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Landscapes of Worship and of Death: The Imprint of Islam on the Cultural Landscape of Afghanistan in The Kite Runner

ABSTRACT

The paper is about the role of Islam in shaping the cultural landscape of Afghanistan under Taliban. Yi-Fu Tuan's, a Chinese-American humanistic geographer, description of religion is used as a theoretical framework in this study, and juxtaposed to Taliban's religious fanaticism. Afghanistan is addressed through the experiences and perceptions of Afghan characters in the The Kite Runner. The aim of this study is to explore the cultural landscape of Afghanistan after the Taliban held power during the years 1996-2001. It also examines the discrepancy between Yi Fu Tuan's description of religion and the humanitarian crisis that Taliban had created in Afghanistan.

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أرض العبادة و الموت: أثر الإسلام على المشهد الثقافي الأفغاني في عداة الطائفة الورقية

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الملخص

يتناول البحث دور الإسلام في تشكل المشهد الثقافي الأفغاني أبان حكم طالبان. ويشير البحث الى نظرية الجغرافي الأمريكي من أصل صيني يفو توان الخاصة بوظيفة الأديان، ومقارنته بالتعصب الديني لطالبان. يقدم البحث أفغانستان من خلال تجارب و تصورات الشخصيات الأفغانية في رواية عداة الطائفة الورقية. الهدف من الدراسة هو إستكشاف المشهد الثقافي لأفغانستان بعد سيطرة طالبان على السلطة خلال الأعوام 1996-2001. تهدف الورقة أيضًا إلى الكشف عن سبب التناقض بين وصف يفو توان للدين والأزمة الإنسانية التي خلقتها حركة طالبان في أفغانستان.

الكلمات الدالة: البشتون ، هزارة ، طالبان ، أفغانستان ، المشهد الثقافي

Geography is closely allied with religion in that the latter influences people and their conduct in a myriad of ways, and the former addresses the arrangement of individual organization and the pattern of where people live. C. J. Glacken (1967) explains how,

in ancient and modern times alike, theology and geography have often been closely related studies because they meet at crucial points of human curiosity. If we seek after the nature of God, we must consider the nature of man and the earth, and if we look at the earth, questions of divine purpose in its creation and of the role of mankind inevitably arise. (p. 35)

Yi Fu Tuan, the Chinese-American cultural geographer, contemplates on the nature and meaning of religion through describing the characteristics of the religious person, culture, and impulse:

The religious person is one who seeks coherence and meaning in his world, and a religious culture is one that has a clearly structured world view. The religious impulse is to tie things together. ... All human beings are religious if religion is broadly defined as the impulse for coherence and meaning. The strength of the impulse varies enormously from culture to culture, and from person to person. (qtd. in Park, 1994, p. 34)

Islam is predominant in the Middle East, West Asia, and North Africa. It is greatly imprinted on the cultural landscapes of these regions through the architectural styles of mosques and other religious buildings, prohibiting definite pursuits, shaping people's view of life, and determining the appropriate attire. The aim of this study, however, is to explore the reason behind which Islam in Afghanistan, under Taliban, do not fit into Yi Fu Tuan's definition of the meaning and purpose of religion.

Afghanistan, from a historical perspective, is a place of conflicts: "Deprived of major mineral wealth ..., landlocked and surrounded from all sides by three formidable mountain ranges, it nevertheless has been a locum of sustained international interest for two hundred years, culminating in the forty-year-long era of social upheaval and bloodshed fueled by external meddling and global rivalries" (Ivanchikova, 2019, p. 7). Afghanistan's major ethnic group, Pashtun Taliban, became a political power in 1996. They seized Kabul, and changed the name of the country to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan instead of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. They strictly applied Islamic law and marginalised the role of women in public life. They promoted intrastate violent clashes and civil wars between Sunni and Shi'a in the country. In this respect,

a significant portion of Afghanistan's population, perhaps nearly 20 percent, belongs to the Shia sect. Among them are the Hazara, a much-persecuted minority group of Asiatic origin inhabiting what is known as the Hazarajat, a region in Bamyan and surrounding provinces. The Hazara are the largest Shia community in Afghanistan, although there are other Shia groups, such as the Qizilbash, the Farsiwan, and the Sayyeds. (Nader, 2014, p. 6)

Perceptible by their Asiatic features, the Hazara had experienced a blatant discrimination by the Sunni Afghans, and later by the Taliban. They suffered from assassination, guillotining, abduction, and massive attacks.

