

## **Critiquing the Narrative and Spatial- Temporal Cultural Displacement in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner***

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### **Abstract**

*The Kite Runner* is the debut novel of Afghan-American author Khaled Hosseini. Published in 2003 by Riverhead Books, it narrates the story of Amir, a young boy from the Wazir Akbar Khan district of Kabul, whose closest companion is Hassan, his father's Hazara servant's son. The story is set against the backdrop of tumultuous events, it records the fall of Afghanistan's monarchy with the aid of the Soviet military intervention, the exodus of refugees to Pakistan and the United States, and the augment of the Taliban regime.

According to Hosseini *The Kite Runner* is a father-son story, wherein the narration aspires to render the endearing ties of kinship and family all the more dearer, an element that he re-employs in his later works. Thematically it is centred on the concerns of remorse and emancipation. Hassan is sodomized, Amir witnesses this bestiality but fails to muster up courage enough to intervene and interrupt the molestation. This self – reproach becomes a constant haunting memory even after he migrates to the United States. In the second half of the story, Amir retraces his steps to Afghanistan, combats the horrors of his memory as well as of the place to subdue the monsters of the past.

**Keywords:** *The Kite Runner*, Narratology, Parent- child relationship, Historical Fiction, Bildungsroman

Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan-diasporic writer currently settled in the United States of America. He has written three novels *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and his recent work *And the Mountains Echoed*. In all his works he deals with different issues. One finds

Afghanistan to be a connecting and underlying link in all his works. In one of the interviews he confessed that, "Most writing is torture... a worry that there is nothing to say," but he expressed his gratitude as "the act of writing changed the relationship with Afghanistan". Hosseini believes himself to be essentially a 'storyteller' and consequently other things follow.

In 1999, Hosseini heard of a news section reporting the ban imposed on kite flying by Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which seemed to him to be quite a callous attempt to curb the cultural freedom of the Afghans. The report "struck a personal chord" for him, as he had fond memories of growing up with the sport while living in Afghanistan. This inspired him to write a twenty-five page short story about two boys who fly kites in Kabul. Hosseini sent copies of his short story to *Esquire* and *The New Yorker*, both of which declined it. He revived the manuscript in his garage in March 2001 and began to upgrade it to a novel format at the suggestion of a friend. Hosseini reveals that the narrative became "much darker" than he originally proposed. Commenting on the cause of popularity of *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini answered:

*The Kite Runner* is multi-layered, in that it provides readers with cultural, religious, political, historical, and literary points to discuss. But I suspect that also part of the reason it is popular with book groups is that it is a very human story. Because the themes of friendship, betrayal, guilt, redemption, and uneasy love between fathers and sons are universal and not specifically Afghan, the book has reached across cultural, racial, religious, and gender gaps to resonate with readers of various backgrounds. I think people respond to the emotions in this book (Reader's Guide 7).

*The Kite Runner* covers a multigenerational period and focuses on the intergenerational relationship as well as the crisis of the generation-gap. According to Hosseini, his interest in the theme grew simultaneously with the novel, and when faced with the writer's block he "doodled" them, i.e. drew images absent-mindedly, a feature that played a decisive role in the adaptation of the book into a graphic novel.

In the character of the protagonist of the novel, Amir, glimpses of the life of Khaled Hosseini are profoundly discernible. For example, both Amir and Hosseini were born in Afghanistan and left the country at the age of eleven, not to return before 2003. They lived in the

same neighbourhood of Afghanistan, Wazir Akbar Khan Street; both return to Afghanistan as debutant novelists. When asked about the autobiographical streaks in *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini responded that:

When I say some of it is me, and then people look unsatisfied. The parallels are pretty obvious, but ... I left a few things ambiguous because I wanted to drive the book clubs crazy.... one-thirds of the book is based on the vivid memories of the pre-Soviet era, the memories which recreated the socio-economic realities of life, the kite flying and the love of reading (Wilson).

Hosseini gives no explanations as to what all he refers to as “a few things” and the extent of ambiguity. Nevertheless, if one were to exclude the darker portions of the story, the story of the novel does not differ much from what Hosseini himself has experienced in his own life. By his own admissions, one can safely affirm that the character of Baba was based on how he looked up to his father. Hosseini had been a bit deferential to his father, who was a fiercely confident and proud man. Like Baba in the novel, he refused the charity food stamps, choosing instead to work for a living. Hosseini’s mother taught Farsi, like Amir’s deceased mother did.

