

Portrayal of Migration in Khalid Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*: A Diasporic Analysis



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Abstract: *The portrayal of migration in South Asian fiction has been extensive and multifaceted. Numerous literary works delve into the complex themes surrounding the identities of migrants and their encounters with the dichotomy of home and exile. The present study has discussed representation of migration in Khalid Hosseini's The Kite Runner. In the selected novel, characters undergo the process of emigrating from their country of origin to a foreign host nation experiencing various circumstances. This migration occurs either out of a sense of reluctance stemming from certain push forces, or freely as a result of specific pull elements. Nevertheless, the migrants in the host countries exhibit a diverse range of experiences, encompassing nostalgia, hybridity, anti-cosmopolitanism, and transnationalism. This qualitative study has used Lee's Theory of Migration as a theoretical framework. The interpretation of the selected texts has been conducted using a qualitative content analysis technique. The study presents intriguing results that diverge from the prevailing ideas on migration.*

Keywords: Migration, Diasporic identities, Transnationalism, Anti/cosmopolitanism

Background to the Present Study

Diaspora writers, as individuals who have migrated and settled in many host countries around the globe, have consistently engaged in literary pursuits that explore their cultural heritage, the inhabitants of their homelands, and the process of assimilation into their adopted societies. Within the realm of South Asian literature, a multitude of fiction writers have crafted noteworthy literary works that effectively capture and portray various concerns and experiences pertaining to the migratory population. The topic of migration in the context of contemporary globalization is a prominent subject of interest among fiction writers. The study of literature, namely South Asian fiction in English, created by Diasporas over the past two decades, has received significant scholarly

attention within the frameworks of feminism, Marxism, post colonialism, and its relationship to migration. The primary focus of this study pertains to migration and its associated concerns, including alienation, nostalgia, racial discrimination, labor class challenges, and identity crises.

In addition to documenting and discussing the migration-related challenges faced by other migrants, these individuals also provide personal narratives, addressing their own experiences, difficulties, and conditions as migrants. Prominent writers of the South Asian diaspora encompass a notable group of individuals, such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Khalid Hosseini, Mohsin Hamid, Monica Ali, Nadeem Aslam, Shyam Selvadurai, Zulfiqar Goshe, Kiran Dasai, among several others. These

authors has extensive expertise in the field of migration. The diaspora writers documented their personal experiences as well as those of others pertaining to the phenomenon of migration. According to Bill Ashcroft et al., writers of the diaspora during the postcolonial period have addressed themes such as displacement, a prevalent preoccupation with the concept of identity and authenticity (Ashcroft et al., p. 9). From a historical perspective, the region of South Asia has experienced significant waves of refugees and displaced individuals, resulting in some of the most substantial population movements in the post-World War II era. Indeed, the nations

The experiences of South Asian migrant writers and the issues of immigration they explore in their works of fiction can be understood as interconnected through a network of influences. Furthermore, it is possible to identify certain parallels by examining the narrative patterns utilized in the works of these writers, as well as the tactics of vernacular experimentation they apply.

The convergence of these intersections primarily arises from the mutual utilization of a common network of literary influences. However, it is important to note that the thematic content and narrative structures of these literary works can exhibit significant disparities contingent upon the specific portrayal of migrant experiences within them. Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* (2003) and Deepak Unnikrishnan's work *Temporary People* (2016) exemplify the adversities experienced by migrant workers originating from South Asia, as well as their sentiments of dislocation within the contexts of Britain and the United Arab Emirates. The novels *The Nowhere Man* (1972) by Kamala Markandaya and *"Jasmine"* (1989) by Bharati Mukherjee prominently address the themes of identity and acculturation within the context of the South Asian diaspora residing in London and Iowa. Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* is one of the several diasporic literary works originating from the Anglophone world that highlights the experiences of immigrants in American society, including the pressure they face to adapt (Grewal 1996:99).

1.1 Objectives of the Study

To analyze the portrayal of migration in the selected novel

To discuss characters' transformation in the course of migration

1.2 Significance of the Study

The current study holds considerable significance due to its exploration of the phenomena of migration, which is a prominent topic within the field of literature, specifically in the context of diaspora and migration literature. The phenomena of migration has influence on several facets of life, encompassing both economic and socio-cultural dimensions. The economy has a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of a nation and exhibits a profound interconnection with the phenomenon of migration. Moreover, the migration of individuals significantly influences their sense of identity. Numerous authors have produced literary works encompassing narratives, novels, and various other forms of creative expression that explore the theme of relocation. This work holds academic significance as it addresses a prominent contemporary issue, namely migration, which is subject to ongoing debate.