In this novel, Khaled Hosseini addresses racism and the Sunni-Shi'a sectarian division in Afghanistan through the relationship between Amir, the Pashtun and Sunni Muslim master, and Hassan, the ethnic Hazara and Shi'a Muslim servant. This shows that ethnicity and religion are inseparable, and would have bad consequences in the Islamic world. Amir had read about Hazara's history in a book that belongs to his mother. They rose against the Pashtuns in the nineteenth century. The Pashtuns, in return, had violently killed the Hazaras, captured their property, and sold their women. The old history book that belongs to Amir's mother also reveals that other ethnic groups in Afghanistan "called Hazaras *mice-eating, flat-nosed, load-carrying donkeys*" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 9). Amir recalled that other boys in the neighbourhood used to insult Hassan through those names. However, a Hazara nursing woman had fed both Amir and Hassan. She had a mellifluous voice and used to sing to them a religious song which reflects that she is a Shi'a Muslim:

*On a high mountain I stood,
And cried the name of Ali, Lion of God.
O Ali, Lion of God, King of Men,
Bring joy to our sorrowful hearts.* (Hosseini, 2003, p. 10)

According to Yi-Fu Tuan (1979), "A key to the meaning of place lies in the expressions that people use when they want to give it a sense carrying greater emotional charge than location of functional node. People talk of the 'spirit', the 'personality' and the 'sense' of place" (p. 409). The song is a prayer for Ali to bring joy to painful hearts. It reflects a religious and cultural practice which expresses the sorrow of this ethnic and religious minority in Afghanistan. The fact that the Hazara nursing woman was singing, while feeding both Amir and Hassan, conveys this minority's sense of inclusion which entails Amir; who is from a different sect.

Amir received his early religious education through the teachings of Mullah Fatiullah Khan. Amir showed the history book to the Mullah and drew his attention to the chapter on Hazaras. The Mullah "skimmed through a couple of pages, snickered, handed the book back. 'That's the one thing Shi'a people do well,' he said, picking up his papers, 'passing themselves as martyrs.' He wrinkled his nose when he said the word Shi'a, like it was some kind of disease" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 9). The Mullah's comment reflects a long Sunni-Shi'a divide that frequently provokes conflicts in Muslim countries. It also foretells the dissention in Afghanistan under Taliban. However, Shi'a's character is deeply-rooted in victimhood after the killing of Al-Husayn ibn Ali. The Shi'a also suffered a long period of marginalisation by the Sunni majority. Mullah Fatiullah taught about "the virtues of *zakat* and the duty of *hadj*;" and how to perform "the five daily *namaz* prayers". Yet he had failed to teach his students how to deal with Shi'a through peaceful dialogue and without prejudice. Especially that they share the same faith, but differ in the performance of some rituals and interpretation of Islamic Law. Amir mentions that Mullah Fatiullah made his students "memorize verses from the

Koran—and though he never translated the words [...], he did stress, sometimes with the help of a stripped willow branch, that [... they] had to pronounce the Arabic words correctly so God would hear [... them] better” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 15). This shows The Mullah’s inability to properly approach the central text of Islam and convey God’s message. This would have its consequences in not accepting religious pluralism or having tolerance. Mullah Fatiullah taught his students that alcohol is forbidden in Islam. However, in the 1970s, Afghans would drink alcoholic beverages and not been publically lashed for it. Alcohol was sold in certain pharmacies as a medicine. In this regard, according to Amir’s father, mullahs or the religious leaders in Sunni Islam “do nothing but thumb their prayer beads and recite a book written in a tongue they don’t even understand”. Significantly, he further adds: “God help us all if Afghanistan ever falls into their hands” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 16). Religion and politics are inseparable in Islam; and Islamic countries employ religious legislation. Amir’s father, however, seems to prefer a secular state that provides peace and harmony between different religious groups sharing the same geographical place. Yet in all the religions of the world, “the whole movement of fundamentalism has been seen as a confrontation by traditionalists of those believed to be responsible for replacing a religious moral framework for politics and government by one that is humanistic, and therefore, in their view, anti-religious” (Moyser, 2005, p. 429). Islamic fundamentalists are no exception in this regard. The Taliban which includes members of various Islamic extremists repress individuals who do not belong to a coherent faction.

Amir mentions that he never thought of Hassan as a friend though his childhood memories in Afghanistan revolve around the strong bond between them. Yet Hassan, a Hazara and Shi’a, ultimately becomes to Amir the embodiment of Afghanistan, along with the fact that they are both of two different religious sects and ethnicities:

The face of Afghanistan is that of a boy with a thin-boned frame, a shaved head, and a low-set ears, a boy with a Chinese doll face perpetually lit by a harellipped smile.

