

Traversing through Memories in Exile: an Analysis of Khaled Hosseini's the Kite Runner

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Abstract

Khaled Hosseini can be heralded as someone who not only brought the battered milieu of his homeland Afghanistan to the forefront but has also been instrumental in debunking the myths surrounding it through his novels. A prominent Afghan American novelist Hosseini migrated to the US at the age of fifteen owing to the political upheavals in Afghanistan. Hosseini and his family were granted political asylum in the US, and he became a trained physician. In 2003, he became a publishing phenomenon of sorts with his book *The Kite Runner*, which earned widespread acclaim. An enduring tale of friendship between Amir and Hassan, the seeds of the book were planted in Hosseini's mind when in 1999, he read about how the Taliban (the militant organization which had taken hold of Afghanistan) had banned the sport of kite-flying. It was one of the many authoritarian rules laid to subjugate people. However, Hosseini, an Afghani living in exile, brought back vivid memories of his childhood, spent flying kites in the alleys of Afghanistan, once his home. It acted as an impetus, making him write the story of two friends and their bonds of amity, which spanned through generations. *The Kite Runner* depicts the war-ravaged Afghani soil right from the fall of the monarchy, the Soviet invasion, and the eventual rise of the Taliban. More often than not, a displaced protagonist yearns to return to his homeland. Memory plays a crucial role in filling the blank spaces that the sense of displacement inevitably creates, alienating one further. The purpose of nostalgia and the urgency to redeem oneself forms the edifice of Hosseini's book *The Kite Runner*. Recounting the trauma of the past and traversing through the subjugated and war-ravaged terrains of his homeland Afghanistan, the protagonist Amir holds on to his threadbare memories only to come home and put an end to his suffering. Though Hosseini claims that *The Kite Runner* is not autobiographical, it is evident that as a writer in exile, his own experiences have still seeped into his debut work. This paper aims to analyze the significance of memory as an inherent aspect of exile literature through a study of Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner*. It will also attempt to trace the dilemma that an exile writer portrays through his protagonists by reclaiming the past. As Afghanistan has come to the forefront yet again with the withdrawal of the US forces and the consequent violence that ensued, followed by the reinstatement of the Taliban, it is even more pertinent to examine literature that brings forth the turmoil and travesties of Afghanistan.

Keywords: Exile Writers, Memories, Afghanistan, Taliban, Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*

Introduction

When Salman Rushdie put forth this statement, he spoke out for all exile writers who, more often than not, traverse past and present. Memories form a vital thread that connects the exiled writers to recount and, many times, reclaim what was lost as they were uprooted from their home country.

In 1978, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PPDA) seized power, followed by the Soviet-Afghan war in 1980. The volatile environment in Afghanistan made the Hosseini family seek political asylum in the US in 1980 when Hosseini was fifteen years old. Later, Hosseini became a trained physician and practiced medicine for over ten years in the US. In 2003 he became a publishing phenomenon of sorts with his debut book, *The Kite Runner*, which not only brought the battered milieu of Afghanistan to the forefront but also debunked the several myths that shrouded the subjugated soil of Afghanistan.

Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner*, which heralded his presence in the diasporic literary stage, inarguably delineated the dilemma of an exile writer who holds on to the reins of his threadbare memories, thereby coming to terms with his two-fold existence.

Memory: The lever that pushes forth Exile Writing

The seeds of the book *The Kite Runner* were planted in Hosseini's mind when he read about the Taliban banning the sport of kite-flying. Hosseini shared the same in an interview.

"I was watching a news story in the spring of 1999 on television, and this news story was about the Taliban. Moreover, it talked about all the different impositions the Taliban had placed on the Afghan people. Moreover, at some point along the line, it mentioned that they had banned the sport of kite flying, which struck a personal chord for me because, as a boy, I grew up in Kabul with all my cousins and friends flying kites" (RFE/RL).

Though Hosseini maintains that *The Kite Runner* is not autobiographical, one cannot overlook the fact that it was the memory of his childhood days spent in Afghanistan which ceased to be obliterated and thus manifested in the form of a fictional book. Jasbir Jain, in her book, 'The Diaspora Writes Home' proposes, "MemoryMemory is both process and raw material;

the process as it covers many journeys back and forth as a new subjectivity is defined, as relationships are reviewed and very often cleansed of bitterness and regret and raw material as it is the only reality that has been experienced either by them or the ancestors that have created them made them what they are. All the cultural nuances so imperceptibly imbibed and internalized and often fretted against are now highlighted and framed through the act of remembrance—an act that is simultaneously a process of self-analysis, self-discovery, and relocation. It is the raw material for no matter how distanced they feel from it, it is the primary baggage they have lugged along the route, the context that provides a meaning" (Jain 9).

