

Harmonizing Multiple Identities in Afghan English Literature

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ABSTRACT

The present paper explores the intricate portrayal of multiple identities within Afghan literature written in English. It examines the emergence of this literary genre, its global recognition, and its profound influence on the literary landscape. The article strongly emphasizes the intricate nature of identity formation while shedding light on the cultural richness embedded in Afghan literature, particularly in works written in Dari and Pashto. Significant attention is given to the surge of Afghan literature in English, primarily fueled by the dynamic Afghan diaspora, international literary festivals, and the burgeoning growth of Afghan publishing companies. The article underscores the crucial role of delving into multiple identities within the literature as a means to foster empathy and deepen readers' understanding. Moreover, it highlights the sense of empowerment experienced by the Afghan diaspora through the acknowledgment and celebration of their diverse identities within the literary realm. There is exploration into how literature originating from Afghanistan challenges and counters the preconceived notions held by Western societies. It achieves this feat through the introduction of various perspectives that unveil the complexities inherent in Afghan life and culture. Consequently, it advocates for appreciating diverse cultures and actively encourages empathy by exploring multiple identities within the literature. Ultimately, it invites readers to actively engage with the transformative power of storytelling, aiming to cultivate understanding and forge connections in an ever more interconnected world.

Keywords: Multiple identities, Afghan literature, Afghan diaspora, Intercultural dialogue, Humanizing narratives, Identity formation.

AFGHAN LITERATURE

Afghanistan's heritage boasts a rich and complex chronicle of its literary traditions in both Dari and Pashto. This profound cultural tapestry is interwoven with tales from the past, imbued with historical significance. Throughout the years, these two languages have served as conduits for storytelling, encapsulating the cultural essence of the Afghan people. With their unique cadence and poetic prowess, both Dari and Pashto have contributed to a diverse literary landscape, nurturing a love for words and forging connections across generations.

From ancient folk tales passed down through oral traditions to modern works that reflect contemporary experiences, the history of Dari and Pashto literature chronicles the nation's triumphs, struggles, and resilience. As such, exploring this treasure trove of literary masterpieces can offer valuable insights into the country's vibrant heritage. Pashto and Persian (Dari), both Indo-European languages, are the official languages of the country (Allchin). Dari and Pashto are extensively used in literature, poetry, and other creative pursuits (Pariona).

- Afghan authors who wrote in Dari made impactful contributions to the literature that delved deep into their rich culture. These writers skillfully portrayed aspects of their own beliefs and heritage, delivering a wide range of historical and cultural writings that have been revered for centuries. Through engaging accounts and powerful narratives, these writers have immortalized stories that resonate with readers worldwide. Take Firdawsi, for instance, a renowned poet from the 10th century who penned the *Shāh-nāmeh* - an epic poem comprising nearly 60,000 verses - based on the *Khvatay-nāmak*, a historical account of Persian kings dating back centuries ago (Britannica). This literary masterpiece continues to captivate audiences even today.
- Afghanistan's Pashto literature boasts a lengthy and prosperous past. The largest ethnic group in the country, known as the Pashtun, speak Pashto as their native tongue. Within Pashto literature, various genres prevail, such as poetry, short stories, novels, and historical texts. Renowned poets like Khushal Khan Khattak, Rahman Baba, and Ghani Khan flourished during the 17th and 18th centuries (Khan M). Their works delve into themes of love, war, and spirituality, consequently earning admiration from the Afghan and Pashtun diaspora alike.

In Afghan literature, the thoughts and principles cherished by its people are brought to light. Through the written word, the beliefs and values that hold significance among Afghans find expression. This vibrant literary tradition portrays the essence of their cultural fabric, providing insights into their ideals and worldview. According to Nancy Hatch Dupree :

An innate sense of the essence of their culture sustained Afghans through 24 years of conflict and displacement. Although they continue to cherish the diversity of regional differences, individuals cling tenaciously to their national identity, upholding traditional values and customs that distinguish them from their neighbors.

From the beginning of the twentieth century, attempts to foster unity through nation-building activities in mostly urban areas met with mixed success; the latest attempts to cast Afghans in a puritanical Islamic mould met with disaster. Years of discord stretched the fabric of the society, and national traits once honored hallmarks of the culture were compromised. Yet the fundamentals of the culture remain strong, changed in some ways but readily recognisable as uniquely Afghan. (977)

Afghan literature is characterized by repetitive motifs that mirror the essence of the Afghan identity. This phenomenon can be observed in various literary works from Afghanistan, spanning across different genres and time periods. The recurring themes illuminate aspects of Afghan culture, tradition, and history, embodying the collective experiences and values of its people through diverse narrative strategies. Writers from Afghanistan frequently highlight the significance of kindness, warmth, and friendliness within their society. Additionally, the experience of war and displacement emerges as another prevalent theme in Afghan literature.