Never mind any of those things. Because history isn’t easy to overcome. Neither is religion. In the end, I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara, I was Sunni and he was Shi’a, and nothing was ever going to change that. Nothing. (Hosseini, 2003, p. 24)

Biased religious beliefs are powerfully set into the matrix of many communities and their impact is prevalent. When Assef, a violent Sunni racist, raped Hassan, he justified the act by referring to Hassan as a Hazara, which implies that he is a Shi’a as well. Hassan’s body is feminized and raped as would later happen to Afghanistan by Taliban. According to Hosseini’s narrative both Hassan and Afghanistan have to silently accept their fate (Ivanchikova, 2019, p. 73).

During an encounter between Assef and both Amir and Hassan, Assef mentions that Mohammed Zahir Shah had been deposed by a military coup and the monarchy been abolished and replaced by a republic. Assef tells Amir that his father knows the president of Afghanistan, Daoud Khan, and that he dined at their house last year. Assef further adds that he is going to share his vision with Daoud Khan the next time he visits them: “Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns. It always has been, always will be. We are the true Afghans, the pure Afghans, not

this Flat-Nose here. His people pollute our homeland, our *watan*. They dirty our blood” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 38). Assef’s words reveal racial and religious discrimination and how he is full of hatred for Hassan and the Hazaras. He also blames Amir and his father for tolerating their presence in the country: “You’re part of the problem, Amir. If idiots like you and your father didn’t take these people in, we’d be rid of them by now. They’d all just go rot in Hazarajat where they belong. You’re a disgrace to Afghanistan” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 39). Ethnicity and religion are fundamental to understand the political conflict in Afghanistan. Hazara people had to deal with an uncertain future and to flee their own country due to the violence exerted against them by Sunni extremists. They had experienced countless kinds of abuse from Pashtun governments, including servitude, expatriation, and genocide.

Amir and Baba fled Kabul to Pakistan with other Afghans in the back of a truck, after the Russian invasion in 1981. Amir explains the reason behind the secret elopement from their house and the decision to leave Afghanistan for good: “You couldn’t trust anyone in Kabul anymore—for a fee or under threat, people told on each other, neighbor on neighbor, child on parent, brother on brother, servant on master, friend on friend.” Amir refers to “the *rafiqs*, the comrades, [who] were everywhere and they’d split Kabul into two groups: those who eavesdropped and those who didn’t” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 104). The plan was that they switch truck in Jalalabad, but the driver informed them that the other truck was broke and they had to hide in a basement with other refugees for some time. They were thirty refugees in the basement, and other than Baba, the Afghan refugees prayed to God who is going to save them. Baba replied that “what’ll save us is eight cylinders and a good carburetor” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 111). However, for Muslim Afghans, prayer is part of the structure of the day, one of the most observed rituals, and a means to connect with God during life crisis.

Rahim Khan, the closest confidant of Amir’s family, explains to Amir the quality of life after the Taliban took over in Afghanistan. He describes his happiness when the Taliban arrived in 1996, defeated the Alliance and forced them to leave Kabul. Afghans “were celebrating at *Chaman*, at *Deh-Mazang*, greeting the Taliban in the streets, climbing their tanks and posing for pictures with them. People were so tired of the constant fighting, tired of watching Gulbuddin and his cohorts firing on anything that moved” (Hosseini, 2003, pp. 184-185). In this regard, Alla Ivanchikova (2019) writes about the quality of life in Afghanistan before the arrival of the Taliban:

From 1992 until the arrival of the Taliban in 1996, warring factions of various radical Islamist groups destroyed the infrastructure of the country, unleashed war on civilians, and engaged in ethnic cleansing, all of which lead to the collapse of the state and massive population displacement. After fifty years of steady modernization, Afghanistan was reduced to ruins. While the arrival of the Taliban in 1996 restored a degree of law and order, it also solidified gender inequalities already in place, and did little to alleviate the poverty and breakdown of infrastructure. (p. 11)

Rahim Khan mentions that he has once attended a soccer game in Ghazi Stadium. When Kabul scored against Mazar-i-Sharif, the man next to Rahim Khan shouted happily. Immediately, the bearded young man who was patrolling the aisles struck Rahim Khan’s right eyebrow by the butt of a Kalashnikov. He referred to Rahim Khan as a donkey and threatened to cut out

his tongue if he dares to cheer loudly again. Taliban's fundamentalist regime had not only suppressed the rights of women and exterminated ethnic and religious minority groups, but also spread fear and intimidation on daily basis among people.

