

UNDERCURRENTS OF REMINISCENCE: UNVEILING OF PAST IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S *THE KITE RUNNER* AND *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*

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ABSTRACT

Memories can be dangerous as they remind us of the past. In a way, memories are the recollection of gashes as well as happiness. Literature is a splendid realm that traces the recollections of the past. This paper aims to dissect the theme of 'recollection' or 'reminiscence' in Khaled Hosseini's novels *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Kite Runner*. The act of returning home, the significance of home, and thinking of home are substantially seen in his novels. The Afghan-American experiences prompt Hosseini to address the childhood trauma in Afghanistan, issues of immigration, and the present scenario of Afghanistan. *The Kite Runner* (2003) interweaves the tale of two Afghan boys, Amir and Hassan, who were parted by the Afghan civil war. Returning home becomes an act of redemption for Amir to compensate the act of betrayal of his best friend Hassan. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* describes the relationship between two Afghani women, Laila and Maryam, and their lives under the Taliban regime. The paper intends to show how reminiscence works as an effective tool in enhancing the aesthetic effect of the novels under consideration.

Keywords: Reminiscence, Afghanistan, Return to the homeland, Memory Studies, Diaspora, Exile.

INTRODUCTION

*There is no present or future,
Only the past, happening over and over
again.*

- EUGENE O'NEIL

Memories are the recollection of scattered images of the past that are stored in the subconscious mind. Memory studies is a convergence field, with contributions from political philosophy, cultural history, media archaeology, social psychology, and comparative literature. It emerged as a new and different way for scholars to think about past events in the twentieth century. Memory was always a preoccupation of social thinkers, though it was only in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries that a distinctively social perspective on memory became prominent with the use of the term 'collective memory' by Hofmannsthal in 1902 (Olick and Robbins, 1998). Memory research is closely linked to many issues at the forefront of contemporary political debate, particularly the political effects of the continuing presence of past hurts in the present (Radstone, 2008). Scholarly interest in memory has resurfaced since the 1980s. While psychologists were more interested in memory from

an individual perspective, sociological theorists emphasize the social and cultural bases of shared memories (Pennebaker, 2013). Memory studies is thus a multidisciplinary field of studying a ‘traveling concept’ as defined by Mieke Bal.

In Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* traumatic memory and cultural memory interplay. Looking back to the roots and lamenting over their separation, the characters undergo cultural memories, childhood memories and traumatic experiences. Returning to home land becomes the representation of redemption as well as of remembrance for the characters in the selected works. The memories of prosperous Kabul were part of Hosseini’s memory and most of the characters, who tussle between childhood memories and present are his own self representation Hosseini uses memory as a tool not only to remember the past or to recollect the cultural roots but also to criticize the present scenario of his homeland. His pen turns into a weapon which can attack even the throws built of diamond.

Objectives of the Study

The study tries to designate the position of memory studies in Khaled Hosseini’s novel *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. It further tries

- * To employ memory studies as a critical tool to portray the traumatic experiences of the central characters.
- * To explore the experiences in the past and to interconnect with the present day conditions.
- * To analyze ‘home’ as a significant metaphor in the selected works.

METHODOLOGY

Memory studies is a multidisciplinary field which combines intellectual strands from anthropology, education, literature, history, philosophy, psychology and sociology, among others (Roediger & Wertsch, 2008). Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) have also inspired much research in the area of memory studies (Hoelscher & Alderman 2004, p.349). Other early key texts in the field of memory studies include: French philosopher Henri Bergson’s *Matter and Memory* (1896), Paul Ricœur’s *Memory, History and Forgetting* (2004), French historian Pierre Nora’s *Realms of Memory* (1996-8) and Jacques Le Goff’s *History and Memory* (1992). For these writers, the concept of memory destabilized grand narratives of history and power, as “memory, remembering and recording are the very key to existence, becoming and belonging” (Garde-Hansen, 2011). Halbwachs argued that memory is not simply an individual phenomenon, but is relational in terms of family and friends, and also societal and collective in terms of the social frameworks of social groups.

