

Code-Switching as a Strategy of Cultural and Identity Assertion: An Analysis of Khalid Hosseini's Novels *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Kite Runner*

التناوب اللغوي كاستراتيجية لتأكيد الهوية والثقافة: تحليل لروايات خالد حسيني "ألف

شمس مشرقة" و"عداء الطائرة الورقية"

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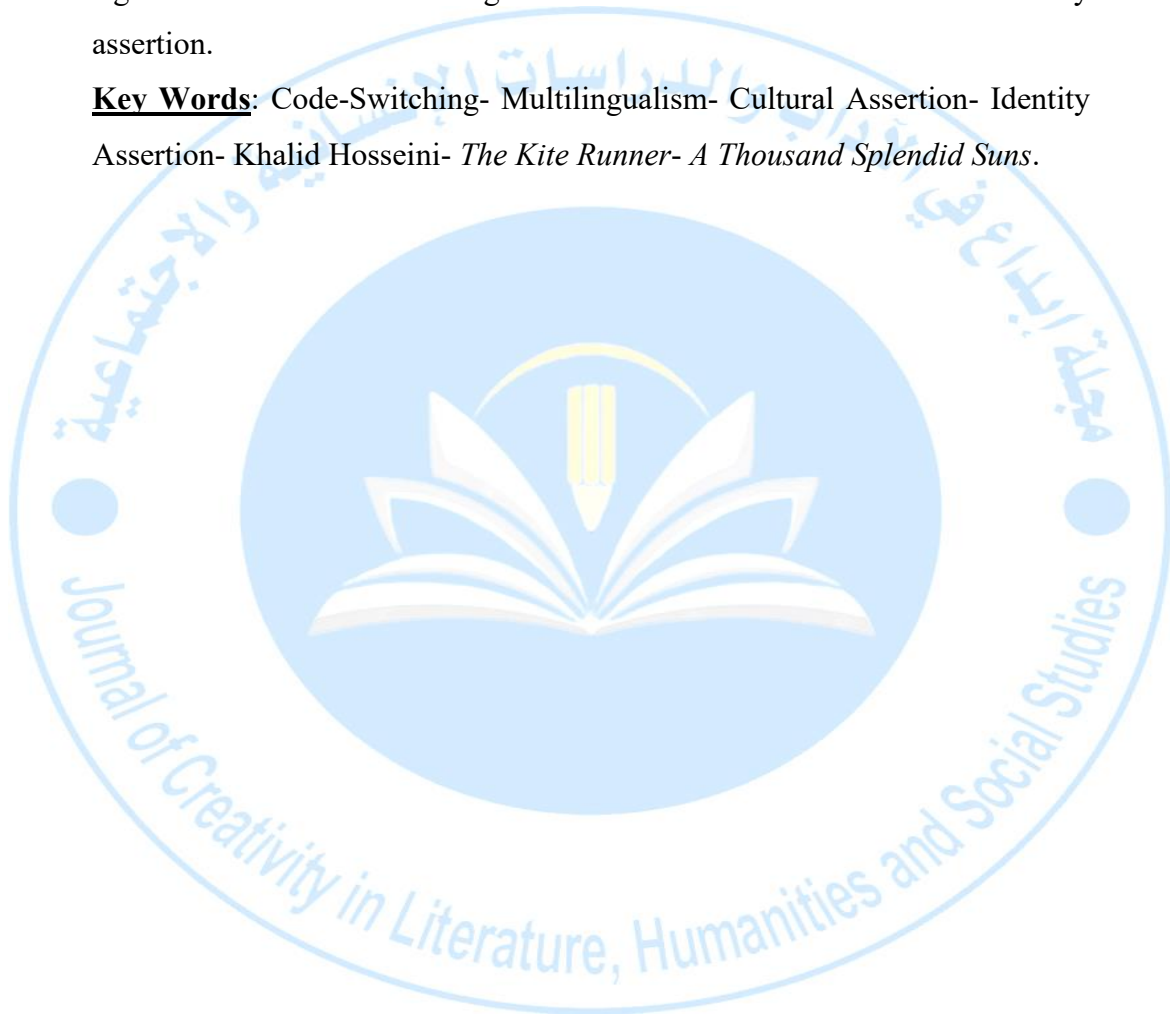
Abstract:

