



Literary Representations of the Horrors and Brutalities of Armed Conflict: A Study of War Imagery in Khalid Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

¹ Zia Ur Rahman ² Aziz Ahmad ³ Abid Ali Khan

¹ Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, University of Malakand, KPK

² Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, University of Malakand, KPK

³ M. Phil Scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, University of Malakand

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*Corresponding author: (Z. Rahman)

zia.iu@gmail.com

Abstract

Afghanistan is known for its long history of war and conflict. Since the invasion of the Soviets, the country has been facing subsequent invasions from other powers as well as internal conflicts among different religious sects and political groups for gaining power. Due to this history of turmoil and conflicts, the people of Afghanistan were severely affected. Many of them were displaced and migrated to other countries while those who remained suffered from the horrors and brutalities of war. It also caused them great physical, economic, and mental losses. During this era of absurdity, mental depression, and chaos writers felt the urge to express new experiences and realities in new ways, and thus war became a dominant theme in the writings of many Afghan writers. One among such leading authors is Khalid Hosseini who has realistically and boldly reflected the life of Afghans during wartime and brutal realities of war in his novels. The current study probes into the author's dealing with the war subject through the use of imagery in his novel 'A Thousand Splendid Suns' published in 2007. The main objective of the study is to highlight how imagery has been a useful tool in the hand of the novelist to depict the brutalities and horrors of war. For this purpose, a qualitative research approach is adopted which includes an introspective and contrapuntal reading of different quotations and excerpts from the novel in the light of the theoretical framework adopted from Cuddon (1994). The key findings of the study are that imagery has been a useful tool in the hands of the writer for revealing the horrors and brutalities of war such as; mental trauma and chaos of characters, the portrayal of War Driven Landscape, nostalgia for the lost Cultural Heritage, separation of the loved ones and disintegration of social fabrics and physical violence against the civilians.

Keywords:

War and Conflict,

Alienation,

Chaos,

Afghani Fiction,

War Horrors

Introduction

War is always brutal and ugly since it involves aggression, violence, and destruction. It involves multiple strategies and techniques of suppressing the opponents with violent force and combat actions. The literature of war has existed since the first literary texts were written. (Calloway, 2013). The war era is characterized by various horrific features such as the Holocaust, violence, and terror. Other horrors include homelessness, displacement, hunger, and economic challenges. Wars also cause the separation of thousands of families and children are left fatherless or motherless. These effects are not only physical but also psychological and mental.

Afghanistan has suffered continuous and brutal civil wars since the late 1970s. The country has been arbitrated by numerous incidents like the Soviet invasion, civil wars, the Taliban regime, and ethnic conflicts. The war

times have been a time of deep mental trauma for all Afghans living in any part of the world. The beautiful land was deserted as a result of frequent wars. The country not only faced internal conflicts for the gain of power but also brutal external invasions. Ranging from Daud Khan overthrowing King Zahir Shah to the American invasion and subsequent chaotic withdrawal, the people of the country still face an uncertain and bleak future. The author himself has referred to this fact in the novel, “And that my young friends, is the story of our country, one invader after another.” (Husseini, 2007, p.144)

Literary writings produced during war and conflict adopt various innovative strategies and techniques for the portrayal of the war-driven landscape. The existence during a war is also sometimes realistically portrayed. The different genres of literature record the horrors and brutalities of armed conflicts in different ways and styles. The imaginative qualities of these writings compel the readers to identify themselves with the characters and raise their voices against such horrors and brutalities.

Since Afghanistan has been suffering from war and conflict for a long, many literary writers from different parts of the world have written about its conflict. One among these writers is the prominent Afghani writer Khalid Husseini who has been depicting the war-driven scenario in many of his novels not only outwardly, but inwardly. In his novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, he has skillfully and artistically portrayed various evils of the series of wars that Afghans witnessed. The novel traces the history of the disaster with its various horrors such as; displacement, bombings, starvation, chaos, absurdity, and mental traumas. While commenting on the relation of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* to these conflicts, Azimova (2022) states:

A Thousand Splendid Suns is a breathtaking story set against the volatile events of Afghanistan’s last thirty years—from the Soviet invasion to the reign of the Taliban to post-Taliban rebuilding—that puts the violence, fear, hope, and faith of this country in intimate, human terms. (p. 51)

The story of the novel centers around the tragic characters of Mariam and later Laila who are faced with the harsh realities of life during war. On the one hand, they suffer the patriarchal norms, and on the other hand the brutal and volatile events of wars. The series of wars and political instabilities compel various other characters like; Mammy, Babi, Rasheed, Tariq, Aziza, and Zalmai to lose the right to live an ordinary life and are faced with fear, violence, homelessness, lack of education, and mental conflicts.