The ongoing conflicts and wars have compelled millions of individuals to flee from their homes. Since 1978, there have been only a handful of literary works created in Afghanistan that don't bear the scars of war and violence ("An Observation"). Through their writing, Afghan authors strive to underscore the resiliency of their people in the face of adversity while also shedding light on the profound effects of war upon society and its inhabitants. Many poets in this region celebrate love's beauty and its transformative power, while others delve into insightful explorations of mystical Sufi traditions. Poetry reveals that love and spirituality are equally significant motifs within this literary culture. Thus, with its overarching themes such as community, war, hospitality, love, and spirituality, Afghan literature artfully captures the intricate complexity and diversity intrinsic to Afghan identity.

Afghan writers encounter difficulties that make it arduous for them to express themselves:

- The Taliban regime and the conservative elements in Afghan society have been known to censor literature that they think is immoral. It was reported: The Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in 2021, twenty years after their ouster by U.S. troops. Under their harsh rule, they have cracked down on women's rights and neglected basic services. (Maizland)
- Afghan writers have many times faced threats and attacks for their work, particularly when the work criticizes the government.

Social activism and writing go hand-in-hand in Afghanistan (Reporter). In addition, the current situation in Afghanistan has put the cultural heritage of Afghanistan, like its people and their allies, at risk (Anderson). Despite these obstacles, Afghan writers continue to create literature that captures the nuanced depth of Afghan identity. Their writing offers a distinctive viewpoint on the nation's challenges and triumphs, and they are vital in maintaining Afghan history and culture.

The Growing Afghan Diaspora

In recent years, there has been a substantial increase in the Afghan diaspora, primarily due to political unrest, turmoil, and economic struggles in Afghanistan. Numerous Afghans have sought more stable environments and security by migrating to other countries. This migration trend can be attributed to the conflict and political instability that has plagued Afghanistan over the past decade.

Among those who have left their homeland are skilled individuals who yearn for educational opportunities and lucrative jobs abroad. Additionally, many Afghans choose to migrate as an effort to reunite with family members who were previously displaced. Thanks to the aid provided by international organizations or governments on humanitarian grounds, some Afghan refugees have found new homes in various countries across the globe.

The presence of the Afghan diaspora brings invaluable contributions both economically and culturally to their host nations while still maintaining a strong connection with their Afghan heritage. Moreover, they strive diligently to create a better future for their homeland through their efforts from afar. Khaled Hosseini says:

I have a deep affection and a deep emotional connection with the people there, with the land, with the culture, with the history, and the heritage. I hope my books provide a little bit of insight on what Afghanistan is, beyond the usual storylines that we see in the media about Afghanistan as a breeding ground for terrorism or the Taliban, the opium trade, and the cycles of war (Harris).

Afghan Literature in English

Afghan literature in English has evolved into a rich and varied one that sheds light on the complexities of Afghan society, history, and culture. Although English has become a more common medium for Afghan writers and poets to express their perspectives, reach global audiences, and promote understanding amid ongoing unrest, much of Afghanistan's literary heritage remains rooted in Dari and Pashto. A larger readership now has access to the riches of Afghan literature, largely thanks to works in English. Afghan literature in English explores themes of identity, resilience, family, and the human spirit in the face of adversity through famous poets such as Rumi and Khwaja Abdullah Ansari, as well as contemporary writers such as Khaled Hosseini, Atiq Rahim and Nadia Hashim. This expanding collection helps bridge cultural gaps and provides invaluable insight into the daily lives and experiences of Afghans. It possesses several distinct characteristics:

