

The Emergent Writes Back: Emergent Ethnic Self-History Recasting Dominant Ethnohistory in Khaled Hosseini's Fiction

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Received: 14-02-2023 **Revised:** 22-06-2023 **Accepted:** 25-06-2023

Abstract

“Anglophone,” “Postcolonial,” “Diasporic,” “Transnational,” “Ethnic,” “Multicultural,” “Cosmopolitan,” and “Emergent” are all umbrella terms that are used to lump together writers who write from the fringes of the Western center. Such writers, however various and different their literary productions are, create worlds in their stories and populate them with characters that defy and counteract many Western essentialist misconceptions about their homelands. In this context, and resonating with Salman Rushdie’s seminal statement— “the empire writes back to the center”—and Smaro Kamboureli’s “the diaspora writes back home” (30), I argue that “the emergent” also writes back as a response to the dominant mainstream discourse. This paper seeks to read Khaled Hosseini’s fiction as an exemplar of an emergent narrative that deals with Afghanistan’s ethnic self-history and voices the gory details that can only be perceived and mirrored through the lenses of an insider. Being a diasporic ethnic writer, Hosseini’s fiction discredits the Western ethnohistory that mainly offers an essentialist depiction of the writer’s homeland, typifying, thereby, the colonial discourse as dominant.

Keywords

Emergent, Dominant, Emergent literatures, Ethnic self-history, Western ethnohistory.

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Introduction

The “dominant” wouldn’t exist if the center was not fringed with the “marginal.” The “emergent,” also, would not come into being if the “marginal” was stifled by its self-induced inertia. The nameless protagonist in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) introduces himself by saying; “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. . . . When they approach me, they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination” (7). As an African-American, Ellison’s protagonist ascribes his invisibility to people’s refusal to acknowledge his existence. This invisible man, defined and therefore ‘othered’ because of his color as well as social class, epitomizes the dilemma of the marginal rendered invisible by the dominant. He also illustrates a state of alterity/subalternity, which Ranajit Guha describes as “an identity-in-differential,” (qtd.in Spivak 80) and which Spivak defines as “a differential space” occupied by people who are different from the elite (80). If the “subaltern cannot speak,” as Spivak argues, not only because it doesn’t have a voice and is represented by its master, but also because it is excluded “from the lines of social mobility,”ⁱ so are the trivialized diasporic ethnic minorities kept on the social sidelines and frozen out from cultural mobility.

This paper seeks to demonstrate that from the marginalized and disenfranchised position the diasporic subject occupies emerges a voice loud and strong enough to drown that of the dominant mainstream. This voice translates in the narratives of the diasporic ethnic writers who aim at retracing and rewriting their histories, cultures, and identities, thereby, disassociating themselves from the essentialist Western representations. The first part of the paper traces the emergence of new subjectivities and defines ‘the emergent’ subject while analyzing its relationship with the empowered mainstream. The second part deals with the emergent writers and their pluralistic narratives set against the monolithic Western representation with their ostensibly “authentic pasts,ⁱⁱ” to use Spivak’s terms. Capitalizing on Cyrus Patell’s distinction between ‘ethnic self-history’ and ‘ethno-history’, the third part aims at reading Khaled Hosseini’s fiction as an emergent narrative that performs “an affirmative sabotage of the remains of imperialism,” to quote Spivak’s newly coined metaphor. It is through the writer’s ethnic self-history of his homeland that he fends off the perpetuated Western ethno-history of Afghanistan.

Tracing the Trajectory of the Emergent

From Multiculturalism to Cosmopolitanism

The margin is no longer a proper space to inscribe one’s story, especially if one has been relegated, held back, forced to remain at the left side of the hyphen, and perceived as a stranger for a long time. “All societies produce strangers,” Zygmunt Bauman avers, and “each society

produces its own kind of strangers” (1). Strangers are defined as those “who do not fit the cognitive, moral, or aesthetic map of the world” charted by the dominant mainstream to mark off its territory (ibid). Such strangers, he elaborates, “by their sheer presence make obscure what should be transparent, confuse what ought to be a straightforward recipe for action,” and “befog and eclipse the boundary lines which ought to be clearly seen,” thus “gestat[ing] uncertainty, which in its turn breeds discomfort” (ibid). Bauman’s concept of the stranger chiefly illustrates the position occupied by immigrants, to whom he refers as “the strangers at our doorsⁱⁱⁱ.” This means that the presence of such strangers in the host country is seen as threatening and subversive to the hegemonic mainstream which is mainly established to maintain conformity and order. According with Bauman’s stranger is Julia Kristeva’s “foreigner” who “is from nowhere, from everywhere, a citizen of the world, cosmopolitan” (30). Thus, being perceived as a stranger and/or a foreigner, the immigrant bearing a hyphenated identity is excluded and ostracized from the host country’s society.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, in 1915, deprecatingly talked about the hyphenated and firmly announced that the US has no room for such strangers and that staunch Americans should prevent their country from becoming “a tangle of squabbling nationalities.” Such a position stems from a deep mistrust of the hybrids— “those who are ‘othered’ by dominant culture” and bear such labels as “transgressors, aliens, inhuman, [and] subhuman,” as John C. Hawley puts it (29). Timothy Weiss also describes the hybrid as being “the product of the interaction of two unlike cultures”— a person whose “identity bears the mark of more than one culture or ethnic group” (42). Simply put, by leaving a homeland behind and putting down roots in new soil, the immigrant/exile forges new ties with the host country and its culture, hence being marked with the two different cultures. In a related vein, depicting the way the hybrids used to be perceived, Umberto Eco maintains that, in the past, they were “essentially considered as ugly, a deformation and a mistake of the natural form” (qtd.in Maver x-xi). Put differently, “proponents of allegedly pure or uncontaminated national or cultural identities,” as Jopi Nyman labels them (10), look askance at people with fluid identities and keep them at arm’s length because they are perceived to be “primarily citizen[s] of a foreign land” whose allegiances belong elsewhere, to use Roosevelt’s words.