Although the novel has been analyzed from various aspects by different researchers, the current study analyzes the depiction of the horrors and brutalities of war through the use of imagery by the author of the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The main focus is to highlight the specific war portrayals that include; Mental Trauma and Chaos of Characters, the Portrayal of a war-driven Landscape, Nostalgia for the Lost Cultural Heritage, separation of loved ones, and Disintegration of Social Fabrics and physical violence against the civilians.

Scope

The scope of this research lies in its comprehensive approach towards the technical as well as the major thematic dimensions specifically in relation to war and its horrors. The novel is analyzed in relation to the author’s use of imagery as an effective tool for revealing the brutalities and evils of war. So the scope of the study lies in its introspective approach to the analysis of imagery and its functions.

Limitations

The present study focuses on imagery in Hosseini’s novel ‘*A Thousand Splendid Duns*’ and the functions of imagery in revealing war-related themes. The themes are discussed and analyzed in light of the different types of imagery. So, the study analyses the different war-related themes in the light of imagery only.

Significance

The main significance of this research study is to create a full understanding of this novel with respect to war and its hazards in the pre and post-9/11 scenario. Since the study highlights the use of imagery and its role in showing war hazards, the theoretical framework of this study will help in the assessment of any literature in post-war literature.

Research Objectives

- 1) To pinpoint the various types of imagery in the novel ‘*A Thousand Splendid Suns*.’
- 2) To highlight the role of imagery in revealing the horrors and brutalities of war.
- 3) To reveal the specific war portrayals as depicted through the use of imagery.

Research Questions

- 1) What are the different types of imagery used in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*?
- 2) What significant role does imagery play in revealing the horrors and brutalities of war?
- 3) What are the specific war portrayals as revealed through imagery?

Literature Review

Imagery may be defined as the painting of a picture in the reader's mind through the use of language. It represents human experiences and thoughts in concrete, tangible, and perceptible terms. It also helps the author to convey his message in strong and clear terms. According to Yanni (2007), "Imagery is the heart of literature, which allows the reader to become immersed in the story, the poem, or the play. It provides all of the details of sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch." (p. 779). Without imagery, the imaginative quality of Literature may be incomplete. Some of its main types as stated by Cuddon (1994), are the following:

1. **Visual or Sight Imagery:** It is the use of vivid figurative language that paints pictures in our imagination. It may include the descriptions of a setting, characters, or another thing in our surroundings. It usually foregrounds the color, shape, size, and pattern of a particular thing. Through this type of imagery, the sight of a particular image is evoked in the minds of the readers.
2. **Auditory Imagery:** As the name indicates, this type represents sound. Auditory imagery describes specific sounds that are happening within the story or any piece of Literature. These sounds may be enjoyable and harmonic, noisy, or calm. The use of such sound can help in eliciting emotional responses toward a piece of text. These may include the emotions of fear, suspense, or general chaos.
3. **Olfactory Imagery:** Olfactory imagery is used to describe a particular scent. The type may include fragrance, or odor etc. Thus, it helps to conjure up smells for the reader.
4. **Tactile Imagery:** Tactile imagery refers to or appeals to the sense of touch. It includes references to temperature, touch, texture, etc. in a particular text. Most of the time, this touch is often conveyed through the use of various similes and metaphors. These associations enable the reader to make connections between the tactile imagery in a piece of literature and the author's own tactile experiences.
5. **Gustatory Imagery:** It pertains to the sense of taste and helps in evoking the sense of taste in one's mind. It includes sweetness, sourness, bitterness, tartness, saltiness, spiciness, and savoriness, etc.
6. **Kinesthetic Imagery:** This type of imagery describes the movement or action of objects or people. It includes various sensations and descriptions of movement. Movement is important to this type even if it incorporates some features of tactile imagery.