This study investigates code-switching as a translation strategy in Khalid Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Kite Runner*, examining its role in articulating cultural identity and negotiating spaces between Afghan and Western contexts. By analyzing instances where Hosseini employs Dari, Pashto, and culturally specific expressions within English narration, the research highlights how code-switching functions beyond linguistic variation, serving as a marker of authenticity and cultural memory. Drawing on sociolinguistic theories of code-switching and postcolonial perspectives on language and identity, the study argues that Hosseini's selective use of multilingualism is not ornamental but deliberate—asserting Afghan heritage, evoking communal values, and challenging the dominance of monolingual literary norms. Ultimately, the analysis demonstrates how Hosseini's novels exemplify code-switching as a literary tool that affirms identity, preserves cultural resonance, and mediates the complexities of global readership. Code-switching is a sociolinguistic phenomenon that refers to the shift between various languages in speaking or writing and it is employed by speakers or

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authors for different linguistic, social and political reasons. The methodology in this study follows a descriptive approach to analyze data concerning code-switching that Hosseini employs in his two novels. This study examines the significance of code-switching in the formulation of cultural and identity assertion.

Key Words: Code-Switching- Multilingualism- Cultural Assertion- Identity Assertion- Khalid Hosseini- *The Kite Runner*- *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.



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Definition of Code-switching:

Myers-Scotton (1993) refers to Code-Switching as “the selection by bilinguals or multilinguals of forms from an embedded and the model of matrix and embedded language. While Spolsky (1998) defines Code-switching as the phenomenon which occurs when bilinguals switch between two common languages they share in the middle of a conversation, and switching takes place between or within sentences; this involves phrases, words, or even parts of words. Code-switching is also known as linguistic alternation.

In his book *Bilingual: Life and Reality*, François Grosjean defines it as: “The alternate use of two languages, where a speaker completely shifts to another language to say a word, phrase, or sentence, and then returns to the main language”. In this context, bilingual individuals engaged in code-switching generally speak in one primary language, but briefly switch to another for specific expressions before returning to their base language. It’s also important to note that code-switching doesn’t always happen between two different languages. It can also occur within the same language—such as switching between formal and informal registers or from Modern Standard Arabic to a local dialect and vice versa. Code-switching can be used to show group belonging, assert identity, exclude someone, elevate status, or demonstrate expertise. Grosjean notes that: Sometimes, a suitable word or expression simply doesn’t exist in the speaker’s main language, prompting them to switch. It may signal affiliation with a certain social group—especially for people living in a country where a different language is

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spoken—or assert cultural or linguistic identity. Moreover, It can also show solidarity—for example, switching to a language understood by a newcomer to help them feel included.

Types of code switching:

According to Dr. Ali Al-Mana'a's book *Sociolinguistics*, there are **three main types** of code-switching:

1. Inter-sentential Code-Switching (between sentences)

This occurs when a speaker finishes a sentence in one language and starts the next sentence in another.

Examples:

- سأذهب إلى السوق *What do you want me to buy?*
(I'm going to the market. What do you want me to buy?)
- أخبرتها عن سيارتي الجديدة *I called my sister*
(I called my sister and told her about my new car.)

2. Intra-sentential Code-Switching (within a sentence)

This happens when a word or phrase from another language is inserted into a sentence that's otherwise in a different language.

Examples:

- ذهبت إلى المطعم وطلبت *grilled chicken.*
(I went to the restaurant and ordered grilled chicken.)
- I am really مشغول *اليوم*
(I'm really busy today.)

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3. Tag-Switching (at the end of a sentence)

In this type, a short word or phrase—often a comment or expression—is added at the end of a sentence in a different language.