This act of remembrance steers forth the voice of an exiled writer as he walks on the long-lost road of remembrance, which had hitherto been buried to give way to his present. This aspect is evident enough in the foreword of *The Kite Runner* wherein Hosseini writes, "In March of 2003...I returned to Kabul for the first time in twenty-seven years. I had left Afghanistan as an eleven-year-old, thin-framed seventh grader; I was going back as a thirty-eight-year-old physician, writer, husband, and father of the two" (Verma 183).

The Kite Runner: Past Remembered and Reclaimed

The Kite Runner captures the enduring tale of friendship between Amir and Hassan. Amir, an affluent Pashtun, and Hassan, the son of a servant and one hailing from the socially and economically inferior Hazara tribe, forge bonds of amity. However, an unfortunate act of sexual molestation, Amir's consequent shame, and the fact that he chose not to stand up for his friend Hassan form the edifice on which the novel progresses. The book commences on a note that once affirms how memory percolates and forms the very essence of a protagonist in exile.

I remember the precise moment, crouching behind a crumbling mud wall, peeking into the alley near the frozen creek.

Years have transpired, but the protagonist Amir invariably traverses to 1975, when he was twelve. The memory of that year is so much in his mind that, like a time warp, it flings him back to his childhood and perches him in his homeland Afghanistan. "These lines become metaphoric at many levels.

The constant swaying of the past and present interspersed with metaphors that act as a bridge between the two distant worlds makes *The Kite Runner* representative of exile literature. More often than not, the lines of fiction and fact are submerged. In Amir, Hosseini seems to transfer the epithet of a man in exile, who, though far removed from his roots, is still entrenched at some corner, waiting to reclaim his past.

The first chapter sets a tone of nostalgia as Amir recounts his life in Afghanistan.

"One-day last summer, my friend Rahim Khan called from Pakistan. He asked me to see him. It was my past of unatoned sins. Then I glanced up and saw a pair of kites, red with long blue tails, soaring in the sky. They danced high above the trees on the west end of the park, over the windmills, floating side by side like a pair of eyes looking down on San Francisco, the city I now call home. Moreover, suddenly Hassan's voice whispered in my head: For you, a thousand times over. Hassan the harelipped kite runner" (Hosseini 1).

In these lines, as Hassan whispers in Amir's head, it is as if his past comes swooping on him a thousand times over. One senses a melancholy, another trait of an exiled character. The protagonist in *The Kite Runner*, in recapturing his past, bears similarity to someone penning his autobiography and mapping his familial roots. As Anna Mäkinen analyses in her research, "Mapping his memories in a project of narrative cartography, Amir simultaneously maps his exilic identity, the expressions of which are both conscious and unconscious in his memoir. In addition to the explicitly narrated escape from one place to

another, exile manifests itself in the memoir implicitly, through recurring metaphors of liminality, movement, and non-linear time” (Mäkinen)

Acknowledgment of the Subaltern

Another aspect that forms an integral part of *The Kite Runner* as a postcolonial subtext of sorts is the delineation of the subaltern. While reclaiming his past, the immigrant writer often retraces the social fabric of his land and, in the process, comes to terms with the class dynamics intrinsic to that period. The edifice of *The Kite Runner* is the guilt that overpowers Amir's subconscious. The gruesome molestation that his friend Hassan endures is, on some level, the consequence of his being a Hazara. Amir's silence gnaws at him, and it is only later, when he scratches the hitherto suppressed memories, that we are made aware of the subtle exploitation and casual acceptance of Amir to treat Hassan, his economically inferior friend, as someone who is bound to servitude.

As Promod K. Nayar points out, “Subalternization is the process by which minorities, ethnic groups, and communities are rendered subalterns, mostly by acts of omission or commission by the postcolonial state. This could be the Ahmadiyas in Pakistan, the Dalits in India, the Aboriginals in Australia and Canada, or the Hazaras in Afghanistan. Global activism in the domain of Human Rights and investigation of war crimes and ethnicities focus almost entirely on subalternation. In effect, one could argue that the global visibility of the postcolonial subaltern, subalternated by the state, ensure at least minimal pressure on the state towards welfare or reparation” (Nayar 70).

The following lines depict how the class divide worked at the base level, even as the friendship and camaraderie between Amir and Hassan thrived.

Never mind that we spent an entire winter flying kites. Never mind that to me, the face of Afghanistan is that of a boy with a thin-boned frame, a shaved head, and low-set ears, a boy with a Chinese doll face perpetually lit by a hare-lipped smile. Never mind any of those things. Because history is not easy to overcome, neither is religion. In the end, I was a Pashtun, and he was a Hazara; I was Sunni, and he was Shi'a, and nothing was ever going to change that. Nothing” (Hosseini 22).