- Afghan literature in English reflects the complex and intersecting identities of Afghan writers. They often navigate multiple identities and cultural references in their work.
- Afghan writers in English often engage in cross-cultural dialogue, combining traditional Afghan values and history with contemporary literary forms.
- Many Afghan writers in English explore issues of diaspora and resettlement and the complexities of identity formation in a new country. It is rightly said:
Talking about Afghan literature, you are often forced into a discussion on politics. In a “poeticized community” such as Afghanistan, much of what is written, especially poetry, is in one way or another related to politics, not necessarily being political or ideological but *politicized* to various degrees (Widmark).
- Afghan writers often reflect on the themes of war, conflict, and political turmoil.
- Afghan women writers center their works on the unique experiences and daunting challenges that women encounter within Afghan society. Through their powerful narratives, these talented individuals shed light on the intricate web of obstacles that often entangle women, illuminating both the immense strength and resilience exhibited by women in Afghanistan. By providing a platform for these diverse voices to be heard, these writers enrich our understanding of the complex fabric of Afghan society and inspire us all to strive for greater equality and empowerment. Khojasta Sameyee, a young Afghan woman writer in November 2021, said: The main reason that pushed us to write in English was to be able to spread information about the conditions of the Afghan people, particularly women and girls, all over the world. By writing this book in English, a global language, we aim to remind people around the globe to be thankful for what they have in their lives, their opportunities, and their rights. Because in Afghanistan, most people are deprived of their basic rights: going to school, having a voice, the right to vote, and ultimately, being your own person (Noubel).
- Afghan writers, despite facing numerous obstacles, shed light on the relentless resolve, tenacity, and fortitude of the Afghan populace. Their narratives aren't devoid of hope; rather, they exude stories brimming with determination and a profound dedication to building a brighter tomorrow.
- Within this tapestry of recurring motifs lies Afghan literature in English, presenting a multifaceted portrayal of Afghan society—its battles endured, and dreams pursued. In its wake, it manages to cultivate compassion and comprehension among readers across the globe.

The Concept of Multiple Identities

Identity is the accumulation of different variables that distinguish an individual, such as race, ethnicity, gender, culture, and so on. A person's identity is shaped by social environment, upbringing, and personal experiences. Identifying one's identity is difficult because it is not fixed and fluctuates from person to person based on what they have encountered. In the anthology “Exploring Identity in Literature and Life Stories: The Elusive Self,” the authors explore how identity is thematized in literary narratives and other types of narrative, such as life-writings, pathographies, interviews, reading logs, language corpora, film, and theatre (Barstad, Knutsen, and Vestli). The book is about how recognizing people's diversity of opinions, motivations, and values can help to make our societies more inclusive and diverse.

Afghan literature, in all its themes, represents many different identities and images. It is related to Afghanistan's complex and different pasts; Afghanistan is full of many different races and people and their ways of living. Multiple authors from Afghanistan use their writings to examine the frictions and struggles that can occur when different types of identity or heritage coincide. In ‘The Kite Runner’ (2003), Khaled Hosseini presents a clear view of the life of a young Afghan boy, Amir. Amir has Afghan and American identities. Through his different relationships with his Afghan father, his American friend at school, and his sense of guilt and shame; he sets out on his own quest to fit into the world and to find his place between these various identities. A second example could be of Nadia Anjuman, a young woman poet from Afghanistan who spent her life beneath the obscurity of war. A frequent theme in Anjuman's poetry reflects on a number of different facets of her identities as a woman, as a Muslim, and as an Afghan as she faces the complications and anxieties that appear between these many different sides.

Traversing Multiple Identities through Literature

The inquiry into what exactly constitutes Afghan identity has been a reappearing topic throughout diverse forms of Afghan literature. These many literary genres offer countless viewpoints on this intricate and multi-layered subject matter. Novelists, poets, and autobiographers from both within Afghanistan itself and beyond its borders have attempted to delve deeply into the perplexing nature of Afghan identity through their written works. The books "The Kite Runner" and "A Thousand Splendid Suns," by author Khaled Hosseini, provide illuminating insights into Afghan cultural practices, as well as the complexities present within family dynamics and how these can be impacted by war's fallout on individual identities. In addition, Latifa's memoir titled "My Forbidden Face" and Najaf Mazari's fictional piece known as "The Honey Thief" likewise illuminate various facets of Afghan identity in a time fraught with social upheaval and conflict, inviting readers to explore its many dimensions for themselves.

Afghan writers manage to integrate many overlapping identities, reflecting the complexity of their own experiences and the diversity of perspectives within Afghan society. Afghan literature explores intersectionality by manifesting the following:

- Multiple identities
- Cultural hybrids
- Feminist Outlooks and Gender Positions.
- Diaspora challenges
- The impact of war, conflict, and political unrest on individuals because of their gender, ethnicity, religion, or social status.

The following illustrations from Afghan literature explore intersectionality through the inclusion of different identities:

