

QUEST FOR IDENTITY AND REDEMPTION IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S THE KITE RUNNER

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ABSTRACT

“ For you, a thousand times over! “

The Afghan born American novelist and Physician, Khaled Hosseini is worldwide acknowledged as the true gifted teller of tales of his native land, Afghanistan. Hosseini grew up there in a middle-class family, and is the eldest of five siblings. His father was a civil diplomat and his mother was a teacher of Farsi and History at a large high school. As a result, Khaled was very fond of Persian Poetry and was deeply influenced by her mother's books. He was also fond of reading novels and short-stories. In 1976, when Khaled was 11, his father was transferred to a diplomatic post in Paris. So the whole family moved to France. Residing in Paris was a period of discovery of many new things for him. The year 1978 was a period of tremendous calamity in the history of Afghanistan, as the communist forces took control in a coup in the country. Khaled and his family could witness all upheavals going on in his land through television. At last, they had an idea of not returning back to Afghanistan. So, they decided to migrate to the United States. First, they sought political asylum in the States and then got settled in California. It was financially very difficult for them to survive there. “My parents were educated people. They had established lives, and when we came to the States, we left everything behind. We had to start from zero (Hosseini, Los Angeles Times 2003) Gradually, their conditions improved and Khaled enrolled himself in a medical course. Soon he became a famous doctor, got married to Roya and settled in Northern California.

KEYWORDS: Identity, Redemption, political asylum, Afghanistan

INRODUCTION

“A devastating, masterful and painfully honest story of a life crippled by an act of childhood and cowardice and cruelty... it speaks the harrowing truth about the power of evil, personal and political, and intoxicates, like a high-flying kite, with the power of hope”

(Daily Telegraph)

Hosseini narrates the pangs of his countrymen and women, their problems and obstacles that are making their lives hell. His novels carries a mission along - a mission to redeem his country, Afghanistan like it once was. The Afghan men, women and children who are caught in the web of religion, politics and terrorism features in his works. His works include three novels, **The Kite Runner** (2003), **A Thousand Splendid Suns** (2007) and **The Mountains Echoed** (2013). All his novels had remained international bestsellers, most notable The Kite Runner spending more than thousand weeks on the New York bestseller list. The Kite Runner made its cinematic adaptation in 2007. Talking about his first two novels, The Kite Runner and The Thousand Splendid Suns: “ His (Hosseini) two heart-tugging, blockbuster

novels, set in his native Afghanistan, offered simple tales of redemption and grace..."(The Guardian, 2013). Besides, Khaled has established The Khaled Hosseini Foundation, a non-profit organization that provides humanitarian assistance to the people of his native land, Afghanistan.

The Kite Runner is a poignant novel that follows the story of two Afghan boys. One is Amir, who belongs to Pashtun tribe and other his best friend and son of his father's servant; Hassan belongs to the Shia Hazara community. The story is a kind of Bildungsroman i.e. the development of the character of Amir and his relationship with all other characters in the novel. It is a story of guilt and redemption. As Hosseini himself he puts in:

"Because it's themes of friendship, betrayal, guilt, redemption and the uneasy love between fathers and sons are universal, and not specifically Afghan, the book has been able to reach across cultural, racial, religious and gender gaps to resonate with readers of varying backgrounds"

(Khaled Hosseini, San Francisco Chronicle 2005)

Hosseini depicts the relationship between fathers and sons as he elaborates:

"The Kite Runner was a father-son story, and A Thousand Splendid Suns can be seen as a mother-daughter story."

(Khaled Hosseini, 2013)

At the same time, the novel is insightful describing the world of Taliban in particular and the values and traditions of Afghan people in general. Hosseini's wide vision and great story narration enable him to depict the intricacies of life in Afghanistan in Taliban regime. The period of turmoil from the year 1970's to the Taliban regime of the 1990's until its fall in 2001 is witnessed in The Kite Runner. All these incidents had brought a drastic change in the lives of many people. The novel is a stark reality of human sufferings and affliction prevalent in those times. According to Rebecca Stuhr, "He (Hosseini) interweaves into the action of his stories the details of history, culture and daily life in Afghanistan." (P. 78). Another character, Rahim Khan too expresses his concern for his community: "Our ears became accustomed to the whistle of falling shells, the rumble of gunfire, our eyes familiar with the sight of a man digging bodies out of piles of rubble Kabul in those days was as close as you could get to that proverbial hell on earth" (p. 196). The Taliban were racist of topmost order occupying high rank in Hitler's Nazi party. They played a big role in cleansing Afghanistan of the minority Shia Hazaras in large numbers, for no crime at all. As a result, when Hassan and his wife are killed only for protecting the property of Amir and his father, is a hateful crime committed by the Taliban against the ethnic minority residing in Afghanistan. Moreover, they even banned music, dancing and drinking liquor in the country. Women were the customary targets of them who lived a fearful life there. In the novel, Khaled's description of the execution of ethnic minorities in the Ghazi stadium is an example of ill-treatment conducted on minorities.