On the literary front, Amir is almost as well-learned as Hosseini had been in his childhood. In fact, Hosseini seems to have developed Amir’s character on the footprints of his growing years, except the tragedy that befalls Hassan. Firdausi’s *Shahnama* is a great favourite of Amir and young Hosseini. Moreover, the story of his own creation that Amir narrates to Hassan was the one Hosseini had composed at the age of nine. Hosseini recounts an event in which he witnessed the death of a friend when they had been trying to escape Afghanistan. Amir does the same when he witnesses the death of Kamal. An unmistakable link between the two is the pressure of parents to adopt medicine as a profession when the hearts of both are in writing.

Hosseini admits that he experienced the trauma of the survivors-guilt, as the family had providentially evaded the excruciating yoke of the Soviet reign. He relates that:

Whenever I read stories about Afghanistan my reaction was always tinged with guilt. A lot of my childhood friends had a very hard time. Some of our cousins died. One died in a fuel truck trying to escape Afghanistan. Talk about guilt. He was one of the kids I grew up with flying kites. His father was shot (Wilson)

Although many of the incidents in the fiction germinated from the facts of his life, he asserts that the plot is an imaginary tale. *Riverhead Books* initially published 50,000 copies in hardback. It was released on May 29, 2003, and the paperback edition came a year later.

Though the narrative has no division into structural units on a formal basis, still the storyline can be carved up into three distinct phases. The narrative is not linear for the novel begins in medias res, when Amir gets a call from Rahim Khan, who lives in Pakistan. His parting sentence “There’s a way to be good again, Amir jan”, unleashes the Pandora’s Box of the childhood reminiscences of the protagonist. Amir, who is the protagonist of the story, narrates the story from an intradiegetic stand, as he himself is a part of the story he narrates. He is homodiegetic narrator as he participates in the action. The narrative, however, is heterodiegetic because the story has no embedded narratives.

The canonization and appeal of a work of literature, especially fiction depends upon the basic central idea that the work aims to convey through the story. Hosseini’s first novel is one that has a network of holistic and conflicting themes. Hosseini has endeavoured and succeeded to make his characters humans, instead of fictional ghosts. They experience emotions and undergo the crisis of human existence just as any other person may, outside Afghanistan. Hosseini admits that he has brought into light the burqa-clad realities of life of Afghanistan, which more often than not remains outside the capturing lenses of news reporters. Following the Taliban occupation of Afghanistan, the Afghans have been perceived as cold-blooded demonic beasts, without a trace of the milk of the human kindness in them.

The underlying theme is of the ‘battle of loves’ faced by every person at some or the other point of time in life, in this case the love between parents and children depends and destroys the love between friends. Amir ditches his closest companion, Hassan, a Hazara servant-boy, though the latter worships and loves him the best. Although Amir is instructed and nurtured with good principles, yet he lacks the moral courage and the discerning disposition to look beyond his self-interests. The ethnic tensions existing among the various tribes in Afghanistan are highlighted in the inexpressible relationship Amir shares with Hassan. Even though he considers Hassan to be his best friend yet he is ashamed to admit so before his classmates and other friends for that would be a blow to his high social status. The supreme

failure of his life takes place when Hassan gets raped for his loyalty towards Amir, and the latter watches it all voyeuristically. Amir's final downfall occurs when he falsely implicates Hassan of having stolen his watch, to which Hassan confesses. Hassan's accepting and unflinching dedication towards Amir makes him all the more pathetic and pitying character, and what may otherwise seem as a child's gripping fear, appears to be gross betrayal.

The disappointment of strangled hopes of parents from their children, and the helplessness of kids to make their parents proud, the betrayal and cowardice, in spite of honourable intentions and many other such veins of emotional and moral fibre juxtapose in this tale. Amir allowing Hassan to be the scapegoat for making his father proud of himself leads to his downfall in his own esteem. Amir is presented as a well-rounded character, as he redeems himself of his past guilt when he rescues Hassan's son Sohrab and tries to rehabilitate him within his family as his own son. The virtues and ethics he lacked as a child, he acquires in the course of his development, but still the question remains whether the sins of the past can be so conveniently atoned for, more so because the foundation of all jealousy i.e. Baba is no more.

Sigmund Freud in his *Civilizations and its Discontents* says that:

To begin with, if we ask how does a person comes to have a sense of guilt, we arrive at an answer which cannot be disputed, that is, a person feels guilty (devout people would say sinful) when he does something he knows to be "bad" (Mishra 73).