Concurring with Eco’s description of the previous perception of the hybrid, Patell describes ethnic minorities living in the US as being “portrayed as different, incomprehensible, inscrutable, and uncivilized—in short, portrayed as “others” who could not be assimilated” (14). Asian-American writers when they first came into existence have also been perceived as “exotic anomalies” (Patell 3). These “citizens of a foreign land” together with these “exotic anomalies,” either forced or willing to leave their homelands, settle in the surrogate country and not only have to contend with the subordinate position they find themselves in, but also face an identity crisis that diasporic subjects undergo; It is when “a minority group is caught between two incompatible identities,” and when “identity [itself] becomes a matter of either/or: either ‘American’ or whatever it is that precedes the hyphen” (Patell 14). It follows that the fluid identity that the diasporic subject gains in the host country are, more often than not, perceived as a conundrum and a hurdle in the way to full integration into the new culture, as the latter requires adopting an assimilationist attitude and dispensing with the vestiges of the immigrants’ ethnicity and culture.

Nevertheless, with the decline of the “monochrome and limited identities on which nation-states are built,” as Hawley states, “notions of hybridity and in-betweenness are [now] seen as potentially positive” (147). Hawley’s argument finds resonance in Eco’s statement apropos the shift in the derogatory classical view of the hybrids, now being supplanted by the perception of the “diasporic literary and cultural hybrids” as “the newly emerging globally nomadic natural and hence beautiful forms, not only as regards post-colonial subject but in abstract” (qtd.in Maver x-xi). Ulf Hedetoft shares the same viewpoint, maintaining that, nowadays, “it is widely acknowledged that ‘hybrid identities’, several homes and multiple attachments are a ubiquitous

fact of life in midst nation-states” (30). In other words, the presence and acknowledgment of people with diverse ethnic, cultural, and national identities in the host country is in and of itself proof that the one-nation-state principle no longer holds in a world veering itself towards cosmopolitanism.

Accordingly, “homelessness,” as Martin Heidegger argues, “is coming to be the destiny of the world” (qtd.in Chambers 1). Heidegger's statement proves that “the logic of 'either/or',” and the dichotomy of “Us vs. Them,” ineradicable as they are and deeply entrenched in any cultural, ethnic and national fabric, are starting to abate in the name of openness, tolerance, and willingness to coexist and engage in a dialogical relationship with the ‘Other’. Such “intercultural dialogue,” contends Igor Maver, “appears a sine qua non of contemporary society in route to a transcultural future, where the sheer preaching of multiculturalism may also echo the fear of the majority being disturbed by the Other who can thus be kept at bay and safely contained” (xi). If anything, this statement unravels the prevalently ambivalent attitude that the dominant majority adopts towards the ‘Other’, which asks that “its specifying cultural difference be accepted,” thus, not only becoming “intrusive” but also demanding (ibid).

Ian Chambers delineates the same attitude of the “advanced” or “first” world “when the third world is no longer maintained at a distance ‘out there’ but begins to appear ‘in here’, when the encounter between diverse cultures, histories, religions and languages no longer occurs along the peripheries . . . but emerges at the center” (1-2). In other words, the ‘Other’—being a stranger, a foreigner, an alien, a hyphenated and an exotic subject in the eyes of the dominant— “is namely quite acceptable as long as it remains the Other” (Maver xi), as long as it assumes whatever identity the dominant culture attributes to it. This imposed identity, however, neither amounts to a status equal to that of the dominant, nor does it connote eradication of power relation linking, and at the same time, setting both cultures apart. The hegemonic group has its strategies to counteract the emergence and divergence of such subversive minority groups. It is by acknowledging their existence and difference but without allowing them to infiltrate its hegemonic ‘comfort zone’.

The dominant mainstream has developed a two-pronged strategy to deal with the threat posed by these strangers. It is either through “annihilating the strangers by devouring them and then metabolically transforming them into a tissue indistinguishable from one’s own,” or by “vomiting and banishing them from the limits of the orderly world and barring them from all communication with those inside” (Bauman 201). In this respect, annihilation is the annihilation of the strangers’ cultural and ethnic differences, which is a prerequisite for full assimilation with the mainstream culture. Vomiting, however, refers to the ostracism and exclusion of these strangers, thus trampling them with “the jackboot made to trample the strangers in the dust . . . and keeping those not-yet trampled but-about-to-be trampled away from the mischief of boundary ignoring” (1). This demonstrates the length to which nation-states can go in preserving the unity and conformity of their social, cultural, and ethnic fabric. Pertinent to the dominant culture's stance towards the marginalized groups is also its use of such terms as “multiculturalism” or “universalism” either to coerce the ethnic minorities into abiding within the narrow confines of their ethnic and “essentialized” identities, without running the risk of having them intermingling with the dominant mainstream, or to force them into suppressing their differences and conforming to the dominant mainstream. In this context, “essentialism,” as defined in the *Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Studies*, “is a viewpoint that attempts to explain the properties of a complex whole by reference to a supposed inner truth or essence” (156). This concept is mainly applicable to (post)colonial subjects who are mainly defined and represented by the dominant colonial discourse which aims at demeaning and devaluing the essentialized cultures. Such systems of representation “create notions of inferiority regarding the colonial subject . . . and reinforce hegemonic control over the colonized by manipulating the dominant modes of public and private representation”