Memories are part of a larger process of cultural negotiation, which defines memories as narratives and as fluid and mediated cultural and personal traces of the past (Sturken, 2008). This suggests the fluid nature of memories and enforces representation of the past in personal and social action. Whereas Halbwachs used the term ‘collective memory’, many students of literature and some philosophers prefer the term ‘cultural memory’, while historians and social scientists mostly use the term ‘social memory’. In practice these differences in terminology are pointless to diverging definitions of communal memory, than to different approaches to studying it. Halbwachs

chose an approach based on sociological categories – family, class, religion. Many students of ‘cultural memory’ come to the subject with a strong interest in recollection, repression, and the subconscious, sometimes informed by psychoanalytic thought, and trace these in literary and visual sources. Both because of a lack of traumatic experiences generate fear and the pleasant experiences create nostalgia in the characters’ minds. Various aspects of memory studies are seen in the selected works for study.

Textual Analysis

Khaled Hosseini’s books are mostly contemplated with the diasporic features and nostalgia over homeland. *The Kite Runner* is primarily a historical novel that focuses on the lives of Afghans, the collapse of monarchy and the rise and fall of Taliban. As a genre, historical fiction focusses on a particular setting and the social conditions of the time period but Hosseini’s novels address the real changes in political power and its impact on characters’ lives. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* tells the story of two women, Mariam and Laila, with deeply moving themes of family, friendship, faith and salvation to be found in love.

The postmodern era of degradation and fragmentation delimits to the future and present. The linear development of time from present to future is intentionally deviating from the past cultures and the historicity. “Social amnesia”, Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz termed this disconnection from the historical discontinuity by highlighting the role of memory or rather, its absences in the postmodern scenario. It is in this disorientating state that Khaled Hosseini is revisiting the past using the features of memory and nostalgia in his works. The selected works for the study is relevant as Afghanistan is still suffocating between

the social aristocrats and the peace of the country. Afghanistan was once a peaceful and developing country and the city of Kabul was an emerging center of cosmopolitanism. In an interview, Hosseini had said that, Afghanistan portrayed in the medias as the breeding ground for terrorism or Taliban, the opium trade, the cycles of war, there is so much more to Afghanistan. It is a beautiful country with beautiful, humble, kind, welcoming, hospitable and charming people and once you’ve been in touch with those people, it becomes personal. Hosseini is thus trying to bring up the stories of the people in Afghan and the memories he had about Afghan in his exile.

In both novels, Hosseini uses place as a tool to connect the past with the present and this evokes memories. The characters in the selected works are remembering the traumatic experiences they had with the association of the place and then they move to deeper details of their happy days as well as the heart piercing memories. The character Amir, in *The Kite Runner*, feels exhausted and the remembrance of the trauma makes him more disturbed. Laila, in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, feels sympathetic towards the person in her memories, Mariam.

The Kite Runner is a multi-layered novel which narrates the stories of many generations and stands as a kaleidoscope to cultural, political, and religious aspects of Afghanistan from the year Zahir Shah began his forty-year reign, 1933, to 2002. The memories engraved Amir’s mind, which haunts him even after the long 26 years, the “unstoned sins” are the primary source used by Hosseini to dwell into the past. The use of memory from the very beginning of the novel itself points to Hosseini’s deep affection of his childhood days and his thirst to be in his homeland as he used to be. In

the foreword of the book, written as part of the tenth anniversary edition, Hosseini writes, “A few lines from *The Kite Runner* came to me, as Amir’s thoughts suddenly became my own: *The kinship I felt suddenly for the old land... it surprised me... I thought I had forgotten about this land. But I hadn’t... Maybe Afghanistan hadn’t forgotten me either.*”

Returning to homeland stands as a redemption for the “unstoned sins” Amir had done to his childhood friend and half-brother Hassan. The wild transformation from a prosperous country to a wretched place due to the gruesome effects of war shatters Amir. Even though he is exiled from his country, his marriage with an Afghan woman and close association with many more Afghan people and Community come as temporary solace. The conversation with Rahim Khan, an old friend of Amir’s father takes him back to the beautiful as well as the traumatic past he had. Hassan’s promise to Amir is the very first thing that repeatedly haunts him, “*For you a thousand times over, Amir Jaan.*” The memories of Hassan made Amir feel like a living body in hell as he is reminded of his sin and betrayal.