Hosseini's The Kite Runner is a long exciting journey of Amir's life in Kabul and San Francisco. The author follows the flashback technique, as he narrates incidents of past from time to time. It is a perfect blend of past and present. "The novel has, at its heart a sense of loss, of displacement, of the ineluctable distance between the present and the past."(Hosseini, 2003) The novel opens in San Francisco, where Amir, the grown up narrator is contemplating his past that is full of guilt and betrayal. His thoughts are broken by a phone call from Rahim Khan, his father's old business partner giving him a chance to redeem himself, "There is a way to be good again" (p. 2) As a result, Amir is engrossed into sweet and bitter memories of his life in the company of his friend, Hassan. Thus, Rahim Khan's on phone call firms Amir

to embark upon the journey to Afghanistan after twenty six long years. He knew "It wasn't just Rahim Khan online. It was my past of unatoned sins." (P.1). Residing in America for so many years did not diminish his thoughts and feelings for his land: "... Kabul had become a city of ghosts for me... America was a river, roaring along, unmindful of the past. I could wade into this river; let my sins drown to the bottom..." (p. 126) Hosseini introduces to his readers two kinds of characters. On the one hand are Amir and Baba, the dominant Pashtuns and on the other hand, Hassan and Ali, the Shia Hazaras. Baba and Amir have palatial houses, whereas Ali and Hassan lived in impoverished huts. Both Amir and Hassan spent their days flying kites in Kabul. Assef, another Pashtun impudent boy stands for the ethnic discrimination pulled out on Hazaras in Afghanistan. His hatred for the Hazaras is very evident in the novel: "Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns. It always has been, always will be. We are the true Afghans, the pure Afghans..." (p. 38). During the annual kite festival, when Hassan is trying to grab the last cut kite, as a trophy for his friend Amir, he meets the ruffian Assef on the way. Assef demands the kite in order to disrobe Amir of his trophy, but Hassan denies. Assef then rapes Hassan in public, demeaning him forever in that locality. Amir watches the whole incident from the fringe, but did not dare to intervene for his beloved friend who was in this situation just because of Amir and his kite. Though Amir does not tell about this incident to anyone, but the guilt cripples him from inside. In order to overcome the weight of his guilt, he places his new watch and some money in Hassan's room to show him a thief. Hassan confesses the crime which he had not committed. In Hosseini's own words, " Hassan is a lovely guy and you root for him and you love him, but he's not complicated." Hassan and Ali leave Baba's house forever. Amir never sees him again. It is only because of his guilt that Amir remembers Afghanistan more than anything else. His journey back to his native country is made only to atone for his sin that he had carried for so many years in his heart. On reaching Afghanistan, the first shocking news he learns from Rahim Khan is that his Baba is the father of Hassan as Ali was sterile. Further, he tells him that Ali and Hassan both are dead. The only way of redeeming his past sin is to save Hassan's son 'Sohrab' who is thrown to orphanage, which is controlled by none other than Assef, the child rapist of Hassan. Amir not only saves Sohrab from Assef's clutches, but also takes him along with the United States to his own house. In the last part of the novel, Amir tells Sohrab of his father as both are flying kites in the park: "Did I ever tell you that your father was the best kite runner in Wazir Akbar Khan? Maybe all of Kabul?... He'd run kites and never look up at the sky, and people used to say he was chasing the kite's shadow. But they didn't know him like I did. Your father wasn't chasing any shadows. He just... knew." (P. 337)

CONCLUSIONS

Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* is a heart touching novel about the individual's search for redemption; redemption for the sin committed in the past; for the things left unfinished; for the failure in performing moral and ethical duties towards friends, family, humanity and country. Amir's quest to atone for his past sin and redeem himself of the guilt forms the central crusade of the novel. Amir realizes it was not just to atone for his sins, but his Baba's too:

"The *Kite Runner* written by Khaled Hosseini, is a famous novel for its devastating and painful, honest depiction of identity, betrayal, deception and atonement. The narrative portrays the journey of a boy escaping from his haunted childhood while torturing himself with his own contrition. These two concepts of identity and redemption play a vital role in creating the string that binds the character together..."

(Saraswat Niraja IJIMS 2014)

The novel takes its readers to both, the journey of glamorous Afghani life as well as deceitful life of those less

fortunate. Amir's unatoned sin have scourged his conscience and have taken away all his joys and happiness. As he was aware of the fact that past persists in several ways: “ It's wrong what they say about the past. I've learned, about how you can bury it. Because the past claws its way out.” (P.1). His novels takes up the universal themes of love, friendship, betrayal, guilt and finally redemption. Hosseini admits, “ My books speak to the sort of universal thing that bind all people, regardless of culture, race, religion. They're really stories about families, stories about having a reasonable expectation of happiness in life... those are not Afghan-specific things (Dallas Morning News Archive, 2015)

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