(ibid). Public representation refers to the way the essentialized subjects are regarded, defined, and represented by the hegemonic group. Such a definition is publicly accepted and validated by the dominant group and privately internalized and adopted by the inferior minority, which comes to see itself through the lenses of the dominant. Relevant in this vein is Patell's statement that colonization is not only limited to the colonization of foreign territories, but could also take place at home; since "within its own boundaries, a dominant culture seeks to colonize the imaginations of those whom it has marginalized" (24). In so doing, the dominant culture drives the marginalized to adopt and internalize their inferior position and to abstain from questioning the hegemonic system.

Thus, in the name of 'multiculturalism', not only does the hegemonic culture establish a principle of cultural difference and thus Darwinism masquerading as acceptance of pluralism, but it also guarantees the superiority of its status when compared with other "essentialized," "uncivilized," "a-historic," and "primordial" cultures. Multiculturalism, as a concept, also comes as a denial of the possibility of ethnic evolution, fusion, in-betweenness, or hybridity, as it interprets ethnicity as being "fossilized and immutable" (ibid). Hence, it establishes itself against the principle of change because it threatens its hegemonic position. While multiculturalism differs from universalism in the way it favors difference over universality, it does so by advocating a pluralism that "respects inherited boundaries and locates individuals within one or another of a series of ethno-racial groups to be protected and preserved" (ibid). This accentuates the perversity inherent in the use of such terms, which, through the guise of defending diversity, pluralism, and difference, only serve as a justification for preserving, maintaining, and strengthening the dominant and the hegemonic at the expense of the dominated and the marginal.

This sheds light on the significance of such notions as "multiculturalism," "universalism," and "cosmopolitanism"—thought to be innocuously interchangeable, but transpire to be substantially different, and each of which promotes a distinct frame of reference. Illustrating the differences between universalism and cosmopolitanism on the one hand, and between cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism on the other, Patell quotes David Hollinger's distinction between "a universalist will to find common ground from a cosmopolitan will to engage human diversity" (16). Therefore, if universalism "suppresses difference and perceives it as a potential problem," cosmopolitanism views it as "an opportunity to be embraced" (Patell 16). As regards the difference between multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, Patell refers to the latter's "recognition, acceptance, and eager exploration of diversity," and contrasts it with "the degree to which [multiculturalism] endows with the privilege particular groups, especially the communities that are well established at whatever time the ideal of pluralism is invoked" (17). In other words, for the sake of preserving its hegemonic status without appearing supremacist, the dominant culture invents the "ideal" of multiculturalism which, by favoring diversity and immutability at the same time, makes sure to nip in the bud any emergent cultural form that compromises the hegemonic position. In the same vein, Patell refers to what the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah terms as "cosmopolitan contamination," which is a threat to the cultural purity highly cherished by multiculturalists (17).

This bears out that what the discourses of multiculturalism and universalism aim at building is a stratified world order which is, as Spivak^{iv} observes, "controlled by repressive tolerance," and dominated by hegemonic "pure" cultures defining themselves and their dominance against the inferiority of other cultures. Hence, comparison becomes a form of self-definition, i.e., a prerequisite for the existence of a dominant is the existence of its marginal. Such hegemonic cultural forms pave the way for "the vigilant policing, often associated with fundamentalist regimes or xenophobic political parties" to reign supreme (Patell 17). Accordingly, the facade that multiculturalism displays is that of tolerance, diversity, and pluralism, whereas the core that it hides is the dominant's antagonism towards the "Other," who threatens to "contaminate" and

despoil its supremacist “purity.” In this respect, Hawley believes that “the cultural difference of the historically marginalized, the migrant, the refugee is to be seen as an argument not for equality with the dominant group but for a dialogic equality in which no single (normalized) term would allow the de-privileging of specific subaltern histories and identities” (29). Differently put, what matters most is the marginalized cultures standing an equal chance with the dominant ones to be valued and represented without being overlooked or silenced “by the disciplining gaze of the colonizer” (Hawley 105).

No longer Marginal: On the way to becoming Emergent

The peripheral position of the marginalized, created and all the more aggravated by the dominant, along with an identity that is considered as “a predicament of multiple locations,” as James Clifford declares (255), and analogous to “a state of violence and self-division,” as Patell notes (29), can incite these ‘othered’ cultures to “transform themselves from marginal into emergent cultures capable of challenging and reforming the mainstream” (Patell 20). This recalls Raymond Williams’s concept regarding the ‘emergent’ culture’s potential to challenge the ‘dominant’ one and to impose its principles on the domineering mainstream. Furthermore, abiding in the cultural interstices of two countries can beget a fragmented identity to which the diasporic subject has to acclimatize. Kuortti, in this vein, emphasizes the substantial role the diasporic subject can play in transforming this in-betweenness from “a negative site of fears of losing [one’s] identity” into “a positive site for the affirmation of [that] identity” (3). Thus, only by embracing their alterity along with their fluid identities, cherishing their variegated ethnicities, opening themselves to the new culture of the host country, and most importantly assuming the responsibility of “dispel[ling] essentialist national ideologies and interpretations” (Maver x) can the “Other,” the diasporic, the hyphenated, and the hybrid establish a new status different from that of the marginalized, and rejuvenate their cultural and ethnic identities.

