



Assessing Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* as a historical novel

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Abstract

History should be regarded not just as a continuum of evolution but as a certain organic process that is crucially both the cause and the consequence of man's thoughts and actions. It is a documentation of change – a change brought forth by social, political, ideological, racial and economic clash and conflict.

With the coming of the Modern era, history became a living reality of human existence and the novel (in international, national and regional languages) grew into a very powerful literary expression of social reality. This paper shows how Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* is not the author's artistic re-creation of a past age and thus, how such a novel cannot be criticized for a semi-faithful portrayal of a specific historical peculiarity. The *Kite Runner* satisfies all the requisites of a historical novel and serves us with "concrete possibilities for men to comprehend their own existence as something which deeply affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them" as observed by George Lukacs in his *The Classical Form of the Historical Novel*. Partially autobiographical in strain, the novel is about the author's own time and culture, almost journalistic at times in its approach towards war-torn Afghanistan. The *Kite Runner* is a powerful record of the growth and life of Amir whose journey from innocence to experience is encased within a particular socio-political epoch.

Keywords: History, historical novel, the kite runner, Afghanistan

Introduction

The term 'History' for most of us merely signifies a chronicle or narrative record of past events occurring in succession. On certain occasions, History textbooks go a step further to define the discipline as a body of knowledge which not just holds up a mirror to what has been but also provides a protective shield against what might be. However, even this sort of a utilitarian approach towards the subject does not successfully convey its actual value to the beneficiary. The failure to do so can be attributed to the flawed conception of History as a distant, static and objectified phenomenon and not as a dynamic and progressive force. History should be regarded not just as a continuum of evolution but as a certain organic process that is crucially both the cause and the consequence of man's thoughts and actions. It is a documentation of change – a change brought forth by social, political, ideological, racial and economic clash and conflict. Hegelian philosophy (as opposed to the Enlightenment approach) aptly describes this "progressive historicism" as a paradigm of evolution which "in the spirit...is a hard, unceasing struggle against itself" [1].

If History in itself is regarded as such an animated entity, its presentation should be no less euphonic. A historian's bland description of invasions and revolutions, constructions and destructions, victory and defeat can never unfold the past as a living presence. Only that account of history that is portrayed as a drama of human emotions can best fulfill the functionality of history itself and the genre that can best amalgamate these various strands – historicisation of human sensation and sensationalisation of history – is that of the novel. Such an artistically stylized version of history might

not be completely true but will nonetheless be much more appealing to the reader, for whom the author's perspective will now serve as a screen and the broader human psychology as the canvas to a certain historical event. As Lukacs in his pioneering work *The Historical Novel* explores, the French Revolution brought about a remarkable change in the way war was viewed by people in general, broadening it from being an "individual, isolated" occurrence to a "mass experience of hundreds of thousands, of millions" [2]. There was an increasing historical consciousness and a strong stimulation of historical sensibilities in the common crowd who was now well integrated into the socio-political system. The historical novel also progressed from the cosmetic depiction of a historical background to a concrete portrayal of the "spatio-temporal (i.e. historical) character of people and circumstances" [3]. With the coming of the Modern era, history became a living reality of human existence and the novel (in international, national and regional languages) grew into a very powerful literary expression of social reality. The combination of the two proved to be a lethal medium of exposure, criticism and stimulation of public sentiments.

Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* is not the author's artistic re-creation of a past age and therefore such a novel cannot be criticized for a semi-faithful portrayal of a specific historical peculiarity. Partially autobiographical in strain, the novel is about the author's own time and culture, almost journalistic at times in its approach towards war-torn Afghanistan. *The Kite Runner* is a powerful record of the growth and life of Amir whose journey from innocence to experience is encased within a particular socio-political

epoch. The trajectory from his childhood act of diffident cowardice to the ultimate deed of unfaltering courage and resistance is not just conditioned but also made wholly possible only in that particular historical milieu. As Tony Monchinski observes, “The Kite Runner is a historical novel that brings the agony of a character and a country to life, showing the whole time the part circumstances play in encouraging the best or worst of which we are capable ^[4].” The narrative method offers a curious mix of the flashback mode, the stream of consciousness mode and settles for a linear pattern in the last few chapters. In spite of such disunities in the pattern of story telling, the plot smoothly flows along being essentially bound by causes and consequences of a particular historical condition.