Examples:

- You called her, صح؟
(You called her, right?)
- I don't know why. أشعر بالتعب الشديد اليوم،
(I feel extremely tired today—I don't know why?)

The two constraints theory:

According to Sankoff and Poplack (1981), two primary constraints govern when and how code-switching can occur.

1. Free Morpheme Constraint

This constraint states that code-switching can only happen at points where the switch does not break apart a bound morpheme from its base. In other words, the inserted word must be a complete, independent lexical item that fits phonologically with the language in which it appears.

Example: I have to أكتب my homework.

Here, the English sentence incorporates the Arabic verb أكتب (“write”) at the point of a full lexical item, without disrupting any bound morphemes. The switch aligns with the boundary of a free morpheme.

2. Equivalence Constraint

This constraint suggests that code-switching tends to occur at places

in a sentence where the grammatical structures of both languages line up, so that the rules of neither language are violated.

Example: *Could you bring the ماء to the table?*

In this case, the English structure allows the insertion of the Arabic noun ماء ("water") at a point where the syntactic patterns of both languages match, preserving grammatical integrity.

Analysis:

The most prominent feature of Hosseini's writing style, and particularly in his appropriation of language, is code-switching. Hosseini's usage of code-switching is clarified and evidenced through examples from the two selected novels. In linguistics, code-switching refers to the simultaneous and syntactically and phonologically appropriate use of more than one language (Gardner-Chloros, 2009, 12). It refers to the alternation of languages within the same text, sentence, or constituent, where the practice involves moving back and forth between two languages or between two dialects or registers of the same language at the same time (Nordquist); this is also known as code-mixing and style shifting. Linguists study code switching to examine when people do it. For example, under what circumstances do bilingual speakers switch from one language to another? Sociologists study it to determine why people do it; for example, how it relates to their belonging to a group or the surrounding context of the conversation (Nordquist, 2019, 56).

Notably, Hosseini extensively uses code-switching, bringing change in the modes of expression. Multi-dialectal writers use this device, and it serves as an interweaving mode of illustration. The writer moves between variations of

languages. Fern Johnson sees that "the usage of code switching is to align speakers with others in specific situations (e.g., defining oneself as a member of an ethnic group" (Johnson, 2000, 184). Code-switching also functions to announce specific identities, create certain meanings, and facilitate particular interpersonal relationships. Hosseini is appropriating the potentialities of language, especially code-switching, to conform, through language, the spirit of modernism.

Most of the examples of code switching found in the novel belong to Intersentential code-switching which refers to a certain type of code switching which means the alternation in a single discourse between two languages, where the switching occurs after a sentence in the first language has been completed and the next sentence starts with a new language (Appel & Muysken, 1987, P. 118). It occurs within a clause or sentence confirming the rules of both languages. Code-switching creates a dialectical interplay between familiarity and unfamiliarity so that, at times, we are reassured that the protagonists are just like the us-their world is also our world-while, at others, we are shown worlds of experience that are entirely and shockingly unlike our own.

For instance, instead of giving only a translation of a patriotic song, the author prefers to code switches and presents verses of *Ustad Awal Mir's* Pashto song first " *Da ze ma ziba watan, da ze ma dada watan*". This is our beautiful land; this is our beloved land (Hosseini 151). Instead of adapting the couplet into English, the author's deliberate choice to use it in its original form is part of his political-cultural stance throughout the novel, satiating his

own instinctive inclinations towards his culture which may not be satisfactorily expressed in any other language (Appel & Muysken, 118).

On another occasion, Hosseini code switches and writes *zenda baad Taliban* before giving its translation: “On it, someone had painted three words in big, black letters: *zenda baad Taliban!* Long live the Taliban!” (Hosseini 246). Maybe; Hosseini wants readers to see the proclamation as it is written in a language other than English. Likewise, he code- switches in several other places in the novel, such as you woke up the baby.” Then, more sharply, “*Khosh shodi?* Happy now?” (Hosseini 213). No, *na fahmidi*, you don’t understand.” (Hosseini 41) which is considered an insertion of discourse markers or Tag-switching which is also common in the novel: “That it was my fault. *Didi?* You see’ (Hosseini 6). Didi has been used here in place of a discourse marker ‘you see’. Further, there are some examples of intra-sentential code-switching which is within a clause or sentence boundary or mixing within a word boundary (Gardner-Chloros 31). For the last two years, Laila had received the *awal numra* certificate (Hosseini 103). Here, two languages within one sentence.