While further discussing the effects of this manifestation of guilt, Freud opines that the superego of the child grows with the child, and thus if the child imbibes a consciousness of being in the wrong, this gnaws at his existence for a considerable period of time. Amir's reactions towards this consciousness echoes Macbeth's words, "I am in blood stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, Returning were as tedious as go o'er" (Shakespeare 94). After his cowardly stance, Amir is not able to behold Hassan without a prick of his conscience. His whim of flinging and smearing Hassan with pomegranates and of implicating him in the theft, are his attempts to thwart the cause of his self-loathing. He craves punishment, hence when Asef batters him up he laughs wholeheartedly, for the burden that had been beating along with every heart beat has been lifted. P.S. Greenspan explains this burden in his work *Practical Guilt*. He explains that, "the

guilty is assumed to be emotionally at odds with himself as a result of the kind of identification with others". (Greenspan 142)

In his book *Responsibility and Atonement*, R.C. Swinburne describes four components of atonement and reparation is one of them. Reparation is a kind of patch-work or the damage control to mitigate the wreckage. Amir's drive to attain redemption for his past misdeeds springs not from a sincere desire of remorse but more from an urge to preserve the family. It is only after he gets acquainted with the fact that Hassan had been his half brother and consequently Sohrab is his nephew that he agrees to risk himself by going in search of Sohrab. Offering Hassan as a scapegoat to gain his father's approval was easier because of the class consciousness that separates them. Hassan is a Hazara, a Shi'a and a servant. He is the thrice removed and there by the chasm between him and Amir is three-fold. It is only later that Amir learns of his true relation to Hassan, which urges him to wash away the odour of his past foul deeds.

Amir can now only attain partial atonement by rescuing the only surviving family member of Hassan, his son Sohrab, for the rest are dead. Derrida says, "Forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable." (Derrida n.p.)

The gothic temperament of the 'sins of the forefathers being visited upon their sons and daughters' as well as the adage that, history repeats itself is downright evident in the tale. The family of Ali is compromised in every generation. Ali's parents are killed in an accident by the driver of Amir's grandfather. Baba cheats on his childhood friend with his wife Sanaubar. Hassan is bartered by Amir. However, the retribution of it all is Amir's and Hassan's to pay, now that biologically Hassan is Baba's son. Hassan is massacred along with other Hazaras and his son is molested by Aseef. Amir, on the other hand, is sentenced to the anguish of remaining childless, and this somewhat tarnishes his domestic felicity.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* blames the West for distorting the image of the east in about the same ways as feminist criticism criticizes the androtexts that purport to be gynocentric. Either they have made East exotic as heavens or blood curdling terrifying as the hell. This is the other theme which is vividly brought out in the novel- the devastation and the loss of life, love and property due to the raging wars which triggers off the sufferings, displacements and desolation which mar the lives of those who fall prey to the beast of the war. The abandoning of

their homeland and the escape into the unfamiliar realms of the unknown without an inkling of what the future holds is not a covetous position in which many would like to find themselves. Hosseini himself had known the anguish of being torn apart from his roots and he brings it in his narration quite remarkably. The fall from the grace into the realms of purgatory that lands Amir and Baba in Fremont in United States, leaves with them with no other option other than acclimatizing to their curtailed circumstances.

The genre of Bildungsroman consists of the novels that trace the trajectory of the development of the protagonist since his infancy to the mature years. *The Kite Runner* can be considered a Bildungsroman, as it delineates the life story of Amir, with is interspersed with redresses of his decisions and actions.

Though the main action is partaken of predominantly by the male characters, yet Hosseini is to be applauded for the portrayal of his female characters. Unlike many other male writers, he does not caricature the females in his novel on the stereotyped notions; instead he makes them dwellers of the real and practical world. Amir's wife Soraya is a true Afghan-American in spirit and cognition, with the traits imbibed from both the cultures. Unlike the traditional Afghan woman, she is not a conformist and has had a dour history. She had lived with another man outside marriage. Yet, the strength of her character lies in her honest avowal of her past to Amir before their marriage. She is the pillar of strength for Amir post-marriage and post-Baba. Although she is against adoption, yet when she learns of Sohrab's parentage and history, she excitedly awaits the arrival of the boy. She is shown to be an empathetic, selfless and understanding wife, who does not wish to move to another house and instead chooses to nurse her ailing and dying father-in-law. Hosseini had changed her nationality from an American to an Afghan migrant, on the advice of his editor.