The emergence of such new cultural identities is predicated upon “the enunciation of cultural borders and crossings” (2), as Chambers states, along with a celebration of “a cultural stew whose flavor is constantly changing as immigrants add new ingredients to the mix” of the cultural “melting pot” (Patell 13). This means that “a new cultural politics which engages rather than suppresses difference and which depends, in part, on the cultural construction of new ethnic identities” (227), as Stuart Hall emphasizes, is imperative for the emergence of a sustainable cultural identity that defies the straightjacket of cultural Darwinism, ethnic racism, and national prescriptiveness. This also means that marginalized cultural groups should transcend what Patell (14) terms as the “impasse of hyphenation”—being caught between a rock and a hard place in a state of helpless indecision between a pull-back current towards the homeland’s culture and a push-forward tide towards the host’s culture—neither of which is within full reach.

Emerging from the periphery allocated for ethnic minorities while securing a position in the center also requires that the ethnic minorities revisit and decolonize the notion and significance of the term “ethnicity.” Ethnicity as a concept, Hall propounds, was used in “the discourse of racism, as a means of disavowing the realities of racism and repression” (226). Differently put, the pejorative connotations associated with ethnicity are traced back to and rooted in the discourse of difference and multiculturalism, which eventually boils down to sheer racism. Hall also insists that the term “ethnicity” should be “disarticulated from its position in the discourse of ‘multiculturalism’ and transcoded,” just as the term ‘black’ was disassociated from the negative features assigned to it (227). The racist discourse pairs ‘black’ with ugliness, inferiority, shame, and unworthiness, and it took centuries for the term to be freed of its negative associations. In a similar vein, accentuating the extent to which ethnicity as a concept has been deployed by the dominant discourse to cement its “nationalism, imperialism, racism, and state,” Hall refers to the double standards of the dominant Western nations which, “because [they] are hegemonic, do not represent

[themselves] as ethnicity at all” (227). In this context, Werner Sollors illustrates the two conflicting uses of the term ‘ethnicity’, stating that, against the “universalist and inclusive use” of the term, which concurs with Helen Hughes’s statement; “we are all ethnic” (qtd.in Sollors 219), comes the hegemonic view of ethnicity which “excludes dominant groups and thus establishes an ‘ethnicity minus one’” (219). This concept of ethnicity, to use Dean J. Franco’s words, “reify[ies] the logic of centers and margins” (5). This means that the margin is identified as ethnic, whereas the center is not. This use of the term resonates with Hall’s argument concerning the negative associations ascribed to the term “ethnicity.”

To free the term “ethnicity” from its colonial vestiges and to endow it with appropriate connotations, Hall stresses the need for presenting “a non-coercive and a more diverse conception of ethnicity, to set against the embattled, hegemonic conception” conceived by the dominant discourse (227). Ethnic identity, thus, should be seen as “a powerful identifier” for ethnic minorities, because, as Ashcroft et al. argue, “it is an identity that cannot be denied, rejected or taken away by others” (80). Such a term, they add, should be used to “account for human variation in terms of culture, tradition, language, social patterns and ancestry, rather than the discredited generalizations of race with its assumption of a humanity divided into fixed, genetically determined biological types” (80). If the marginalized ethnic minorities manage to militate against such an abusive use of the concept of ethnicity, and establish an emergent cultural and ethnic identity in the host country, they can start deforming and defying the dominant mainstream and live in a cosmopolitan world where differences are celebrated and changes are sought and welcomed. Accordingly, this suggests the emergent’s “willingness to live at the crossroads of paradoxes, ambivalences, and contradictions—without a model,” as Iliya Troyanov avows (qtd.in Dagnino 41). Troyanov further notes that, against “the custodians of national, civilizational, or religious purity,” a hybrid has to claim “a fluctuating identity, from an imaginary homeland to the next, through a chameleonic existence lived in temporary communities” (ibid). He also explains that, because “the chameleon does not wear a single color but chooses the one that better adapts to the situation,” and because “it produces from within itself the colors of its transformation,” it best depicts the hybrid’s state of being and its potential to “self-determine [its] cultural identity” (ibid), without having to fit in one of the molds designated by the dominant.

Williams’s “emergent,” in this context, is the hyphenated who transcends the hyphen and becomes a cosmopolite who fuses his/ her two halves, without one looking down on the other; the hybrid who finds beauty in its encompassing identity; the marginalized who challenges the boundaries that its inferior position implies; the subaltern who, as Spivak expounds, “embrace[s] a strategic essentialism to counter the effects of colonial and neocolonial oppression” (qtd.in Hawley 175). This “strategic essentialism,” coined by Spivak, confirms that by embracing their peculiar identity, however different, exotic, or fluid, and by uniting with each other, the marginalized minorities can acquire a sense of power to counteract that of the dominant group. Furthermore, preliminary to the emergence of the marginal is its “resistance to dominant discourses and power structures” (*Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Studies* 8). Agency is of paramount importance for the downtrodden since it “presumes certain autonomy and emancipatory possibilities for the [marginalized] subject, usually identified in terms of either insurgency or complicity” (ibid). This calls into mind the dividing principle of “either/or”; *either* with the dominant as its marginal, *or against* it as its “betrayal,” to use Parikh’s terms. In this respect, Parikh defines betrayals as “performances of social difference” on the part of a minority subject when it “confronts (and is confronted with) the conditions of its existence”—being “ex-centric to the dominant political and epistemological regimes of culture and society” (3). Therefore, by recognizing the fertility of their interstitial position, assuming their agency and resistance, and recognizing the power inherent in their insurgency, the marginalized can set the tone for a different community. In this context comes Homi K. Bhabha’s argument that “the seeds

of the alternative community arise out of close attention to the locality of culture, its hybridity, and resistance to the polarizing nature of social hierarchies, all of which have been constructed by the oppressor" (ibid). This "alternative community" is a by-product of the power invested in the emergent culture to challenge the dominant one and establish a different community wherein there exists no cultural subordination or ethnic Darwinism. For such a community to exist, the emergent's voice needs to be heard, and its story articulated.