2. Analysis and Discussion

Khalid Hosseini's first novel, *The Kite Runner*, is written in the backdrop of the Soviet-Afghan War in 1980s. The traumatic war continued for nine years between Afghan Mujahidin, Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and the Soviet Army. The story revolves around the protagonist, Amir who has a childhood friend, Hassan. Amir is a Pashtun boy who, most of the story, seems struggling to fulfill the expectations of his Baba. Hassan is a Hazara boy, serving as is typical of his class, as servant of Amir, but he was more than this, a very close friend. In the efforts to secure his self-image Amir loses Hassan who is raped by Asef, who is represented as a Pashtun with extreme evil traits. Meanwhile, Amir moves with his father to the U.S. in the wake of civil war in Afghanistan. Thus, the first half of *TKR* focuses on Amir's life with Hassan whereas the second half reveals Amir's life in the U.S, there he feels guilty for

not helping Hassan, and finally he goes back to Pakistan to his uncle-like figure, Rahim Khan, and then eventually to Afghanistan to rescue Hassan's child, Sohrab, whom he accompanies back to the U.S.

2.1 Dramatic Structure of *The Kite Runner*

The transient scene shows that Amir calls San Francisco his home. He is called by Rahim Khan, his father's friend now living in Pakistan, whose words, "There is a way to be good again," strike his mind and begin his narration of his childhood in Afghanistan. By recalling his childhood with Hassan, Amir debates matters such as childhood nostalgic memories, sectarianism, guilt, and migrants' identity.

The majority of the story takes place at the wealthiest city of Wazir Akbar Khan, a district of Kabul, Afghanistan. The act of kite flying is central to the book both in terms of the relationships among the key agents and for how it symbolizes key themes in the book. Kite flying symbolizes freedom, movement and progress. Flying kites in competitions provided the most important game for children in Afghanistan. Each year dozens of youths would fly kites whose lines were laced with glass, seeking to cut down the kites of others, until only one kite remained in the sky. As the kites fell, other youths would run to grab the fallen kites of others. The government of Taliban mercilessly banned these important competitions and it struck Hosseini so much that he wrote this complete and beautiful novel, *The Kite Runner*.

The next significant scene in this novel is the rape of Hassan, which occurs at the close of the competition. Hassan, a Hazara boy accomplished at kite running, does everything for Amir who, in return, strives to fulfill his Baba's expectations. During the final kite fighting competition, Assef, a typical Pashtun has grudges against the Hazara Community.

Assef criticizes Amir for being close to Hassan, a Hazara boy who always works selflessly for Amir. On the day of the final competition of kite fighting, when Amir's kite cut down the kite of the final opponent, Hassan runs to catch it to bring it back to Amir so that he can present it as a trophy to his father. As he finds the kite,

Hassan is surrounded by Assef and his accomplices. He is brutally raped by Assef. Amir finds him, but he doesn't help him, both from fear and because he is so obsessed with winning his Baba that he wants to present the kite at any cost. This is the guilt Amir bears throughout the second half of the book. The rape scene symbolically signifies the loss of childhood innocence of Hassan and the loss of friendship between Amir and Hassan. Hassan sacrifices, every time, for Amir as the latter says that Hassan was the price he had to pay, the lamb I had to slay to win Baba" (68). The researcher perceived another aspect that Amir has an unrealized version of jealousy with Hassan because the latter is closer to Baba than the former and moreover, Amir is always scolded and blamed for his cowardice and timidity by his Baba. The following lines from the text show the jealousy from Amir's narration; "If I changed my mind and asked for a bigger and fancier kite, Baba would buy it for me - but then he'd buy it for Hassan too. Sometimes I wished he wouldn't do that. Wished he'd let me be the favorite" (p.51). These lines clearly demonstrate Amir's biased attitude towards Hassan and such behavior is the result of Baba's closeness to Hassan.

The final part of the book presents an act on the part of Amir that can redeem the guilt from this previous act. At Rahim Khan's urging, he goes to Pakistan and then Afghanistan to rescue late Hassan's only child, Sohrab who is being kept as a dancing boy by Assef. By rescuing Sohrab and bringing him to the U.S. he feels satisfied and refined from the guilt. This act also rebuilds the family relationships: as Amir has discovered that Hassan was his half-brother, so he is Sohrab's uncle. The atonement and rebuilding are not immediate: Sohrab is so mentally harmed that he is distant and withdrawn. But a small amount of progress is made when Amir takes Sohrab to fly kites. Repentance and rebuilding, however difficult, is worth the effort: looking at Sohrab, he hears Hassan's words, "For you, a thousand times over" (p.223). The cited line reminds Amir the great words Hassan used to pass for him.