Although the novel ranges across three countries, its setting is centralized majorly in Afghanistan. If the novel is strategically divided into two halves, the former depicts the pre-war visage of the country in general and specifically of Wazir Akbar Khan district – a slightly posh locality in North Kabul. The colours, images and descriptions used in this part are starkly different from the latter section that depicts the nation scarred by successive invasions and insurgencies. As a child, Amir’s life is encased in a world of mulberries, pomegranates, strawberries, walnuts, cherries, roses, open grass fields, exciting kite flying and running adventures – all symbolic of the lush fruition of the cultural identity of Afghanistan; his affluence palpable in the sprawling mansion, lavish parties and expensive cars. The first strike to this idyllic life comes on the night of July 17, 1978 when Afghanistan’s monarchy was replaced by a republican government. The roaring sound of guns and explosions did not simply designate a change of political authority. As a stepping stone to the “still ongoing era of bloodletting” ^[5], the incident put an end to a particular way of life and the narrator specifies that such sounds which seemed unfamiliar then was to become the daily diet of people and children some years later. Although there is no detailed description of the bang of the Saur revolution that led to the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan after a bloody coup in which Daoud Khan, the erstwhile president, is killed by the Communist PDPA (People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan), the narrator in precise yet powerful terms does mention that the communist coup d’etat of April 27, 1978 and the Soviet army deployment in Afghanistan on December 24, 1979 officially murdered the essence of his motherland. In March 1981, Baba and Amir smuggle out of Afghanistan in a tarpaulin-covered cab of an old Russian truck (the terror and despair of the general public apparent in the way the job of “driving people out of Shorawi-occupied Kabul to the relative safety of Pakistan” is addressed as a “lucrative business”) ^[6], spend a week huddled along with thirty other refugees in a stuffy, rat-infested basement and finally reach Peshawar in a pitch-dark fuel tank reeking of gasoline. Amir’s experiences throughout that journey is socially, historically and psychologically metaphorical of how human existence in Afghanistan had been almost nullified and humans were treated as animals and worse, as commodities to be used and misused at pleasure. With the “Roussi” soldiers patrolling every part of their nation and their lives, their tanks metaphorically rolling up and down their national identity reducing it to a heap of rubble, Kabulians had become a group of despondent and faithless civilians. When Amir

returns from America he not only feels like a “tourist” in his own country but is also bedazed by the skeletal appearance of his nation. The bullet-ridden sign of “The Kyber Pass welcomes you” and the teeming child beggars are just minor denotations of violence and poverty that had seeped deep into the country’s crevices. The account of Rahim Khan’s first hand experience serves as the most heart-rending portrayal of the inhuman conditions of the Afghans. The barbaric reign of the “Shorawi” followed by the fierce infighting between the factions and finally the ruthless atrocities of the Taliban are presented in starkly realistic details. The authenticity of these descriptions is proved by the parallel newspaper reports citing the exact same particulars – “After the capture of Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998 the Taliban indulged in the ‘frenzied killing of shop owners, cart pullers, women and children shoppers’. Women and girls were raped, and 2,000-5,000 civilians, mainly ethnic Hazaras, were massacred ^[7].” Apart from the distinction between the two phases of Afghanistan on either side of the war, an explicit contrast is set up with America. America’s cosmopolitan culture is bigger, brighter and better, allowing much more freedom of thought, expression and movement and by the clever denotation to the equivalent of three dollars being a few hundred Afghans, the economic destitution of Afghanistan is accurately placed on the international economic map.

Apart from the setting and situation, even the action and the actors are context specific. Both Ali and Hassan exemplify typical Hazara characteristics – not just in their mongoloid features but also their inner attitude of servility. That Hassan dies trying to protect Baba’s property, gets raped to save the kite for Amir may be ascribed to his fathomless devotion, love and respect for them but the way he addresses Assef as “Agha” even after a session of agonizing humiliation, his insistence on staying in the old crumpled mud shack instead of moving into one of the empty guest rooms clearly depicts his “ingrained sense of [his own] place in a hierarchy” ^[8]. Evidences of Pashtun dominance (a product of a long history of ethnic stratification) is ubiquitously present in the novel – the extremist form embodied in Assef, the subtle form in Amir and the self-righteous form in the school teacher’s approach to the word ‘Shia’. In Amir’s own words, “...history is not 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 Shia, and nothing was ever going to change that” ^[9]. In spite of being nursed by the same woman there existed an unbridgeable divide between the two, reflecting the destruction of the Afghan fraternity due to narrow parochialism. The characters therefore do not always act on the basis of impulsive individuality but their thoughts and deeds are historically conditioned. The heinous act of stoning the half buried adulterers to death, the sexual assault of young kids, flogging people cheering at a soccer match were all done under the garb of Islamic demand for a pure breed of Pathans and a land unpolluted by dirty blood – “ethnic cleansing”. The novel clearly shows that the seeds of contemporary factionalism and ghastly aggression had already been sown in the past and events of terror are manipulated by traditional religious conservatism and aggravated by foreign intervention. The dichotomy in the response and reaction of the adulterers to Taliban oppression is a true psychological representation of the split in the Afghan sensibility – the likes of Rahim Khan who