Emergent Literatures

Writers who straddle two cultures and who "find themselves with one foot inside and one foot outside of the literary mainstream" (5), as Patell maintains, are called diasporic, ethnic, multinational, or multicultural writers, and are also said to be "primarily citizens of a foreign land." Through their texts which are considered "to some degree [as] events" in themselves, as Edward Said opines, these writers reclaim "the 'right' to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege," as Bhabha maintains (2). These emerging "New Literatures," defined by Ashcroft et.al as being an "alternative to 'Commonwealth' and later 'postcolonial' literatures," accentuate "the emergent nature of work from post colonized societies and connote freshness and difference" (150); freshness because they are newly emerging postcolonial narratives, and difference because they are premised upon the politics of challenge and change. This means that these newly-emergent literatures challenge the dominant Western narratives and seek to change the way the sidelined identities, cultures, and histories have been portrayed by the Western colonizer. This concurs with Williams's model of the dialectics of modern culture, in which "the emergent" cultural form is born out of and undergirded by "new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships" with the dominant culture (123). The newness of these emergent cultural forms depends on the perspective of the dominant culture, for, as Patell clarifies, "what is new is what looks new from the vantage point of the dominant" (20). Accordingly, some cultures might be older than what the dominant mainstream might think or admit.

In this context, Patell defines emergent literatures as "literatures that express marginalized cultural identities" and "exist within a certain relation to established literary forms" (2-3). Put differently, these emergent literatures voice the stories of the relegated minorities, and, in so doing, create an antagonistic relationship with the dominant canonical narratives. In this respect, the emergent, "valorizing non-Western culture by the agent of [literary] production, [is] in itself threatening to the idea of a neo-colonial West" (Kuortti and Nyman 72). In other words, as the hegemonic West always devises and reinvents new ways of securing its world supremacy, it perceives as menacing the emergent narratives which restore and assert the richness and value of the marginalized cultures. The emergence of new literary forms ascertaining that "never again shall a single story be told as though it were the only one^{vi}," are strategically countered by the dominant mainstream through what Said describes as a process of "conscious affiliation proceeding under the guise of filiation" (qtd.in Ashcroft et.al 4). Said's reference to affiliation masquerading as filiation illustrates the center's counterinsurgency as a response to the threat posed by the marginal's voice. This retaliation translates into enticing "those from the periphery to immerse themselves in the imported culture, denying their origins in an attempt to become 'more English than the English'" (ibid), hence no longer working against the well-oiled hegemonic machinery. This resonates with Bauman's concept of "annihilating the strangers by devouring them" (201). When devoured, therefore, the peripheral voices are given the illusion of nearing the center and being part of it, therefore they slavishly adhere to the canonical forms and abstain from articulating any opposing viewpoints.

Conversely, emergent writers "realize that they are writing from the margin . . . but feel themselves to be sufficiently empowered to offer a challenge to the center, [as] their goal is not to

enter the mainstream but to divert and transform it” (Patell 14). Subsequently, as Patell clarifies, “[n]o longer is ‘assimilation’ the abiding goal of those who write from the periphery” (12). It follows that, just as the diasporic subject is met with two options when interfacing with the host country’s culture—either to opt for an assimilationist attitude, hence shedding one’s skin and becoming a naturalized citizen, or to embrace one’s hybrid identity without betraying one’s original culture or ethnicity—so is the diasporic ethnic writer swayed by two choices; either to succumb to the temptation of being “not only accepted but [also] adopted and absorbed” (ibid) by the center, or to become an emergent voice challenging the dominant narratives by his/her counter-narratives.

The warp and weft of the dominant literatures is bolstered by the power and influence the Western culture wields with respect to the ‘other’ cultures. Such power is underpinned by the vertical relationship between colonizer and colonized—thus the vertical relationship between the colonizer’s culture and that of the colonized. Therefore, the emergence of a post-colonial narrative “that refers back to the classic and recasts it in a different light” fosters an antagonistic relationship between the “mainstream culture and those practices that it deems ‘deviant’” (Patell 7-12). The emergent voices aim at decolonizing their histories, cultures, and subjectivities from the appropriating grip of the colonizer who marginalizes the subjectivities of “subjugated native peoples, immigrant populations, [and] ethnic, racial, religious, sexual, or other minorities,” as Patell states (21). Accordingly, since, as Frantz Fanon writes, “decolonization is always a violent phenomenon,” (qtd.in Patell 30) the emergent voices have to counter the colonizer’s violation of their history, culture, and identity by a retaliatory discourse, strong enough to delink their history from the Western narratives which bear the colonizer’s stamp and put such derogatory construction on the history of the marginalized subjectivities. Hence, these suppressed subjectivities, so inadequately represented by the colonizer, find in literature a way to restore and assert the value of their histories and cultures.