The longing for homeland is a part of memory invasion in our mind. The sweetness of home and bitterness of life in an alien place, considering it as the new home, is being traumatized by Amir and his Baba, who are dislocated from the roots. Amir’s description of the memories of homeland is poignant:

Baba was like the widower who remarries but can’t let go of his dead wife. He missed the sugar cane fields of Jalalabad and the garden of Paghman. He missed people milling in and out of his house, missed walking down the bustling aisles of Shor Bazaar and greeting people

who knew him and his father, knew his grandfather, people who shared ancestors with, whose pasts intertwined with his.” (Hosseini 129)

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the lives of Laila and Mariam are intertwined from the moment when Laila accepts the marriage proposal of Rasheed. The narrative of the story alternates between Mariam’s and Laila’s stories. The novel begins with the setting of Herat and then to the city of Kabul. The land that brings the memories of Mariam in Laila is Herat, where Mariam’s soul and presence could be experienced. The visit to Herat takes Laila to the past days and it acts as paying a respect to Mariam’s love and sacrifice.

In Pakistan, it was difficult sometimes to remember the details of Mariam’s face. There were times when, like a word on the tip of her tongue, Mariam’s face eluded her. But now, here in this place, it is easy to summon Mariam behind the lids of her eyes, the soft radiance of her gaze, the long chin, the coarsened skin of her neck, her tight-lipped smile.” (Hosseini 402)

For Laila, Kabul is her hometown but her traumatic days after the death of her parents were unbearable and it is not Kabul which takes her to the memories with Mariam, it is Herat, Mariam’s hometown. Mariam had lived most part of her life in Kabul but still Herat is the only place where Mariam was attached to. The soulful memories play a key role in this novel which results in the development of character.

Hosseini not only uses memory as a tool to remind the past, he uses memory for serious criticisms. The portrayal of Afghanistan is a key criticism raised by him. The past and present brings forth a clean image of how the Taliban rule and continuous war had affected the country. Hosseini uses the street images of Afghanistan, the pathetic condition of

buildings and the lives of people who lived there to portray that Afghanistan is not a country of terrorism; it is a country of sufferings and the citizens of the country is experiencing serious traumas. The facts that the world sees through the media is not the exact life in Afghanistan and severe criticisms, that the media hesitate to show are seen in his novels. The passion towards the homeland is what forces Hosseini to lift the veils covered by the media in his stories.

Significance of the Study

This paper analyzes how memory is used in Khaled Hosseini's novels *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as a critical tool. Afghanistan is still under the clouds of Taliban and under the threats. It is facing the world's worst humanitarian crisis. The political unrest described in both novels are still an issue. The criticizing technique of a man in exile is a way of protesting against the existing social condition. This paper tries to bring out the essence of Hosseini's style of using memory to criticize the present by drawing a connection with the past in his works. Hosseini is brave enough to bring the real face of the rulers of Afghanistan when the media hesitate to show.

CONCLUSION

Memories manifest life experiences. The memories in the selected works manifest life experiences as well as act as a critical tool to show how past and present is distancing from the peaceful and developing state of Afghanistan. Many writers used memory to portray the traumatic experiences, the nostalgic emotions, etc. But Hosseini uses all

the features of memories to show the world the brutalities happening in Afghanistan these days. The exile from our land results in the recollection of the past and it approaches the present. The diasporic features and traumatic elements in the novels are perfectly portrayed in the characters.

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