Barry refers to the functions of imagery in literature as:

In literature, imagery is a very useful and powerful tool in the hands of the writer. When the reader is able to experience the sights, the sounds, the tastes, the smells, and the touches in a piece of literature, then he or she is better able to apprehend and to appreciate the piece of literature. Literature would be serene and vacant without the imagery that draws the reader into an intimate experience of literature. (Barry 2010, p. 9)

Various researchers have explored war-related issues in the light of various theories in the novel '*A Thousand Splendid Suns*'. According to Tripathy (2018), the novel itself is set against the backdrop of war-torn Afghanistan and the main characters try to survive in the suffocating chains of war, violence, and oppression. (p.53). While emphasizing the major war concern of the novel, Rebecca states that "In his novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, author Khaled Hosseini provides a vivid portrait of a country shattered by a series of ideological leaders and wars imposed on it by foreign and internal forces." (Rebecca, 2011, p.1). While talking about the feminist elements of the novel, Rabbani and Chaudhry emphasize "Hosseini's narrative is also pervaded by the anti Soviet war of the Mujahideen as well as the bloody Afghan civil war ignited by the Taliban." (Rabbani & Chaudhury, 2018, p.40). They further assert that the conflict resulted 'unbounded pain and suffering' for women. (p.41). In his research about Hosseini's fictionalized stories revealing of his homeland's recent history, social fabric, and cultural peculiarities, Souissi (2015) emphasizes the fact that:

The novel 'A Thousand Splendid Suns' highlights the differing perspectives of the writer towards the different war periods of Afghanistan including the Pre-Soviet occupation period, The Soviet Occupation era, The civil war period, the Taliban's ascent to power, and The post-9/11 period. (pp.494-495).

While talking about revisiting women's rights in the novel, Shihada asserts

A Thousand Splendid Suns, written in is set in a war-ravaged landscape of Afghanistan and focuses on the precarious and wretched lives of women. Afghanistan 's troubled history of the last several decades is recounted through the eyes of women who suffered and lost the most during that period. (Shihada, 2019, p.25).

Zubair (2021), refers to Afghanistan's history, culture, and tradition as depicted in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The work highlights the role of foreign invasions in affecting the Afghan culture and tradition.(p.198-204). While investigating the intersection of history, memory, and culture, Aruna and Shalini revealed that the novel central concern revolves around the struggles and challenges of the people at times of war and invasion. Laila in the novel suffers from trauma through the forceful external migration and also by the memories of her homeland. (Aruna & Shalini, 2022, p.1). Spirovska states about the war elements in the novel as "Hosseini's second novel, A Thousand Splendid Suns, describes the relationship between two women and their lives under the Taliban regime. Mariam's and Laila's life stories are intertwined the moment Laila, forced by the circumstances in Kabul during the civil war and the loss of her parents and her home, accepts Rasheed's marriage proposal, becoming his second wife" (Spirovska, 2022, p.27). Ranawat comments about the fate of women in the novel as:

The novel follows the lives of two female protagonists, Mariam and Laila, and their lives and roles as women in Taliban occupied Afghanistan. The book goes into deep, personal depth of the unjust and cruel treatment of women, the suffering and discrimination that took place on women, and the abuse and violence they were forced to endure. (Ranawat, 2023, p.2)

According to Ahmad (2020) "The novel depicts the city of Kabul as a lived reality that perished and survived constant bloodshed and political mayhem erased of its rich culture of poetry and architecture during a dictatorial fundamentalist regime" (p.124). Akbar reveals that:

The novel then tracks their ongoing relationship and support for one another in Kabul from the 1970s to the 2000s. The tale is set against the backdrop of Afghanistan's post-Soviet invasion insecurity. It also goes into detail about life under Taliban rule. The tale highlights the plight of "Afghanian-women" over the conflict's long years. (Akbar, 2022, p. 40).