- Khaled Hosseini's 'The Kite Runner' is a novel that traces the journey of Amir, an Afghan boy, from his childhood in Kabul to his life as a grown man in the United States. As the book goes on, a wide range of Amir's distinctive identities are investigated. His character battles with the feeling of guilt, which inserts another layer into his complicated identity as he deals with personal sorrows and cultural conflicts.
- Hosseini's novel, "A Thousand Splendid Suns," vividly portrays the lives of two Afghan women whose paths intertwine amidst the war-torn backdrop of Kabul. Hosseini masterfully weaves a tale that highlights their resilience and bonds forged against the oppressive societal norms and brutality they face. "A Thousand Splendid Suns" is an enthralling narrative that sheds light on the plight of Afghan women while capturing the complexity of their experiences with compassion and authenticity.
- Atiq Rahimi delves into thought-provoking territory with "The Patience Stone," focusing on an unnamed Afghan woman who cares for her comatose husband. Within her monologue lies a profound reflection upon her many roles—as a devoted wife and caregiver for her spouse's well-being—as well as how those roles intersect with her religious beliefs as a Muslim woman within an after-war community. Throughout this story, one encounters themes surrounding gender roles, extended sexual politics, and discerning power dynamics entrenched deeply within Afghani society. Through literature like Hosseini's works or Rahimi's thought-provoking narrative touchstones found within this triptych—a tapestry featuring protagonists bound together by common threads kindled delicately beneath Afghanistan's tumultuous backdrop—our understanding grows attuned to the intricacies defining their varied journeys at once compelling readers to explore their intersections whilst contemplating broader issues affecting individuals existing within complex cultural landscapes.
- Similarly, 'Songs of Love and War: Afghan Women's Poetry,' edited by Sayd Bahodine Majrouhm, takes us on a lyrical journey through the writings of Afghan women poets. Within its verses lie explorations embodying gender dynamics, culture clashes, and boldly personal experiences that offer insight into love's complexities while grappling with themes such as loss and longing for identity amidst challenging circumstances. This anthology serves as an empowering testament to both resilience and resistance.

Importance of Exploring Multiple Identities in Literature

Multiple identities should be explored in literature for several reasons. It illustrates the complexity of the human condition, fosters empathy and understanding, dispels myths, deals with social issues, and stimulates self-reflection. The literature illustrates the complexities of human existence by diving into numerous facets of characters' identities, demonstrating that people are not defined by a single identity but by various overlapping elements.

Additionally, it supports inclusive and diverse storytelling, exposing readers to a variety of viewpoints and promoting a broader understanding of the richness of human existence. Literature that examines many identities can also inspire readers to consider their own identities and the factors that shape them.

The Impact of Afghan Literature in English

The impressive body of Afghan literature in English has achieved significant acclaim through international awards, participation in literary festivals, translation efforts, critical acclaim, reader interest, and academic study. Esteemed author Khaled Hosseini is one example of a recognized talent in the field; with triumphs like the British Book Awards and South African Boeke Prize - such achievements bring greater acceptance for Afghan literature on a global scale.

The growing audience fascination allows for greater appreciation across cultures by deepening intercultural understanding. One cannot help but notice the rise in both reader engagement and enthusiasm for Afghan literature written in English. The academic study of this subject through research has further upheld its importance on a global level. This recognition has certainly been bolstered by various outstanding achievements, such as receiving prominent international awards or actively participating at literary festivals alongside affirmative critical feedback from scholars.

Reader attention remains fervent while scholarly rigor flourishes as academics delve deeper into this complex art form, leading to a growing appreciation for Afghan literature written in English.

Afghan literature in English has emerged as a formidable agent in challenging and reshaping Western perceptions of Afghanistan, offering a compelling and alternative perspective on Afghan life and culture. Afghan literature, with its different themes, complex interpretations, and unique voices, provides a more multifaceted knowledge of Afghanistan beyond the basic clichés and limited renderings that are typically associated with the country. Literature breaks down one-dimensional narratives and allows readers to interact with the rich tapestry of Afghan society by humanizing Afghan citizens, showing their complexity, and spotlighting their dreams, difficulties, and accomplishments. Also, Afghan literature in English acts as a vehicle for cultural depiction, allowing Afghan writers to convey their origins, customs, and values to a worldwide audience, challenging stereotypes and cultivating a deeper awareness of Afghan culture. Afghan literature challenges Orientalist views, showcasing Afghan, English, American, Muslim, and feminist identities and opposing violence and war, highlighting Afghan perseverance and grit. It transcends cultural differences and fosters empathy, contributing to a more inclusive literary landscape. This approach creates spaces for mutual understanding, appreciation, and celebration of diverse cultures and tales, transcending borders, and countries.

CONCLUSION

Afghan English literature has gained global fame, not only because of the wide territory it traverses in terms of identity but also because of the beautiful realization that it gives to the various identities built in the Afghan diaspora. Its utility as a platform to make the diaspora vulnerable and thus powerful is the greatest asset of Afghan English literature. The Afghan English literature also breaks the barriers defined for specific geographical locations and allows understanding and discussion. It marks a validation of all forms of civilization and culture. In this day and age, when we are still struggling for a more comprehensive and non-discriminatory literary world, engaging with such texts actively contributes to growth and acceptance. Culture holds no boundaries, and no culture is superior or inferior.

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