Thawing the Past: A Study of Khaled Hosseini's the Kite Runner

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***Abstract*- The present paper highlights the inescapable influence of the past in the lives of the different characters of the novel. The protagonist, Amir, reflects on his childhood in Afghanistan and his complex relationship with his childhood friend, Hassan. The class and ethnic differences between them create a divide, yet their bond remains strong until a traumatic incident in an alley where Amir witnesses Hassan being assaulted but does nothing to intervene. This event haunts Amir throughout his life, shaping his decisions and relationships. The narrative moves back and forth between past and present, revealing the impact of choices made by him.**

1. Introduction

The Kite Runner, a novel by Khaled Hosseini, explores the themes of ethnic identity, friendship, betrayal, and redemption in the context of Afghanistan's turbulent history. The narrative delves into the violent and humiliating suppression of the Hazara minority group, highlighting the repressive socio-cultural perspective towards them (Nayebpour & Varghaiyan, 2020). The protagonist, Amir, undergoes a journey of self-redemption, influenced by archetypal images such as Anima, Persona, and Shadow (Wang, 2019). The novel also examines the power of storytelling and the potential for redemption in a land on the brink of destruction (Miswari, 2018). Through a New Historicist lens, the text is seen as a site of struggle between oppressive Orientalist and liberatory Postcolonialist narratives, shaping readers' perception of Afghanistan (Gunwant & Gaur, 2016). The story of Amir and his childhood friend Hassan reflects the tumultuous changes in Afghanistan, from the fall of the monarchy to the rise of the Taliban regime (Bloom, 2009)

2. Thawing the Past

> *"That was a long time ago, but 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. Looking back now, I realize I have been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty-six years." (Hosseini 1)*

At the very outset the first person narrator of the novel acknowledges the overwhelming presence of past in the present. It is December 2001, and the narrator, Amir reminiscences about his childhood in Afghanistan. As he takes a walk along Spreckels Lake in San Francisco, he sees two kites. He cannot help thinking of Hassan, the kite runner of the novel. Amir has received a call from Rahim Khan asking him to visit him. Rahim khan's call is a call from the past, a call to revisit past and a call to unravel the past. As Amir admits *"I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day of winter of 1975".(1)* He is today what he made of himself by making the choices he made in the past. Rahim Khan's call is an opportunity to face the past he has been peeking into but refused to face.

The plot of the novel starts unfolding through Amir's memories of his childhood in Afghanistan. When he thinks of his childhood, it is filled with the memories of the time he spent with Hasaan. But he never thought of him as his friend. He never called him a friend. Hassan was a Shia, a Hazara and son of a servant. Amir is son of an affluent Pashtun, Sunni Muslim. Hassan's religion, ethnicity and social class separate him from Amir. Baba and Ali, Amir and Hassan are like friends but they are not friends. They belong to two different worlds. Baba in spite of his love for Hassan never thinks of sending him to school. Amir accepts this division as given facts that could not be changed, the facts he even does not want to change.

> "*Never mind any of those things," he adds. "Because history isn't easy to overcome. Neither is religion. In the end, I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara, I was a Sunni and he was a Shi'a, and nothing was ever going to change that" (Hosseini 24*).

The past not only lingers in the subconscious of individuals but also that of communities, that of nations.

Meanwhile the narration of the novel keeps on moving back and forth to foreground the fact that seeds of the present are sown in the past. Amir traces his destiny backwards, to the very first words he and Hassan uttered.

> *And under the same roof we spoke our first words.*
> *Mine was Baba*
> *His was Amir. My name.*
> *Looking back on it now, I think the foundation for what happened in the winter of 1975-and all that followed-was already laid in those first words. (Hosseini 11)*

Baba is like a god to Amir. He was six feet and five inches tall with a thick beard and wild, curly hair. People said that he even wrestled a bear once. Baba was strong and successful man. Throughout his childhood Amir struggles to live up to his expectations and seek his approval. His desire to please his father becomes his fatal flaw. Baba worries about Amir's inability to

stand up for himself. Baba feels that *"There is something missing in that boy."* Amir knows what Baba thinks and feels jealous of Hassan .