Jenifer and Geetha (2018) opine about the war elements in the novel as, "Khaled Hosseini also reflects the life of Afghans among the riotous and war torn in Afghanistan. These violent events are recollected as the haunting memories and literature is considered as the panacea in which it heals the traumatic life." (p.141). In the words of Banu (2016) "Hosseini's novel traces the history of disaster with a series of war, bombings, homelessness, starvation, lifedestroying struggles, etc." (p.188). In their study Thakur and Aggarwal refer to the impact of cross cultural wars on the life of the characters as "Many young men like Tariq were forced to leave their homes because of uncertainty and political unrest and mass butchering carried out by the Taliban and suffered displacement. Women became the targets of violence, rapes and sexual oppression" (2016, p.184). Henston and Neena also highlight the war concerns of the novel by stating that:

A Thousand Splendid Suns is a breath-taking story set against the volatile events of Afghanistan's last thirty years - from the Soviet invasion to the reign of the Taliban to post-Taliban rebuilding - that puts the violence, fear, hope, and faith of this country in intimate, human terms." (Henston & Neena, 2021, p.10).

This research paper highlights the horrors and brutalities of war as highlighted through the use of imagery in the novel. The study is unique and different from other available studies that it focuses the writer's approach to the brutalities and horrors of war through vivid descriptions that appeal to the reader. Since the main focus is on the war aspect of the novel, therefore only the use of imagery has been focused.

Research Methodology

The current study is based on an exhaustive analysis of the use of imagery in Khalid Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. A qualitative research design is used since the analysis includes critical interpretation of selected excerpts from the novel.

The theoretic framework has been adopted from Cuddon's (1994) discussion of imagery. The study tries to find out the different sources of imagery in the novel. The study singles out the various types of images Visual, Olfactory, Tactile, Auditory, Gustatory, and Kinesthetic, etc. The study finds out that imagery is not merely a decorative element but here it is concerned with highlighting some serious subject, i.e, war and its brutalities.

Discussion and Analysis

Imagery has been a useful technique for the author of the novel in portraying the war tragedy and its horrors. In this section, the importance of imagery in revealing the different effects of war has been analyzed:

War Imagery as A Source of Mental Trauma and Chaos of Characters Living in War Zone

According to Geetha:

Generally, the war and conflicts end up with bloodshed and injury and it affects both the physical body and psyche of an individual. During the course of the war, the wound in the mind remains as a scar because of the haunted memories and witnessing the death of their family members. (Geetha, 2018, p.142)

The writer has used imagery in order to reveal the fear and hysteria of characters during the war. In the following excerpt, both visual and auditory imagery is used to highlight such a situation:

On April 27, Mariam's question was answered with crackling sounds and intense, sudden roars. She ran barefoot down to the living room and found Rasheed already by the window, in his undershirt, his hair disheveled, palms pressed to the glass. Mariam made her way to the window next to him. Overhead, she could see military planes zooming past, heading north and east. Their deafening shrieks hurt her ears. In the distance, loud booms resonated and sudden plumes of smoke rose to the sky. (Husseini, 2007, p. 99)

The cacophonous auditory imagery in this description reveal the emptiness and hollow feelings of the characters during the wartime. Similarly, in the following description, the author has employed beautiful auditory and tactile imagery in order to highlight the theme of unemployment and joblessness during war time. Babi, an educated man, has to work in a factory in order to earn a living for the family:

“Though Babi worked at Silo, Kabul's gigantic bread factory, where he labored amid the heat and the humming machinery stoking the massive ovens and mill grains all day, he was a university-educated man.” (Husseini, 2007, p.114).

The civil war and its chaos has been reflected in the following description when the people are terrified and try to search a safe place:

“And when the rockets began to rain down on Kabul, people ran for cover. Mammy did too, literally. She changed into black again, went to her room, shut the curtains, and pulled the blanket over her head.” (Husseini, 2007, p.169)

The civil war has made the whole atmosphere as bleak and chaos and alienation prevailing everywhere:

Outside rockets were zipping across the sky as Hekmatyar's and Masoud's forces fought and fought. Laila knew that somewhere in the city, someone had just died, and a pall of black smoke was hovering over some building that had collapsed in a puffing mass of dust. There would be bodies to step around in the morning. Some would be collected. Others not. Then Kabul's dogs, who had developed a taste for human meat, would feast. (Husseini, 2007, p.183)