The extent to which Taliban can be accredited for the doomed state of landscape, economy, politics, society and the lives of people in general has been precisely featured in the novel. When Amir revisits Afghanistan to hunt for Sohrab, he is not able to identify what he sees as the same Afghanistan he left. What he had known as a land of plenty, was now a heap of rubble, where people had been reduced to sell their limbs to feed their famished families. Hosseini admits that these were "the verbatim stories of people selling a part of the leg and other



horror stories of execution and stoning at stadiums he had heard from acquaintances” (Harker Speaker Series). Another issue that surfaces in this phase of the story is the politics of religion played by those who are considered to be an authority on religion itself. Aseef who becomes a sort of a godman exploits little children from orphanages for the fulfilment of his sexual needs. This is a sin in Islam as well as against humanity. It is ironic that Aseef kills those who are accused of adultery. Such paradoxical images of the public versus the private life of the stalwarts of religion force one to question the righteousness of the interpretations one usually comes across. Aseef’s father is a Pashtun and his mother is a German, and Aseef has the negative attributes of both the races. His pride in being a Pashtun is aggravated by the arrogance of Germans. He is called a ‘sociopath’ later by Amir, for he has been a bully all his life. On Amir’s birthday, Aseef presents him with Hitler’s autobiography. It is ironic that a person of mixed parentage talks of the purity of the Pashtuns and accuses Hazara’s of polluting their blood. Aseef’s ambition for Afghanistan is that of a land which is inhabited only by the pure races as Pashtuns. Aseef is a great admirer of Adolf Hitler and his visions for his motherland are no different from those which Hitler had for his. Therefore, it is not surprising that Aseef bears an affinity towards a fanatic group such as Taliban. He derives sadistic pleasure from exploiting and killing those weaker than him. Aseef becomes a representative of the Taliban organisation and his deeds echo their outlook and activities.

The novel has often been categorised as a historical novel for it has the backdrop of the most tumultuous events recorded in the history of Afghanistan. Hosseini tries to interweave the pivotal events in the life of Amir, the novel’s protagonist, into those of the nation’s history, somewhat similar to the intertwining of personal and political as done by Salman Rushdie in *Midnight’s Children*. The political and personal are often juxtaposed and have major impacts on the lives of the characters. However, Amir cannot be said to be a prototype character representing a group of people, like Salim Sinai represents the *Midnight’s Children*. Amir’s is largely impacted by the political upheavals. The invasion of a foreign agency such as Soviet Union results in his expulsion from his own motherland. He returns during the reign of Taliban and returns as badly battered as Afghanistan was when abandoned by Taliban. Taliban destroyed



whatever good was left in Afghanistan, as they annihilated the only friend Amir ever had, Hassan.

*The Kite Runner* has been recorded as the first Afghan novel to be written in English. It certainly holds a landmark importance as far as the development of Afghan writings in English are concerned. In spite of the acclaim it has received worldwide, yet Hosseini's countrymen have raised an outcry against the "perforated sheet metaphor" he employs in depicting Afghanistan. Hosseini has been denounced in similar ways as Sir V.S. Naipaul was for the prejudice he expressed for India in his *An Area of Darkness*. The people of Afghanistan have objected strongly to the content of the novel and have accused the author of hurting and presenting a distorted image of their culture. Hosseini reverted to this charge when he responded in an interview, "They never say I am speaking about things that are untrue. Their beef is, 'Why do you have to talk about these things and embarrass us? Don't you love your country?' (Mehta n.p.). Hosseini asserts his right to employ the "poetic license" which is his due as a writer.

Although the novel fulfils the anxious expectations of a large number of its readers, it needs to be taken into account that its reading populace is largely the western populace. The theme is simple and largely explored, namely crime and punishment followed by attempts of atonement. Yet the exotic setting of an eastern country, especially one as tinted as Afghanistan has succeeded in playing upon the emotional keys of the West. The populace living in such a country as Afghanistan, which houses terrorists and continues to be in news for all the wrong reasons, are considered objects of pity and compassion. Hosseini has taken up the cause of the subaltern ethnic tribes as the Hazaras, who are a minority in Afghanistan and subject to rigorous hard work and unceasing oppression. Hosseini brings to the fore a portrait of Afghanistan and infuses it with lively characters, who experience the "general drama of pain" and life which is no different from the rest of the world.

In a speech delivered at Book Expo America on the 2 June, 2007, Hosseini talks about how the novel came on. He says:

The language in which I have written has changed. I began writing in Farsi, then I wrote in French and now I write in English, but one thing remains constant: I have always written for an audience of one. For me, writing has always been the selfish, self-

sacrificing act of telling myself a story. You know, something grabs my interest and compels me to sit down and see it through. This is how *The Kite Runner* was written. I had two boys in mind, one who was conflicted and on very unsure moral ground, the other pure and loyal and rooted in integrity. I knew that their friendship was doomed, that there would be a falling out and that this would impact the lives of those around them in a profound way. The how and why that would happen was the compulsion that led me to sit down and write that novel in March 2001.

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