Hassan is a gentle and kind person. He is utterly devoted to Amir. He never denies him anything. When Aseef and other boys bully Amir, he protects him. Hassan's unconditional love and loyalty towards Amir render him vulnerable.

Amir wants to please his father at any cost and the kite tournament is an opportunity he does not want to miss. Hassan will do anything for him. As he says, "for you thousand times over". That is genesis of their tragedy. On the day of the tournament Amir wins the battle of kites as he sends the last blue kite flying loose. Now it is Hasssan's turn to bring the kite back to make the victory complete. The kite runner runs, narrator tells us for the last time. When Hassan does not return for long, Amir goes to look for him and finds him in the alley surrounded by Aseef and other boys. Amir stands there hiding. Amir has been standing there whole his life. He has been furtively watching Hassan being raped. He has been watching himself hiding and doing nothing for Hassan. Hassan reminds Amir of the sacrificial lamb. Amir sacrifices Hassan for Baba, Hassan sacrifices himself for Amir.

The narration of the past is also interrupted by the events of the past of the past. Some of these are events that tell us about Baba's past. The narration goes back to 1933 the year Baba was born. Around the same time Ali parents are hit and killed by a car. Baba's father took Ali in. Ali and Baba grew up together. The relationship between Amir and Hassan mirrors the relationship between Baba and Ali. Baba also carries the guilt of the past that remains a secret till his death. Hassan is Baba's son. Like Amir, Baba had betrayed his loyal friend. Amir always felt Baba favoured Hassan. He never forgot his birthday. Baba even calls a plastic surgeon from India to fix his cleft lip. Amir is quite jealous of him. But nevertheless never acknowledges him as his son. Hassan lives the life of disadvantaged Hazara servant boy. It would later dawn upon Amir how much he and his father were alike. They both carry the guilt of the past.

After the incident in the alley Amir is not able bear Hassan's presence around him.

> *HASSAN MILLED ABOUT the periphery of my life after that. I made sure that our paths crossed as little possible, planned y day the way. Because when he was around, the oxygen seeped out of the room. My chest tightened and I could not draw enough air. I'd stand there, gasping in my own little airless bubble of atmosphere. (Hosseini 83)*

Amir avoids Hassan, then, he accuses him of stealing. Ali and Hassan leave their house. This is the last time he saw Hassan. But Hassan remains a living presence in his life and in the rest of the novel. The past never dies. When they are leaving Afghanistan and Amir is feeling depressed, Baba asks him to think of something good. He thinks of Hassan.

> *I didn't remember what month that was or what year even. I only knew the memory lived in me, a perfectly encapsulated morsel of good past, a brushstroke of color on the gray barren canvas that our lives had become. (Hosseini 113)*

Past is source of anxiety, past is guilt, past is also a shaded place where one finds relief at least for the moment, a corner of momentary escape from present.

For Amir, America is not only an escape from Taliban ruled Afghanistan but also from his guilt ridden past.

> *...Kabul had become city of ghosts for me. A city of hare lipped ghosts.* (*Hosseini 126)*

But shadow of Hassan follows them. When he graduates his father cannot help mentioning Hassan.

> *Then Baba rolled his head toward me, "I wish Hassan had been with us today," he said. (Hosseini 124)*

When Amir is getting married, he wonders whether Hassan had got married. He thinks of him when Soryaa confesses about her past.

> *I envied her.her secret was out. Spoken. Dealt with. (Hosseini 152)*

Souraya has courage enough to reveal her secret even when it means risking the possibility of a respectable marriage. But Amir lacks that courage to face his past and hence is unable escape from it. He still stands in that alley paralyzed.