Since the events of the narratives take place in a Muslim country, so Hosseini cleverly uses many Islamic terms in order to remind us that the events of the novel are happening in a different setting, and in a different culture, adding to the story's novelty and interest. The greeting ‘salaam’ is deeply rooted in the Islamic culture of Afghanistan and saying ‘*Khala Jan*’ is a strong indicator of the family bonds in this traditional society. *Bismallah-e-rahman-e-rahims*, (Hosseini 317), *Salaam alaykum* (Hosseini 351). Since no

equivalents of these religious/cultural expressions are possible in English, Hosseini retains them as such in the text.

Other religious terms such as *azan* (Hosseini 56), *muezzin* (Hosseini 157), *namaz* (Hosseini 15) *sajda* (Hosseini 75), and *masjid* (Hosseini 346) are abounded in the novel; these words do not have their equivalents in English, though *azan* can be translated as 'a call for prayer' yet doing so will not convey its full associated religious significance. Hosseini also employs words like *pakol* (Hosseini 123), *chapans* (Hosseini 29), *tumbans* (Hosseini 183). The use of two different words like *burqa* (Hosseini 59) and *hijab* (Hosseini 20) asserts the difference between them in Islamic cultures and that the exact equivalents cannot be found for these terms in English.

The following expressions also bring out the psyche of language. "*La illah u ilillah*. What did I say about the crying?" (Hosseini 58). While *la illahu ilillah* means there is no God but Allah and *Wallah* or *billah* are Arabic utterances, they are used here as exclamations signifying amazement, disbelief, and anger. It is an expression of the characters' Islamic orientation, deeply rooted in their language. *Wah wah* (exclamation of delight, bravo!). Similarly, when a Talib announces the radio, he says, "Listen. Listen well. Obey. Allah-u-akbar" (Hosseini 249). Instead of using the English translation of Allah-u-akbar, God is great, the writer prefers to code switches to the actual expression which is in fact a slogan and signifier of strength and power in Muslim discourse.

At a casual glance, the reader notices another feature used in Hosseini's style of writing which is glossing. Glossing is generally defined as "an explanatory comment or note added to the text of a book". It is "words of

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explanation or translation of a foreign or strange word that needs explanation". Glossing can be a word, a sentence or a clause qualifying the non-English word. It is one of the most common devices used by authors in cross-cultural texts. The glossed words are the manifestation of cultural distance. For example, '*an inqilab*, a revolution' (Hosseini 101-102), '*Didi?* You, see?' (Hosseini 6), '*Chup ko*. Shut up.' (Hosseini 89).

In *The Kite Runner*, For instance, Hosseini tells readers all the names of the wedding ceremonies in Afghanistan, through Amir's marriage: *Khastegari* means suitor, *Lafz*: the ceremony of "giving word", *Shirini-Khori* (eating of the sweets ceremony): engagement party, the *nika*, the swearing ceremony, *awroussi* the wedding ceremony and a *Yena Massaf*: where they gave the bride and the bridegroom a mirror and throw a veil over their heads and they gaze at each other's reflection. So, here the reader becomes acquainted with the names of all the steps of marriage in the Afghani culture, which shows Hosseini's novels as very informative texts.

However, Hosseini does the glossing in reversed order in order to reverse the positions accorded to both languages. This is found in examples as 'Thank you. *Tashakor*' (Hosseini 55), 'my flower, *my gul*' (Hosseini 207), 'the queen, *the malika*' (Hosseini 200), '*tasbeh* rosary' (Hosseini 16), '*chapli* kababs' (Hosseini 337), '*inqilabi* girl' (Hosseini 101) (revolutionary girl), like "I am *moftakhir* Proud. (Hosseini 131) *la illaha il Allah, Muhammad u rasul ullah*. There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His messenger.