Ergo, the emergence of these new voices, as Abdul Jan Mohammed and David Lloyd propound, is “the product of damage—damage more or less systematically inflicted on cultures produced as minorities by the dominant culture” (qtd.in Patell 21). This damage manifests itself in different forms, the most debilitating of which is the expropriation of the marginalized minorities’ history, since, “by a kind of perverted logic, [the dominant] turns to the past of oppressed people and distorts it, disfigures and destroys it” (qtd.in Hall 224). Following the logic of George Orwell; “Who controls the present controls the past [and] who controls the past controls the future,” (1984 37), the Western hegemonic systems record the marginalized history in such an iniquitous and essentialist way to secure their utmost hegemony and obstruct any future chance for the marginalized to evolve and emerge. In this vein, Franco affirms that “representations of a culture’s past ought not to amount to arrogant misappropriations that merely serve the interests of the present” (6). Franco’s statement points out the ulterior motive of the dominant literary mainstream behind such a perverse use and abuse of the marginalized history; it is to serve and secure its present status quo—thus, remaining at the center while the ‘other’ is just orbiting without establishing a firm foothold.

Nevertheless, this “traditionally rightist confine of discourse and power,” as Ulf Hedetoft and Mette Hjort indicate, “has now been invaded by a motley gathering of “ethnic” groups, who “from below” seek recognition of their status” (x). Therefore, the birth of new literatures, written by minorities from the periphery, and offering a new reading and a different approach to their histories, “restore[s] an imaginary fullness or plentitude, to set against the broken rubric of the [marginalized subjects’] past” (Hall 225). In this light, if the dominant bastardizes the history of the marginalized and demeans its culture within its master narratives, the marginalized rebirths itself in the form of an emergent literary force and ‘writes back’ to right the wrongs committed by the Western writings. The act of writing back, as Smaro Kamboureli elaborates, “is a response to

this institutionalization of literature,” seeking to “question the values and meanings memorialized in national master narratives, while it attempts to resuscitate cultural memories that have been repressed” (30). Thus, when the emergent writes back, the dominant is confronted with an opposing and different version of history which proves “the inadequacy of [its] conceptual resources and systems of signification” (Hawley 64). When the emergent writes back, it scrapes off “the palimpsestic narrative of imperialism,” its “subtext,” and “subjugated knowledge” (Spivak 76), inscribing, instead, its story on the palimpsest—thus leaving the margin and vying for a place in the center.

Hosseini's Ethnic Self-history versus the Western Ethnohistory of Afghanistan

Western Ethnohistory of Afghanistan

Afghanistan has been a target of colonial endeavors—inaugurated with the British Empire and perpetuated respectively by Russia and the United States which, after the retrieval of its forces in August 2021, has left the country in the throes of the Taliban's tyrannical regime. Much ink has been spilled on studying and recording the history of Afghanistan by the Western intelligentsia especially in the aftermath of 9/11. The terrorist attacks ignited scholarly debates about Taliban, Al-Qaida, Ben Laden, and their orchestrated terrorist plan(s) for the USA and the rest of the world, and led to a retrospective analysis of Afghanistan's history—an analysis that testifies to the way the country is viewed and depicted by Westerners, thus ossifying the general view about the country as being a buffer zone, a war zone, and a womb which nurses terrorism.

Afghanistan's backward social apparatus is focused on in a way to confirm the essentialist Western view of the Other's inability to change or evolve. Gilles Dorronsoro, a political science professor and expert on Afghanistan, strikes the right note declaring that “the way in which alien societies are viewed, infiltrated by [the Western] agendas, tends to create imaginary countries” (5). Dorronsoro's statement underlines the disparity between the marginalized societies' reality and the way the West frames and portrays this reality to serve its colonial agendas. Applicable to Afghanistan, this Western reading of the colonized history represents what Michael Dorris calls the “standard history” which differs from “self-history” (qtd.in Patell 38). This “self-history,” explicates Patell, “is a history written from within particular communities whose stories are either excluded or distorted by the ‘standard history’” (39). Thus the “standard history” is synonymous with the history written by the Western colonizer who hijacks, uses, and abuses the history of the colonized; whereas “self-history” is analogous to the history written by the colonized subjectivities who seek to counter the Western larceny by restoring what is rightfully theirs—their history and identity.

Part and parcel of the identity of the marginalized is its ethnic specificities, which are studied and systematized by the dominant “standard history” and its sub-discipline—“ethnohistory.” Patell explains that, besides being “written from without,” ethnohistory “often provides a wealth of information about ethnic communities but cannot substitute for ethnic self-history, because it tends to represent an outsider's point of view” (39). If the outsider in this case is a colonizer/ex-colonizer, the perspective will not only be dented, but also skewed and partial. Hence, accentuating the immanent differences between the Western “ethnohistory” and the marginalized “ethnic self-history,” Patell's definition constitutes a useful point of departure that helps detect the ways whereby the dominant West pontificates on the history of the dominated East. It also zooms in on the way the emergent writers, as a response to the dominant ethnohistory, ‘write back’ their ethnic self-history. Patell further describes the emergent writers' ethnic self-history as being “intimately connected to personal narratives” and finding roots in things these writers “learn at home or in the streets of their neighborhoods” (39). This means that ethnic self-history, lived and experienced firsthand by these ethnic emergent writers and springing from the intimate knowledge they have about their homelands, is a form of resistance employed to reaffirm

the value and richness of the marginalized cultures. Therefore, ethnic self-history is a form of an emergent narrative produced by ethnic minorities to revisit and recast the orthodox hegemonic narratives.