Amir, the protagonist, is described struggling to

locate his identity at various levels. Firstly, he seems a timid boy who lacks courage and often relies on Hassan who always assists him without any hope of reward. Amir's cowardice is often pointed out by Baba, his father, who wants him bold, offensive and extroverted. One example of his cowardice is the scene of Hassan's rape where he says, "I ran because I was a coward. I was afraid of Assef and what he would do to me. I was afraid of getting hurt. That's what I told myself as I turned my back to the alley, to Hassan" (p. 68). The cited line reflects Amir's timidity and inability to rescue Hassan, his bosom friend, from the cruelty of Assef in the novel.

2.2 Anti-Cosmopolitan Concerns in the Mode of Ethnic Segregation in *The Kite Runner*

On a close examination, Hosseini's TKR reveals some of the anti-cosmopolitan elements in the light of Cicero's views. Pieper, C. (2021) gave an account of cosmopolitanism that is consisted of two stances. The first point provides an account of degree of human fellowship and it stresses that all human are equal citizen of world. The second stance with more practical thought that a benevolent Empire governed in the best interests of its citizens might actually bring about a political state covering the entire world that could embody this humanist ideal. Cicero's model of cosmopolitanism is based on a world-wide state governed by mono set of political laws based on divinity and that unite all humanity. In other words, such cosmopolitan model would provide equity and justice to everybody including the minorities, subjugated and segregated people. Cicero sees citizens equal to gods. Similarly, in cosmopolitanism: ethics in the world of strangers, Appiah (2006) argues that cosmopolitanism means an ethical obligation that transcends kinship-to-relative ties. He recognizes the moral obligations we have to our own family and members of the community, but focuses on the issue of moral obligations to strangers.

Hosseini's *TKR* demonstrates anti-cosmopolitanism in term of ethnical segregation of Hazara Community. Hosseini seems to reveal xenophobic mentality of totalitarian Assef who doesn't accept Hassan and treats him as an

outsider always. The ethnic segregation and the hatred for Hassan as Hazara is implied in remarks Assef passes that Afghanistan is the country of Pashtuns and it will remain their property. He thinks that Afghans are pure people and not Hazara community and that the latter are just polluting their homeland.

Racism in *Kite Runner* is caused by social, structural and psychosocial factors. Social structural factors are influenced by how society views the Hazaras. In this case, the appearance of the Hazaras is important. Genetically, the Hazaras are said to be associated with Mongolians and Uighurs in western China, giving them a flat nose and Chinese characters. Their appearance is more beautiful, unlike Pashtuns with different eye colors and sharp noses and high cheekbones. "They called him a mediocre nose because of the unique Mongolian Hazara character of Ali and Hassan. For many years I knew that the Hazaras were from the Mughal Empire. It was just a descendant and a little like a Chinese" (Hosseini, 2003: 9). Hazaras are believed to share some similarities with Mongols, such as appearance, language, and relatives. In other words, the Hazaras are a hybrid of Mongolians and Persians. Various beliefs and cultural practices are also social and structural factors of racism. Both Pashtuns and Hazaras are Muslims, but their beliefs are different. On the other hand, the psycho-social factors that cause racism are the prejudices and stereotypes that exist in society. It is clearly stated that the economic and social status of Kiterunners differs between Pashtuns and Hazaras. The Hazaras live in the streets and in the homes of the servants of the families they serve, while the Pashtuns live in large luxury homes. Therefore, the Pashtuns are considered to be the strongest and richest race in Afghanistan, and the Hazaras are considered to be the weakest and poorest races. As depicted in *Kite Runner*, the Hazaras were called evil and filthy in my class.

These perceptions continue to influence the way Pashtuns think today. The Hazaras do not require Pashtun privileges because they still

consider the Hazaras to be inhuman. All this prejudice leads to the negative stereotype that the Hazaras are poor, stupid, enslaved, and disabled. Hassan and Ali fit these stereotypes. Hassan has cleft lip and ants have paralyzed legs. They also serve only as waitresses, beggars and servants.

Hosseini mentions the reason Pashtuns kept marginalizing the Hazaras due to ethnic differences. Hassan's mother is an ethnic Hazara, a Shi'a Muslim and Hassan will therefore always be considered a second-class citizen in society. Amir and Hassan have a very close bond but the latter is marginalized by society and even by his friend- Amir who being unable to confront with Assef refuses Hassan's friendship and says, "But he is not my friend, I almost blurted, he is my servant" (p. 36). Amir, here, shows his indifferent attitude towards Hassan here.