However, gradually as layers are peeled and Amir narrates his past, it is also hard to miss that a sense of wrong-doing towards Hassan and, in turn, the entire Hazara tribe permeated his psyche. He is not merely a servant representative of the submissive Afghan Hazaras. He is not merely a memory. He is the metaphor for Afghanistan; he is a metaphor for friendship; he is a metaphor for "homeland"; he is a metaphor for memory; he is a metaphor for Amir's existence” (Verma 185).

Hosseini mentions in an interview how he consciously put forth the plight of the Hazaras and the inequality that persisted in Afghanistan: "One example that I highlight in my book is the mistreatment of the Hazara people, who were all but banned from the higher appointments of society and forced to play a second-class citizen role. A critical eye toward

that era is, I believe, as important as a loving eye because there are lessons to be learned from our past" (Afghan Magazine).

This acknowledgment of the subaltern tribe of Hazaras by a privileged exile writer is crucial to opening up a dialogue and eventually makes one hope for the winds of change.

Guilt and Homecoming

The initial chapters of the novel chronicle the friendship between Amir and Hassan and Amir's constant yearning for his father's approval; the event that changes the characters' lives is the kite-flying tournament to earn Baba's affection; Amir resolves to win the tournament. On the wrong day of the kite-flying event, the lives of the two boys cease to remain the same. Hassan is molested while trying to protect Amir's prized possession from his nemesis Assef. Amir's silence puts him in the rignarole of never-ending guilt, which haunts him even when he is a middle-aged man away from his home country.

This nerve-wracking guilt finally brings Amir back to Afghanistan, albeit years later. Traveling through the labyrinths of memory and looking for redemption, Amir becomes the mouthpiece of Hosseini in unfolding the terrors of war-ravaged Afghanistan. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is portrayed as grim through dreadful images as Amir hopes that the sad state of affairs in his homeland is but a dream.

"This had to be a dream. It had to be. Tomorrow morning, I would wake up and peek out the window: No grim-faced Russian soldiers patrolling the sidewalks, no tanks rolling up and down the streets of my city, their turrets swiveling like accusing fingers, no rubble, no curfews, no Russian Army Personnel Carriers weaving the bazaars...This was no dream" (Hosseini 98).

The novel's second part takes place in California, and Hosseini's exile experience invariably seeps in as Baba and Amir find their footing in a foreign land.

A new life beckons Amir in America, and for him, "America was a river, roaring along, unmindful of the past. I could wade into this river, let my sins drown to the bottom, let the waters carry me someplace far. Someplace with no ghosts, no memories, and no sins" (Hosseini 119).

Only years later, through a phone call from Rahim Khan, the past hurls up, staring Amir in the face. Once Amir sets foot in Afghanistan again, memories flash through his eyes of land which once was his home and the home of his loved ones.

"The kinship I felt suddenly for the old land... it surprised me. I had been gone long enough to forget and be forgotten. However, I had not. Moreover, under the bony glow of a half-moon, I sensed Afghanistan humming under my feet. Maybe Afghanistan had not forgotten me either" (Hosseini 211).

Amir goes on to become a writer, and thus again, one can see stark similarities between Hosseini and Amir, both exile writers making sense of their roots through their words. In *The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini makes the central theme the quest for redemption of a character away from his homeland. Only when the protagonist, Amir,

rescues and brings Hassan's son home he feels that he has purged his sins. The narrative, though fictional, draws extensively on memory while bringing to the fore the war-ravaged state of Afghan land, the atrocities of the militant forces of the Taliban, and symbols that signify the withered fragments of Afghan soil.

Conclusion

Exile writers represent an amalgamation of multiple cultures and, more often than not, depict the fractured milieu of their erstwhile homeland, thereby laying bare an unusual voice of a writer in the diaspora. "Their writings, fiction, and nonfiction, therefore represent a struggle for individual identity, and the expatriate writer as an individual caught in a continuum of regression and progression, dislocation and relocation." They write about the quest for identity, a crisis caused due to frequent 'uprooting' and 're-routing.' Their writings describe "multiculturalism" and "marginalized territory" in spatial terms, highlighting individuals and communities that are displaced and dislocated; while the native homeland becoming a metaphor in their writings" (Ilyas). The 'broken mirror' analogy that Rushdie offers is inherent in Hosseini's works as an exile writer (Rushdie 11). It is most prominent in *The Kite Runner*, wherein the memory of a past foregone not only leads to the atonement of the central character but, in the process, Hosseini revisits Afghanistan laying bare the history of his bruised homeland. The redemption of the protagonist Amir in *The Kite Runner* may also be symbolic of an exile writer's quest to find solace and come to terms with the 'survivor's guilt.' Hosseini remained unscathed in a safe space while his fellow citizens faced turmoil and trauma. To go back and create literature out of shards of memory while depicting the travails of one's homeland brings reaffirmation for a writer in exile. Memory, in this regard, becomes a propelling force and though fragmented, becomes a vital tool for a writer in exile to reclaim his past and tell the story of his homeland.

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