In this respect, the Western ethnohistory of Afghanistan chiefly consists in documenting and charting the history of wars in Afghanistan and interpreting every other aspect related to the country accordingly. In other words, Afghanistan, being labeled by the West as “the graveyard of empires,” cannot be perceived or depicted as anything other than a country ravaged by invasions and still waging wars. Illustrative of this perception is Feifer’s depiction of “[t]he country’s long history of invasion,” which he thinks “helped spawn a culture of warfare among disparate local tribes and ethnic groups, which fought relentlessly among themselves” (5). Feifer’s statement crystallizes the Western essentialist representation of Afghanistan’s history—being inextricably entwined with war. Afghanistan’s portrait becomes exclusive to a country unsettled by decades of penetrating commotion, societal unrest, political turbulence and sectarian feuds.

Ethnic Self-history in Hosseini’s Fiction

Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan-American writer who put pen to paper and drew a nuanced picture of his homeland through his fiction—so far consisting of three novels; *The Kite Runner* (2003); *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007); and *the Mountains Echoed* (2013). Hosseini qualifies for the title of an emergent writer, since he is the forerunner of Afghan-American fiction, belonging to the Asian diaspora, straddling two cultures, writing from the periphery of the US literary mainstream, and depicting his homeland in a new light through his fiction. What makes Hosseini an emergent writer par excellence, against some readings of his fiction as “assisting the imperial machine,” as Rekha Chitra V.K proposes, is his offering of a kaleidoscopic portrait of his homeland with its culture and ethnicity which establishes itself against the Western depiction of the country.

The writer hopes that his novels evince an authentic and truthful portrait of his homeland that manages to disabuse the international readership of their ingrained misconceptions about Afghanistan. He states^{vii} that he hopes readers realize that Afghanistan “is a country of people very much like just the average people,” and that his fiction “has humanized Afghans to a certain extent, put a personal face on this very distant and foreign country.” As a matter of fact, for many, Afghanistan is synonymous with a tinderbox and is inextricably linked with war, destruction, and suffering. In this respect, the image that Afghanistan conjures up to mind is that of uncharted mountains, backwaters inhabited by burqa-clad women and long-bearded men, and the bloodletting war American troops wage against the Taliban. This essentialist portrait of the country is conceived by the Western hegemonic mainstream, which seeks through its sweeping generalizations to pare down a whole country, with its variegated ethnic and cultural mosaic, into a land that gives birth to terrorism.

In this context, what Hosseini aspires to effect through his narratives is a subversion of the “standard history” of Afghanistan that is represented by dominant Western narratives. Hosseini explains that, “by default, [his] books have also been a kind of chronicling of the troubles in Afghanistan over the last 30 years, and in some ways, they have been windows into Afghan culture and life for many of his Western readers.” In fact, by shedding a much-needed light on the dark side of Afghan’s society and culture, what Hosseini does is not “reinforce the stereotypical boundaries” between East and West despite his attempts at subverting them as Chitra opines (1), but rather paint a more authentic picture of Afghanistan while steering clear of paying lip service to his homeland for fear of being dubbed an Orientalist. While her argument that “it is most often Hosseini’s powerful characterization of Afghan cultural identity that continues to attract readers” reinforces this paper’s premise, Chitra’s statement that the reason why Western readers find the novel relatable is their identification “with a stereotypical, or perhaps “orientistical” way of

understanding the relationship between the East and the West” (qtd.in Chitra 2) is debatable. In fact, through his internationally acclaimed novels, Hosseini lays the foundation for a new conception and perception of Afghanistan, its history and its ethno-cultural identity, thus urging readers to rethink and assess the inculcated stereotypes and generalizations perpetuated by the Western narratives. The novelist states that now his readers have come to “see that there is so much more to Afghanistan than the caves of Tora Bora and the Taliban.” Having been born in pre-revolutionary Afghanistan and spending his childhood there, the novelist experienced firsthand the life and the cultural and ethnic wealth of his country. Thus, Hosseini’s ethnic self-history that permeates his novels stands in stark contrast with the Western ethnohistory.

His first novel, *The Kite Runner*, intimately depicts Afghanistan through the eyes of a young boy, Amir, who spent his childhood in the wealthy district of Wazir Akbar Khan, writing stories and running kites with his friend and servant, Hassan. Afghanistan at that time (1970s) markedly differed from Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion and from Afghanistan under the rule of the Taliban. Women at that time led distinguished social positions, held college degrees and worked as teachers, lawyers and doctors. Amir’s mother was a Persian literature teacher and the crowning glory of her husband. Though the story interlaces true historical landmarks with fictional events, through the characters’ vantage points, readers get to discover the obliterated face of Afghanistan. They meet characters from various social classes; Baba, Amir’s father, a philanthropic man who is socially affluent symbolizes the respectable Afghan dignitary with his ideals of honor, courage, and defiance. He builds an orphanage and defends the honor of a woman whose husband stands helpless while she is harassed by a Soviet soldier. Baba also experiences the life of an exile with his son in the United States, refusing to live on welfare, and choosing instead to work in a gas station and a flea market. The nuanced ethnic fabric of Afghanistan is also illustrated by the differences between the dominant Pashtuns and the less fortunate Hazaras, respectively epitomized by Amir and Hassan. The lives of the two characters are meant to reflect the social and ethnic Darwinism that permeates life in Afghanistan and whose victims are the Hazaras—being perceived as second-class citizens. Hosseini chooses his characters to be epitomes of Afghan people who lived through, suffered, and survived the heavy toll of successive wars.