Assef brutally rapes Hassan, later on Hassan and his wife are killed by Taliban. His only son, Sohrab, is captured by Assef and used as a dancing boy. Later on the government of Taliban creates Islamic fundamentalism which creates more crisis for refugees specifically for minorities who are compelled to live in a total chaos amidst the legal confusion, xenophobia, racism and rest of all life without human rights. Therefore, in Hosseini's *TKR* Afghanistan is not a cosmopolitan community where Cicero's and Appiah's model of cosmopolitan city can be justified instead it is an ethnically segregated community that reflects ethnic marginalization and it violates the right of human equality.

Hosseini's novel, *The Kite Runner*, diverges from other literary works on migration by offering a distinct portrayal of refugees that deviates from the typical themes of lamentation and nostalgia for one's roots and past. This observation illustrates that migrants exhibit various forms of adaptation in accordance with their individual life objectives, rather than being stagnant in the past. Baba demonstrates his determination to nurture his son and embody altruism despite the altered and diminished circumstances. In contrast, the General withdraws from his present reality and remains immersed in nostalgia until his eventual return

to Afghanistan, resuming his former position. Amir, on the other hand, must confront the shortcomings of his past in order to reconcile his current existence with his ancestral origins, a task he successfully accomplishes. The book places significant emphasis on the significance of family, and the author skillfully employs personal anecdotes to symbolically construct a broader story of Afghanistan. The phenomenon of anti-cosmopolitanism has been observed in the practice of ethnic segregation within the Hazara population in Afghanistan. The Afghan community is shown to be in violation of the universal human right of equality, as evidenced in the book where it is observed that the community practices segregation against the Hazara community and fails to afford them equal treatment as compared to the Pashtuns. The book also explores the issue of optimism toward migrants, as evidenced by Rahim Khan's uttered words, "there is a way to be good again," which symbolically embody a profound sense of hope for individuals who have been uprooted from their homes. The author has effectively portrayed the lifestyle of diasporic individuals by incorporating native word into the English language, so shedding light on the socio-cultural contexts of the migrants' places of origin.

2.3 Diasporic Concerns in Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

Like a number of South Asian fiction writers, Khalid Hosseini is an Afghan-American diasporic writer who discusses the predicaments and life experience of migrants. His writing forms a narrative and discourse revealing his own experience through different characters. The author demonstrates his observation and experience also shared by many others, categorically diasporic, of dislocation and voices it through his writing. In other words, his writing, specifically, *TKR* seems highly autobiographical which he endorses too. In one of his interviews with Newlines (2003) the author says:

The storyline of my novel is almost fictitious. The character was invented and the plot was invented. But as always in fiction, autobiographical elements are woven into the story. Perhaps the most similar part of my own

life is the United States, where Amir and Baba are about to start a new life. Coming to the United States as an immigrant, I vividly recall the short time and difficult task of assimilating into a new culture that had to be dedicated to charity in the early days of California.

Hosseini, like many other diasporic, constructs personal stories allegorically to interwoven public narratives which are mostly linked with geo-political concerns of diasporic people. In TKR, a fraught son-father relationship, ethnic clash between Shia and Sunni, as Hassan and The conflict between language and culture is a fundamental feature of diasporic literature. Diasporic writers use foreign languages and often add native vocabulary to reveal the socio-cultural background of her home country. He explores his experience between his asylum and his hometown. Similarly, the title of the novel symbolizes friendship, freedom and describes kite flying as a well-known sport in Afghanistan. "All winter districts of Kabul hosted kite fighting tournaments. Kite fighting tournaments were an old winter tradition in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* is unlike other books written on migration that present refugees lamenting and nostalgic ones about roots and past. It demonstrates that instead of refugees being stuck in the past, they adapt in different ways based on their life purposes: Baba pursues his goal of raising his son and being a giving person in spite of the changed and reduced circumstances; the General isolates himself from his new conditions and is fully nostalgic until he actually returns to Afghanistan to his old role: Amir must negotiate the failings of his past before he can integrate his new life and his old roots, but he does so. Family has pivotal role in the book and through private stories, the author has allegorically constructed public narrative of Afghanistan. Anti-cosmopolitanism has been found in the mode of ethnic segregation of the Hazara community in Afghanistan. The Afghan community violates the universal human right of equality and instead it has been found in the

book segregating the Hazara community and doesn't treat them equal to Pashtuns. The book also rings round the theme of optimism for migrants as the spoken words by Rahim Khan, "there is way to be good again" symbolically represent great hope for displaced migrants. The author has demonstrated the life style of diasporic people through amalgamation of native vocabulary in English language in order to reveal socio-cultural backgrounds of migrants' native countries.

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