse’, Williams invented the term ‘structures of feeling’: these are concerned with ‘meanings and values as they lived and felt’. Structures of feelings are often antagonistic both to explicit systems of values and beliefs, and to the dominant ideologies within a society” (Barry 177).

## **Residual Ideology**

Raymond Williams believes that the past dominant ideology cannot be eradicated completely. It will not disappear entirely from the political and cultural ideology of the new dominant ideology. Williams called this a ‘residual ideology’. The residual ideology remains in the society outside the purview of the dominant ideology or culture and opposes the meanings and values of the dominant ideology. This very existence of residual ideology creates tension in the existing dominant ideology or culture.

In any society, an ideology becomes tremendous and wide ideology by destroying the previous dominant ideology. Even though the dominant ideology continues to exert force does not mean that there is a monopoly of culture. The dominant ideology involves ongoing

intimidation from the previous dominant ideology, which has now become a residual ideology. In many cases, the dominant culture retains certain values and ideas from the residual culture.

Afghanistan is a land rich in tradition and culture. It is a country of great heritage which regards women with great honour. The Afghan tradition has a substantial position for women and hold them as influential in society.

### **Cultural and Political Hegemony**

Hegemony is a kind of dominance employed in the society by a dominant ideology. The term hegemony is coined and propagated by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist critic, who used this term to represent the power of the dominant class to exert their ideology subtly through established institutions, media etc. in a convincing way to transform the dominant ideology as a consensus world view. In other words, hegemony is accomplished by the naturalisation and universalisation of a dominant ideology and dominant culture. Afghan society's dominant ideologies are idealised in the name of religion. It makes the people approve of this ideology in a hegemonic way. Afghanistan, before the Mujahideen took over in 1992, was a period of freedom, peace and opportunities for all people, especially for women.

The Taliban's extremism is always related to religion to convince and justify their ideology. Hosseini illustrates how their act of cruelty is justified by the Talibans in *The Kite Runner* as "Brothers and sisters!" he called, speaking in Farsi, his voice booming through the stadium." We are here to carry out Shari's. We are here to carry out justice" (Hosseini, *Kite Runner* 248). Their dominant ideology of punishment is also related to God and the Scriptures. He further states "And what does God say? I ask you! WHAT DOES GOD SAY? God says that every sinner must be punished in a manner befitting his sin. Those are not my words, nor the words of my brothers. Those are the words of GOD!" (Hosseini, *Kite Runner* 248). Despite this regular appropriation of the dominant ideology in a naturalised way among the people in a

society, new meanings, new values, new practices, new behaviour, and new social practices do emerge in a society. Raymond Williams calls it a 'Emergent culture or ideology'. He expresses what he means by emergent in his book *Marxism and Literature* thus:

By 'emergent, I mean, first, that new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships are continually being created, but it is exceptionally difficult to distinguish between those which are really elements and some new phase of the dominant culture. (123)

The structure of any society has certain elements that are the social elements that become the base of the society. Moreover, culture is a process of social elements, which assures the existence or emergence of new social elements. The emergent ideology is associated with the new class of people with a novel ideology. It is always an oppositional alternative to the dominant ideology.

### **Afghan Migrants Towards Reformation**

Williams regarded this emergent class as a powerful class, capable of bringing a reformation or change. In Afghanistan, despite the denial of education to women and girl children, there is a group of people who oppose it and continue to teach them to read and write at home.

Hence, Raymond Williams in his 'structure of feelings' opines the existence of a dynamic network of residual and emergent ideology in a society that renders a complex lived experience. This lived experience is beyond the framework of any dominant ideologies or hegemonic dominant ideology. Meanwhile, one may not experience the residual and emergent ideologies as distinct social and cultural values. The world around us can be distinguished as residual, dominant and emergent but our lived experience cannot be distinguished based on

these cultural values. All these cultural elements come together and experienced as a total lived experience, which Williams calls the structure of feeling.

Williams assumes that any work of art, including a literary text that is produced in any particular period, cannot be restricted to be the representation of any one particular ideology. Any piece of literature represents this complex totality of all these ideologies and their dynamic interaction among themselves. Williams expresses this very clearly thus:

It seems to be true, from the nature of art, that it is from such a totality that the artist draws; it is in art primarily, that the effect of a lived experience is expressed and embodied. To relate a work of art to any part of that whole may, in varying degrees, be useful; but it is a common experience, in analysis, to realize that when one has measured the work against the separable parts, there yet remains some element for which there is no external counterpart. It is this, in the first instance that I mean by the structure of feeling. (Williams 186)

To conclude, literary productions, being the dominant mode to portray the realities of society interprets that human life, is an area always remains outside the grasp of any dominant ideology. Williams asserts that human life and its culture cannot be reduced under dominant ideology. The cultural aspects of human life is a grey area which lies beyond the clutches of dominant ideology, because it blends both the residual and emergent ideology. Thus, the literary text succeeds in presenting the intricacies of society and the complex framework of relationships among the various views and ideas of social and cultural elements in a particular society at any time in the world.

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