Assef, Amir’s bully and a Hitler admirer who grows up to be a Talib—a leader in the Taliban fundamentalist regime—illustrates the monstrosity and inhumane practices prevalent during the Taliban reign of Afghanistan during the 1990s. Hosseini does not shy away from putting his finger on the historical wounds that left an indelible mark on the Afghans’ psyches and left them scarred for life. A case in point is Sohrab—Hassan’s son who was orphaned by the Taliban and then later abused and molested by Assef. He epitomizes the toll war has bequeathed Afghan children who had to spend a lifetime coexisting with the traumas of their childhood. Hosseini has been criticized for graphically portraying the religious fundamentalists’ cruelty and chastised for accrediting the Western narratives about the East whose marking characteristic is said to be religious backwardness and fundamentalism. Yet, since it is part and parcel of Afghanistan’s history, the Taliban’s extremist regime cannot be overlooked for the sake of disassociating the country from the Western derogatory narratives. The same can be said for Hosseini’s second novel in which he brings to the fore another uneasy life aspect of his homeland—female subjugation—which has also subjected him to a wave of criticism for reinforcing the Western stereotypes about Muslim women.

Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is set in Herat and Kabul, and features two female protagonists; Mariam, the country girl, and Leila, the town girl. Both women with their different backgrounds defy the Western stereotypes of the burqa-clad, oppressed and, as a result, voiceless Afghan women. If *The Kite Runner* offers the example of an Afghan man of high morals (Baba), *A Thousand Splendid Suns* stars an Afghan woman who exemplifies the courageous, persevering, and compassionate female—Mariam. She survives the brutality of an ungrateful and misogynistic

husband, settles her differences with her husband's second wife, Leila, helps rear her daughter, and in the end, sacrifices herself so that Leila would have the life and the family she always dreamt of. The novel humanizes Afghan women and penetrates the impenetrable veil with which the Western narratives shroud the country and its women. The novel also follows the private lives of characters as they intersect with the country's history which spans the pre-revolutionary era until the post-Taliban period. Readers get to witness the sadness of a mother, who loses her two sons in the war against the Soviets, and get to live the calamity of a daughter who loses her parents in a bomb attack and is presented with two options; either to marry a married man who is twice her age, or to be left stranded in the streets. The novel also dramatizes the brutality exercised by the Taliban whose victims are primarily women.

Again, Hosseini unabashedly highlights the gory details about the atrocities whose primary victims are Afghan women—acquiescing to a considerable extent to the Western depiction of Afghan women being downtrodden by a chauvinistic, male-dominated culture, yet refusing but to endow them with the subversive potential to counteract these very same stereotypes. These female characters experience the injustices of culture and politics that favor and arm men with the confidence and supremacist prerogative over women, yet their courage and resourcefulness galvanize them into acting against their oppressors—therefore illustrating the strength Afghan women possess and the responsibilities they are capable of assuming. In a decisive moment that forever changes both female characters' lives, Mariam saves Leila who was fighting for breath under the tightening grip of Rasheed and, using a shovel, knocks the man dead. Committing murder, she knew she also sentenced herself to death and asks Leila to take the kids and escape with Tariq—her childhood friend and lover. Reflected in Mariam's strength is the unfaltering will of many Afghan women who, despite having all odds against them, still find a will and a way to survive and save their loved ones.

With *And the Mountains Echoed*, Hosseini widens the network of his characters, and again the world of the rich and the poor converge, and the past and the present overlap in a story that starts in 1950s Afghanistan and stretches till 2009. Like the first two novels, Hosseini's third novel is permeated with much realism that infuses the story with vividness and immediacy, rendering Afghanistan more real and familiar to readers. Like the two first novels, also, the figure of the honorable Afghan male is present in this novel and is epitomized by Nabi—the servant who works for the wealthy and enigmatic Mr. Wahdati and who dedicates his life to caring for his master. The havoc that the Soviets, the Mujahedeen, and the Taliban wreaked upon the country and its people is thoroughly mirrored and reflected through the eyes of different characters. The main plot branches off to different storylines, each of which deals with a character, and each character representing a facet of life in Afghanistan; there is the poor Saboor, who has to give up his young daughter, Pari, to a wealthy couple in Kabul; There is the step-mother, Parawana, who hides skeletons in her closet that nobody knows of, and is haunted by her past and the sister whom she rendered crippled and later on escorted to the desert where she left her to die; there is the brother, Abdullah, who has to part with his precious sister at such a young age, and lives his life with the hope of reuniting with her; There is Adel, the son of Commander Sahib, the warlord who lives lavishly on the fortune he makes off his criminal military acts; There is Timur Bashiri with his cousin Idris Bashiri, the two exiles who come back to Afghanistan after the Taliban's defeat. This set of characters confers upon the story much realism and opens a window for readers to gaze at the realities lived by Afghans at different eras without the meddling lenses of an outsider.

Conclusion

Emergent narratives have come to be the norm nowadays and not the exception. They are gaining momentum thanks to the multiple voices that surfaced from the depths of oppression to contend with the oppressor. As an exile who was torn-off from his homeland and who lived the unhinging experience of re-settling in a Western country, Hosseini exemplifies an emergent writer whose narratives and the different voices he ascribes to his nuanced characters weave a living tapestry of his homeland. He doesn't shy away from the deep-seated troubles his country has undergone over the last 30 years, nor does he gloss over to brutality of the conflicts that rendered his country a powder keg. He rather depicts his country in a different light, which proves that, besides the dilapidated and impoverished infrastructure, the war-torn community, and the illiteracy that supplanted the Afghan rich intellectual legacy, there is another facet that remains concealed behind the Western constructions. Hosseini's ethnic self-history proves the extent to which the Western ethnohistory of Afghanistan is limited, partial, and most importantly essentialist.

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