Use of Imagery for the Portrayal of War Driven Landscape

There are many descriptions in the novel which depict the war driven landscape. The harmony and peace has been severely disturbed by the approaching war. For example, the following excerpt highlights the horrors of war through various types of imagery including; auditory, visual and kinesthetic:

They listened to the whistling, forks in midair, unchewed food in their mouths. Laila saw the reflection of their half-lit faces in the pitch-black window, their shadows unmoving on the wall. The whistling. Then the blast, blissfully elsewhere, followed by an expulsion of breath and the knowledge that they had been spared

for now while somewhere else, amid cries and choking clouds of smoke, there was a scrambling, a barehanded frenzy of digging, of pulling from the debris, what remained of a sister, a brother, a grandchild. (Husseini, 2007, p.170).

The land was crowded only with armed men which itself presented horrific pictures for teens like Laila:

Everywhere Laila "went, she saw Massoud's men. She saw them roam the streets and every few hundred yards stop cars for questioning. They sat and smoked atop tanks, dressed in their fatigues and ubiquitous pakols. They peeked at passersby from behind stacked sandbags at intersections. (Husseini, 2007, p.171).

The war during 1992 has been described as a mutual violence among the various ethnic fractions. The landscape is described as: "Every day, bodies were found tied to trees, sometimes burned beyond recognition. Often, they'd been shot in the head, had had their eyes gouged out, their tongues cut out." (Husseini, 2007, p. 173)

The most disturbing description include the following where Laila is wounded badly as her house is hit by a rocket. The description includes various instances of auditory war imagery:

The sands sang on. Screaming now. A sound like...

a tinkling? Not a tinkling.

No. A whistling.

Laila dropped the books at her feet. She looked up to the sky. Shielded her eyes with one hand.

Then a giant roar.

Behind her, a flash of white.

The ground lurched beneath her feet.

Something hot and powerful slammed into her from behind. It knocked her out of her sandals. Lifted her up.

And now she was flying, twisting and rotating in the air, seeing sky, then earth, then sky, then earth. A big burning chunk of wood whipped by. So did a thousand shards of glass, and it seemed to Laila that she could see each individual one flying all around her, flipping slowly end over end, the sunlight catching in each.

Tiny, beautiful rainbows.

Then Laila struck the wall. Crashed to the ground. On her face and arms, a shower of dirt and pebbles and glass. The last thing she was aware of was seeing something thud to the ground nearby. A bloody chunk of something. On it, the tip of a red bridge poking through thick fog. (Husseini, 2007, p.188)

The above incident of the destruction of Laila's family and Laila surviving in the barbaric incident, would not have been better reflected in other descriptions than in imagery. It shows the writer's skillful handling and dealing the subject of war and brutal execution of masses.

Imagery as a Witness to the Physical Violence Against the Public during War Time

The description of the Afghan Civil war carries various instances of brutality and harsh treatment of the civilians. Instead of their protection, they have been robbed, looted and raped:

The streets became littered with bodies, glass, and crumpled chunks of metal. There was looting, murder, and, increasingly, rape, which was used to intimidate civilians and reward militiamen. Mariam heard of women who were killing themselves out of fear of being raped, and of men who, in the name of honor, would kill their wives or daughters if they'd been raped by the militia. (Husseini, 2007, p.247)

The hard rules adopted by the soldiers of new setup has no sympathy even for women. While going to the orphanage to meet her daughter, Laila beaten severely by the Talib soldiers. The writer has depicted this physical violence in the following tactile imagery. Readers clearly feel such tools of violence while studying the scene. How horrific it would have been!

If she was lucky, she was given a tongue-lashing or a single kick to the rear, a shove in the back. Other times, she met with assortments of wooden clubs, fresh tree branches, short whips, slaps, often fists. One day, a young Talib beat Laila with a radio antenna. When he was done, he gave a final whack to the back of her neck and said, "I see you again, I'll beat you until your mother's milk leaks out of your bones. (Husseini, 2007, p.311)

Imagery Highlighting Nostalgia for the Lost Cultural Heritage due to War

The writer has set the war-driven landscape against the old golden days when there was peace. While Laila is trying to escape along Mariam, she observes the destruction caused by the war. The writer has employed extended visual imagery to depict this nostalgia. Also, auditory and kinesthetic imagery have been employed:

All around her now, Laila saw the consequences of the recent fighting whose sounds she'd heard from the house. Homes that lay in roofless ruins of brick and jagged stone, gouged buildings with fallen beams poking through the holes, the charred, mangled husks of cars, upended, sometimes stacked on top of each other, walls pocked by holes of every conceivable caliber, shattered glass everywhere. She saw a funeral procession marching toward a mosque, a black-clad old woman at the rear tearing at her hair. They passed a cemetery littered with rock-piled graves and ragged shaheed flags fluttering in the breeze. (Husseini, 2007, p.252).