Another clear example comes in *A Thousand splendid Suns* concerning glossing as the use of the word *harami* (Hosseini 4); most English-speaking western readers are not likely to be aware of the meaning of this word.

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However, when Hosseini repeatedly uses it, readers get the meaning in context and feel the sting attached to it: You are a clumsy little *harami*, "This is my reward for everything I've endured, an heirloom-breaking, clumsy little *harami*." (Hosseini 4). He first wants the reader to understand it unaided and does the glossing in its fourth occurrence. Such glosses indicate an implicit gap between the word and the referent. This gap turns the glossed word into a cultural sign.

Apart from this being a language strategy, it may also be noted that the intensity attached to this word in an Eastern society like Afghanistan may not be the same as in most European and American societies. Therefore, the use of *harami* significantly differs from its Standard English counterparts like 'bastard' and euphemistic expressions like 'love child' as it entails a vast cultural/religious background embedded in social norms and beliefs. Further, a child born out of marriage is an accepted matter in the US society and it may be legitimized if the couple decides to do, but in eastern societies, there is no tolerance in issues like these.

In the same context but in another instance, for example, instead of saying "until she became pregnant", Hosseini prefers to say "Belly began to swell" "Nana had been one of the housekeepers. Until her belly began to swell" (Hosseini 6); (which is the literal translation of the Persian expression spoken in Northern Afghanistan, that is, *Shikam in zan bramadah*) (lexilogos.com).

Hosseini here highlights the difference between becoming pregnant and being with swollen belly. Belly began to swell ... explains that though Nana does not announce that she is pregnant, believing it to be illegal and shameful, her belly starts disclosing her pregnancy. The estrangement of the

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expression in this example of translation equivalence marks the difference between the cultures of the two languages. This strategy leaves a room for the writer to plunge the native setting, perceptions and beliefs.

Another strategy of conveying the sense of cultural distinctiveness that Hosseini uses is leaving the words un-translated. Sometimes such words are left un-glossed within a context to give their meaning. Most of the time in cross-cultural texts, it is the parenthetical translation of words that indicates the cultural difference. The casual reader may have difficulty keeping track of the places, people, and events because the names and other terms are not typical American, English names. Words and names like Assef, Sohrab, agha, and others may be somewhat confusing at the beginning but they generally defined or explained through the context of the story. For example, the word “*agha*” is never fully defined but through the context the reader can be regarded as a reference of respect. Another example is the word “*Kolba*”(Hosseini 3) left unglossed in the beginning. When Hosseini glosses it, he is not content with a single word; rather, he places it in context, thereby constructing meaning around the word. Then finally the way of its construction is elaborated which installs a gap between *Kolba* and hut. The description highlights the implicit gap between the word ‘*Kolba*’ and hut:

Jalil and two of his sons, Farhad and Muhsin, built the small *kolba* where Mariam would live the first fifteen years of her life. They raised it with sun-dried bricks and plastered it with mud and handfuls of straw. It had two sleeping cots, a wooden table, two straight-backed chairs, a window, and shelves nailed to the walls where Nana placed clay pots and her beloved Chinese tea set (Hosseini 10).

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Leaving words un-glossed/un-translated allows the selection of certain un-translated lexical items to keep the cultural distinctiveness intact. This device gets additional importance due to the fact that it does not only highlights the difference between cultures, but also points to the effectiveness of discourse in explaining cultural concepts, and actively involves the readers in the contexts to find meanings. Hosseini makes use of those untranslated words extensively that students and readers of his books write a full glossary for the non-English words.