When Amir saw Kabul for the first time since 1981, he subtly describes it as "RUBBLE AND BEGGARS" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 225). Children dressed in tattered burlaps crouched everywhere in the streets, asking for money from the pedestrians. They were always accompanied by their mothers; none of them was with his father. Adult males were the main victims of wars and Taliban's brutality in Afghanistan. Amir describes to Farid his childhood memories of Jadeh Maywand: "There used to be shops here and hotels. Neon lights and restaurants. I used to buy kites from an old man named Saifo. He ran a little kite shop by the old police headquarters" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 226). Farid, Amir's guide in Afghanistan, replies that only the police had remained in the place, all other simple luxuries had disappeared. Amir mentions that Jadeh Maywand has turned into "a giant sand castle", the buildings were destroyed and the ones that "hadn't entirely collapsed barely stood, with caved in roofs and walls pierced with rocket shells" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 227). Children were playing on the ruins of buildings. Carts and bicycles swerved around children, dogs, and garbage. Even trees were cut either by people for fire, or by the Shorawi to prevent snipers from hiding in them. According to Amir, "returning to Kabul was like running into an old, forgotten friend and seeing that life hadn't been good to him, that he'd become homeless and destitute" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 227). The way from Jalalabad to Kabul bears traces of the Taliban destructive influence on Afghanistan's landscape. Farid points to the ruins of small villages, whose people are either dead or in refugee camps in Pakistan. He refers to "the crumbled, charred remains of a tiny village" that "was just a tuft of blackened, roofless walls" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 225), and where once lived his friend. He was a bicycle repairman and he also played the tabla. The Taliban killed him and his family, and burned the village. Amir's awareness of the identity of his homeland becomes more intense as he is observing it from the perspective of an outsider. "However, the loss of place need not be literal. The threat of loss is sufficient. Residents not only sense but know that their world has an identity and a boundary when they feel threatened" (Tuan, 1979, p. 418). The Afghan people who remained in their country felt the loss of its very identity after the Taliban took over the control of the place.

Amir and Farid went to Ghazi Stadium to meet the Taliban official who took Sohrab, Hassan's son, from the orphanage. Amir recalled the green grass of Ghazi Stadium's playing field in the 70s. The place became dirty and there were no grass. There were ditches and craters, and a pair of deep pits behind the goalposts. The players were wearing long pants despite the heat, and a cloud of dust rose whenever they kicked the ball. The Taliban moved between the aisles, flogging the audience who cheered in a loud voice. Two pickup trucks rode into the playing field during the half-time, a woman in one of them and a blindfolded man in the other. Both the woman and the man were helped from the trucks by the Talibs. They were forced into "the chest-deep holes", only their trunks jutted out from the ground. A clergy man stood near them and recited verses from the holy Quran. He then started preaching about punishing the sinners in a manner that fits the nature of their sins. Therefore, adulterers who disgraced the holiness of marriage must be punished by throwing stones at them until

they die. After that, a Talib with black sunglasses went to a pile of stones unloaded by a third truck and hurled stones at them till they died.

Amir would later encounter the Talib with the sunglasses, who asks him if he had enjoyed the show. The Talib would further explain that “public justice is the greatest kind of show.... Drama. Suspense. And, best of all, education en masse” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 254). The Talib refers to the Hazara massacre in Mazar-i-Sharif, August 1998. The Taliban shot men and boys in front of their families and left them in the streets for the dogs. The Talib explains to Amir his feelings while killing a large number of people: “You don’t know the meaning of the word ‘liberating’ until you’ve done that, stood in a roomful of targets, let the bullets fly, free of guilt and remorse, knowing you are virtuous, good, and decent. Knowing you’re doing God’s work. It’s breathtaking” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 255). The Talib, who appears to be Assef, an old acquaintance of Amir, tells him the reason for joining the Taliban. He reminds Amir that he is not a religious person, neither he is in need for money. Assef mentions that he has a mission, and he explains the nature of his mission to Amir: “Like pride in your people, your customs, your language. Afghanistan is like a beautiful mansion littered with garbage, and someone has to take out the garbage” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 261). Amir gives another description of Assef’s mission that urged him to commit the Hazara massacre; it was ethnic cleansing.

Islam had shaped Afghanistan’s politics and culture; it also determined Afghans’ attitudes and behaviour. Taliban’s involvement in the political realm of Afghanistan had negated Yi Fu Tuan’s description of religion as the source of coherence and meaning in the world. This is because fanatic religious groups had mainly focused on a strict restoration of Islamic law as the only framework for Muslim’s way of life and the country’s politics. The problem is those fundamentalists groups’ notion of Islam does not always fit into the contemporary social and political life. On the other hand, the fundamentalist Islamic groups considered incorporating the western set of values in Islamic societies as betrayal to Islam. Hence, Taliban reacted violently to modernization, and rendered the cultural landscape of Afghanistan into that of fear and chaos. The Taliban violence against Hazara could not erode the fact that the Shi’a people are part of the memory of the place. Hassan became the embodiment of Afghanistan to Amir, and through the entire novel, Hassan signifies a land that is raped and subjugated.

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