resignedly accept loss and suffering and the likes of Baba who voice out their disgust and undauntedly fight against injustice. However, even the ethically and ideologically upright character in the first half of the novel (Baba) turns out to be deeply flawed in the end with the revelation of his private lies, which remained shrouded by his public integrity. This hypocrisy is well fitted against an entire generation who has tried to conceal their belligerence with false idealism. All the major characters undergo a series of contradictory experiences and the vicious helix between the tormentor and the tormented with frequent role-reversals is a powerful depiction of the Afghan history as a “complex jigsaw of interrelated equations”^[10].

Besides graphic details of setting, the historical authenticity of characters and the use of Farsi, Dari and Pashtun dialectical words and phrases weaved into Afghan cultural history; the historical reality of the age is however best described in a chain of symbols, metaphors and allegory. The most important symbol is that of the kite and kite flying, drawn straight out of the Afghan tradition, where the kite resembles the country in itself and the competitors starkly akin to the various contemporary institutionalized structures struggling for power. This parallel receives a very insightful treatment by Mir Hekmatullah Sadat: “The Kite flyers attempt to down their adversary's kites analogous to the fighting between the Afghan government and mujahidin guerrilla factions...When the opponent's kite has been downed, then the real battle turns into a race, the kite run, to see who retrieves the fallen kite. This is symbolic to the 1992 event in Afghanistan when ethno-religious warlords looted and pillaged Kabul and other cities in a race to see who can amass the most booty. Interestingly enough, in 1994 the emerging Taliban regime banned kite flying and an assortment of other activities offering at best a graveyard peace to a conflict-ridden society”^[11]. Ali's deformed face and lame leg powerfully signifies the degraded status of the Hazara community just as the denuded remains of Baba's mansion and the wilted, leafless pomegranate tree mirror the ruined splendour of Afghanistan. The image of the bustling crowd in Ghazni Stadium at the opening of the stoning scene ends with a macabre picture of blood and mangled flesh is a typical representation of the transition from an era of placid joyfulness to grotesque indignation and persecution. The imposition of the compulsory beard and pakol by the Taliban and Assef's own “John Lennon” sunglass subtly epitomizes the necessity of a dogmatic veil to safeguard against dangers of exposure of their multi-layered bigotry and atrocities. However, Hosseini's personal favourite symbol in the text is Hassan's rape scene. In an interview with Sara Shereen Bakhshian he articulates: “For me, the scene in the alley [where local bullies corner Hassan while Amir hides in the shadows] has always had a metaphoric quality to it, and the rape scene [of Hassan]. A lot of fellow Afghans feel like that's what happened to their country, if you substitute Afghanistan for Hassan. After Hassan has served his purpose and found what Amir wanted, the kite, then Amir kind of stands by and watches him be attacked without intervening. A lot of Afghans feel that's what happened [after the Soviet Union left and Western countries failed to help the country]”^[12]. Amir and Soraya's adoption of Sohrab in the end does not only signify the need for communal integration but also fosters a hope of

a macrocosmic Afghan reconciliation across territorial, psychological and ideological borders.

The Kite Runner satisfies all the requisites of a historical novel and serves us with “concrete possibilities for men to comprehend their own existence as something which deeply affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them” and portrays the “extent to which the economic and cultural life of the entire nation was disrupted by the huge, rapidly successive changes of the period”^[13]. As Hosseini enunciates in various interviews, The Kite Runner is a means of portraying the true face of Afghanistan to a world that knew nothing apart from the nation's name and certain lop-sided and extreme depictions of their faith, in the aftermath of the 9/11 Al-Qaeda attacks. With every particular detail - ranging from the fruit vendor to the high emigration officials - etched with impeccable diligence, the novel serves to open up every pore to the outsider because only accurate knowledge of a certain ailment will help in proper cure of the disease from its roots. Yet, just like any great text transcends its immediate historical and socio-political context, The Kite Runner grows into a commentary on the universal human condition. It upholds the values of friendship, fraternity and peace and delicately portrays the emotions of guilt, anxiety, terror and ultimately the Dantesque path to atonement. The novel beautifully corroborates the pleasure of fiction with the mirror-shield utility (mentioned in the beginning of this paper) of history to provide a holistic treatment of both the disciplines and serve to the reader a piece of true literature.

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