Hosseini uses the Farsi language to create the setting and to bring the reader into Afghanistan and its traditions. The various myths, legends and words that are integrated into the novels form the essence of the culture. Like the use of the word *Yelda*. In Afghanistan, *Yelda* is the first night of the month; night in winter and the longest night of the year. Amir describes "after I met Soraya Taheri, every night of the week became a *yelda* for me". The metaphor of the *yelda*, the darkest and longest night further outlines the significance of his feelings for Soraya. However, at the same time, with the mention of *yelda*, readers also are brought back to Amir's past and the things that he and Hassan did together:" As was the tradition, Hassan and I used to stay up late; our feet tucked under *the Kursi* ... I read in my poetry books that *Yelda* was the starless night tormented lovers kept vigil, enduring endless dark, waiting, waiting for the sun to rise and bring their loved one" (Hosseini 143).

Another example word peculiar to the writer's culture is *Jinn* (Hosseini 3) with an altogether different concept when compared to its meanings in West societies. A *jinni*, in South Asian countries, is considered to be an invisible

power. As it happens to Mariam's mother, Nana expresses her apprehensions even before committing suicide: "I will die if you go. The *jinn* will come and I will have one of my fits. You will see I will swallow my tongue and die" (Hosseini 26). This state of mind stems from a whole worldview and faith system. Therefore, for most western readers (and for many educated people even in Afghanistan, it would only be superstitious to believe in such supernatural creatures. Perhaps for this reason, Hosseini uses this word instead of ghost or witch or fairy similarly.

The use of metafiction is also a characteristic of cultural and identity assertion that Hosseini tries to reflect. Hosseini also uses the epic form, especially the *Shahnameh*- Persian poetry book- in the novel in a symbolic way. *Shahnameh* is not the only thing Hosseini mentions, He reminds the reader of Titanic movie, of old Afghan songs and poetry, of famous writers and poets, of National Geographic channel, he gives a detailed description of pictures of daily life even when talking about Soraya's attempts to get pregnant, he mentions details about the medication she took "Cervical Mucus Test.... Hysteroscopy... Clomiphene, and HMG..... (Hosseini 185-186), Hosseini uses details from different fields on purpose. He benefited from his profession as a physician.

The use of word *Kichiri* Rice (Hosseini 15) is intentional as the writer finds no apt English substitute. Halwa (Hosseini 223), kofta (Hosseini 145), *oush* soup (Hosseini 145), *daal* (Hosseini 62), *sabzi* (Hosseini 15) *qurma* (Hosseini 71), etc. are some other words from the Eastern cuisine. Since these are cultural-specific words, they remain un-translated, just as in the names of French and Italian dishes cuisines are retained as such. Replacing

such terms with two or three words to explain makes no sense and even then, the concept remains vague. The word *halwa*, for instance, can be translated in English as a sweet/ dessert like pudding but this explanation fails to make one understand what *halwa* is in oriental culture.

Another distinctive feature in the language usage is syntactic fusion. It is the combination of two different linguistic structures mixing the syntax of the local language with the lexical forms of English. It results from the influence of two linguistic structures. Here Hosseini uses native words, though applying the syntactic and grammatical rules of English syntactic fusion. For example, he uses plurals like *chapans* (Hosseini 38), *hamwatans* (Hosseini 92), *wahshis* (Hosseini 283), *garis* (Hosseini 28) and *haramis* (Hosseini 100).

Moving to another point, Sara Laviosa comments on Isabella Vaj, the Italian translator who translated Hosseini's two novels into Italian, sharing her experience in translating Hosseini's writings:

Vaj's translations are forms of transculturation, as is evidenced by the transposition of Farsi (Textually and Para textually in a bilingual glossary) and of various aspects of Afghan material culture as well as the author's distinctive register of reality (Vaj, 2015, 103)Indeed, as Vaj observes, a word transmits a world which another even though it possesses a perfect equivalent. As an example, she chooses the word bread, universal and yet imbued with intimate meanings. So, *naan* is a type of bread, but this translation demeans, in her view, the reality of *naan* baked in the tandoor, the ancient oven made of clay, which is different from any other bread in the world (Vaj, 2015, 95). The words of the mother tongue, as Vaj writes, express a unique material and

affective reality; they preserve the flavors, smells the colors of the world of childhood. The word *naan* evokes the color of honey and the smell of clay and charcoal, which render Afghan bread unique. Also, Vaj reveals the Arabic origins of some of the Persian words and expressions used by Hosseini in his fiction (Vaj, 2015, 95).