Similarly, when the Taliban seize the power, according to the author they destroy the things related to Afghan culture and heritage. The following description is one instance where visual imagery has been used by the author:

Paintings were ripped from walls, shredded with blades. Television screens were kicked in. Books, except the Koran, were burned in heaps, the stores that sold them closed down. The poems of Khalili, Pajwak, Ansari, Haji Dehqan, Ashraqi, Beytaab, Hafez, Jami, Nizami, Rumi, Khayyam, Beydel, and more went up in smoke. (Husseini, 2007, p.168).

Imagery Highlighting the Separation of Loved ones and Disintegration of Social Fabrics during War Times

Separation of families and disintegration are common themes in war literature. Husseini has revealed this scenario in various passages of the novel. For example, he has used auditory and kinesthetic imagery in order to reveal the loss of sons and the feelings of a mother for them. The description goes like this:

Laila peeked from the top of the stairs. She watched the stranger sit down with her parents. He leaned toward them. Said a few muted words. Then Babi's face was white, and getting whiter, and he was looking at his hands, and Mammy was screaming, screaming, and tearing at her hair. (Husseini, 2007, p.135)

Mammy love for the dead sons can be better understood from the following description when the Soviet was exiting:

Mammy hoisted a photo of Ahmad and Noor high over her head. It was the one of them sitting back-to-back under the pear tree. There were others like her, women with pictures of their shaheed husbands, sons, brothers held high. (Husseini, 2007, p.152)

The writer has used beautiful visual and kinesthetic imagery when the best friends are parting as a result of the intensity of war: "The last time Laila ever saw Hasina, she was being helped by her father into the crowded backseat of a taxi." (Husseini, 2007, p.156).

It is not only the pain of separation by migrating to different parts of the world but also the pain of permanent departure into another world as in the following horrific description:

One day that same month of June, Giti was walking home from school with two classmates. Only three blocks from Giti's house, a stray rocket struck the girls. Later that terrible day, Laila learned that Nila, Giti's mother, had run up and down the street where Giti was killed, collecting pieces of her daughter's flesh in an apron, screeching hysterically. Giti's decomposing right foot, still in its nylon sock and purple sneaker, would be found on a rooftop two weeks later. (Husseini, 2007, p. 175)

The most beautiful description, full of pain and sorrow is the following when Laila has to say Good-bye to Tariq as their lives are in extreme danger due to the intensity in fighting. The description has several types of imagery such as auditory, kinesthetic and tactile which highlight the fact that 'parting is such a sweet sorrow':

A groan came out of Laila. Then a wail. And then she was crying, and when he went to wipe her cheek with the pad of his thumb, she swiped his hand away. It was selfish and irrational, but she was furious with him for abandoning her, Tariq, who was like an extension of her, whose shadow sprung beside hers in every memory... they ended up brow to brow, nose to nose, and she could feel the heat of his breath on her lips again. (Husseini, 2007, p.178).

The issues related to displacement and migration are quite evident in this passage. Leaving one's home and country is the most painful thing in life and many Afghans have been doing so in the wake of different wars.

Conclusion

This study was mainly intended to critically analyze war imagery in Khalid Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The different uses and functions of imagery have been critically investigated and discussed under different headings. The results and findings of the study show that imagery has been a useful tool in the hands of the writer for revealing the horrors and brutalities of war. Through the discussion of various types of imagery, specific war portrayals like; mental trauma, chaos of characters, the portrayal of War Driven Landscape, nostalgia for the lost Cultural Heritage, separation of loved ones and disintegration of social fabrics, and physical violence against the civilians have been skillfully highlighted through the various types of imagery.

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