But that call from the past changes everything for him. Amir feels Rahim knew truth about Hassan. The narration of the novel comes where it started. Amir agrees to visit Pakistan to meet Rahim Khan. Chapter Sixteen is in Rahim Khan's voice. The narration again moves to past. He tells Amir about Hassan, his wife Farzana and their son Sohrab. Hassan and Farzana wer killed and their son was sent to orphanage. Rahim wants Amir to bring Sohrab to Pakistan so that an American couple can adopt him. Amir is first reluctant but finally agrees to go. He also realizes that Hassan was his brother. All this makes him very upset; he would have liked to live in his oblivion. But the time has come to face and resolve the issues of the past.

Hassan is dead but he a part of him was alive as Sohrab. Past is no more a shadow, a ghost or frozen moment in the alley. It is living in present. His encounters this past: alive, breathing, and palpable at the Taliban official's residence. He asks for Sohrab. The guards bring him in. It is like seeing Hssan again.

> *The resemblance was breath taking. Disorienting. (Hosseini 257)*

Then he realizes that the official sitting opposite him is Aseef. Whole episode is being replayed. Aseef raped Hassan. Now he is sexually abusing his son Sohrab. Sohrab has same look of sacrificial lamb on his face. Aseef is the violent predator. But this time Amir does not stand there paralyzed. He reacts, he acts, he fights. As Aseef beats him, Sohrab takes out his sling and aims at Aseef as Hassan had done before. Amir also risks his own life in order to save Sohrab. Amir is not just rescuing Sohrab; he is recuing Hassan, he is rescuing himself, he is rescuing Baba. He finally reveals this secret to Suraya and confesses his guilt.The process of healing of the souls has begun.

But Amir has to heal Sohrab too. Sohrab's soul also carries the shadows of the past. Sexual abuse has scarred his soul. He feels dirty. He feels guilty. He feels tired. "*I am so khasta." So very tired. (Hosseini 326)* It sounds like someone old, one who has lived a hard life.

Bringing him home does not revive Sohrab emotionally. Unlike Hassan, Sohrab does not give Amir unconditional love and trust. Amir has to work hard to earn win his trust, earn his love. Amir and Sourya try their best. But Sohrab does not respond. He does not smile. He does not talk.

> *It was the silence of the one who had taken cover in a dark place, curled up all the edges and tucked them under. (Hosseini 331)*

And then a miracle happens on one bright Sunday. Dark shadows of the past are dispelled by a pleasant hint of memory. Amir and Sohrab have pleasant memories of the past and common thread is the kite runner, Hassan. Hassan tells Amir in his letter that he had taught his son to fly kite. Kite remains a symbol of what they desired, what they thought and perceived as beautiful: dreams, aspirations, love, friendship and trust. Amir buys a kite for Sohrab and flies it. Sohrab watches it mesmerized as Amir cuts the other kite lose and runs, as Hassan would have, to bring the kite for him. When Amir sees a hint of smile across Sohrab's face, he feels that the process of thawing the past has begun.

Because when spring comes, it melts the snow one flake at a time, maybe I just witnessed the first flake melting. (340)

Amir begins his narration by confessing that he had been living in a frozen moment of betrayal and guilt while his life apparently moved on. The past kept on pulling him back. He has to travel back to confront his past so that the normal flow of time towards future resumes.

3. Summing Up

The narrative of the novel is driven by the narrator's quest to shed the shadow of his past. The past suffocates him and stifles his growth as a human being. A part of Amir is trapped in an alley on a winter of 1975. He is a child of twelve who is neither able to save Hassan nor able to leave and forget about it. In order to break that spell he has to take a journey back home and save Sohrab. The moral standard that Amir must meet to redeem himself is established early in the novel when Baba says a boy who doesn't stand up for himself will never be able to stand up to anything in his life. Amir's failure to stand up for himself as a boy makes him a failure. The only way he can come out of that darkness of guilt as an adult is to stand up for himself and stand up for the people who trust him.

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