Conclusion:

In conclusion, readers of Hosseini's novels sometimes understand the meanings of the words in the contexts of his narratives, and other times the readers exert an effort and search for the meaning of these words. One reader explains the book's appeal thus: "It is foreign in language at times, in metaphor some of the time and in detail of situation almost all the time" (Aubry, 2011, P. 25). Hosseini could cross the borders between nationalities and ethnicities, and brilliantly describes the atmosphere of his country. He brilliantly describes vivid images, considering that the reader is alongside him in the pages to the extent that it makes him/ her almost taste the pomegranate, smell the kebab cooking, and hear the jagged noise of bazaars, inhale the smoke and dust, and ache. A mark of great books is that they can smoothly remove readers from their patch of the universe and submerge them in another world altogether within its strangeness and its unfamiliarity; they recognize themselves, their humanity, in its story.

Despite the texts', "strangeness" and "unfamiliarity," the reader identifies himself /herself with the story, feeling as if he/she embodies humanity in all its heterogeneous manifestations. While scholars ... argue that the sympathy articulated by readers of the novels often synthesizes a sense of sameness and a sense of otherness, exemplifying a fertile tension, which mediates both their

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perceptions of the represented foreign characters and, at least in the moment of reading, their perceptions of themselves (Cheung et al., 2010,62). The texts achieve a powerful universality due to its dual sense of both familiarity and strangeness. This universal acclaim protects the texts from being categorized according to these two extremes.

As an alternative to these two approaches, there is a mode of reading that accommodates both the sense of familiarity and the sense of foreignness those texts inspire: The issue is to stay alive to the works' real difference without trapping them within their original context or subordinating them entirely to the immediate moment and needs. An emphasis on universality can be a powerful aid in protecting the work from either of these extremes, so long as this universality isn't created by a process of stripping away much of what is really distinctive about the work (Aubry, 2011, p. 26).

Hosseini's incorporation of the two languages was so natural and smooth and does not irritate the reader but rather adds to the uniqueness of the texts. He is successful enough to make his written texts interesting and catchy. The texts seemed to be a random juxtaposition of the two languages; however, they are a developmental interlanguage which manifests cultural and sociolinguistic motifs. Hosseini succeeds as a modernist novelist in attaining uniqueness in his style of writing; he breaks the traditional techniques in form and content. He is a writer of the modern generation who succeeds in transiting them totally to his country's history; a traditional journey with an untraditional vehicle.

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The presence of code-switching in Khalid Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Kite Runner* demonstrates how literature can preserve the nuances of cultural identity within global narratives. By allowing Afghan words, values, and traditions to surface in English prose, Hosseini reclaims space for voices often marginalized by dominant linguistic and cultural frameworks. This strategy does more than mark identity; it reminds readers of the layered realities of diaspora, where language becomes both a site of loss and a means of survival. Hosseini's novels suggest that multilingualism in literature is not merely an aesthetic choice but a gesture of resistance, memory, and belonging. For readers and scholars alike, this highlights the potential of code-switching to challenge cultural erasure while fostering empathy and recognition across borders.

At the same time, Hosseini's use of code-switching opens avenues for further exploration. Future research might compare his strategies with those of other diasporic and postcolonial writers, investigating how linguistic hybridity functions across different cultural and linguistic landscapes. Such studies could also examine the reception of code-switching by diverse readerships, asking how multilingual texts are understood, embraced, or resisted in global literary circulation. In this way, Hosseini's novels serve not only as powerful narratives of Afghan identity but also as a starting point for broader conversations about language, culture, and the evolving dynamics of world literature.

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