

Exploring Thematic Concerns in the Works of Khaled Hosseini

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Abstract

We know Trauma is pernicious and destructive but what intensifies it, is the memories behind it, which sometimes are mirthful but majorly are full of glum and disappointment and this inner tumult and dissonance is what writers portray in their seminal works. Khaled Hosseini who is an acclaimed Afghan-American author, has been bestowed with immense international accreditation for his poignant and emotive narratives, enumerating the complexities of human relationships within the ethical and socio-political milieu. His novels *The Kite Runner* (2003) and *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013) evince myriads of thematic concerns that reverberate across cultures and time. This paper scrutinizes the preponderant themes in these two novels, including penitence and vindication, kinship, memory and trauma, banishment and expulsion, and the role of socio-political pandemonium. Through a critical and in-depth assessment of the selected texts, this paper aims to portray a panoptic apprehension of Hosseini's thematic tryst with the convolution of Afghan identity, the effects of war, and the ubiquitous grapple for individual and ethical concord.

Keywords: Trauma and Memory, Afghan Identity, Socio-political Turmoil, Kinship and Relationships, Cultural Displacement, Post-war Literature.

1. Introduction

Khaled Hosseini being an author of the Afghan Diaspora catalogues in his works [1], the entrenched socio-cultural and political milieu of Afghanistan, viz-a-viz surpassing geographical boundaries to examine omnipresent human emotions and disparity. *The Kite Runner* and *And the Mountains Echoed* explore the pivotal and often grizzly relations between individuals; particularly within families and how those relationships are constructed by sartorial choices, historical traumas, and social occurrences. This paper evaluates the core thematic concerns that permeate these novels, highlighting how Hosseini curates a plaintive narrative that is altogether deeply seated and politically substantial [2].

1. Penitence and Absolution

One of the focal themes in *The Kite Runner* is the concept of culpability and the quest for redemption. Amir, the protagonist, is petrified by the perfidy of his friend Hassan and how he could not extricate Hassan while his friends were assaulting him. He was so guilty that he decided to oust Hassan and Ali from his house because he was abashed of his own deed.

"I had one last chance to make a decision. One final opportunity to decide who I was going to be. I could

step into that alley, stand up for Hassan—the way he’d stood up for me all those times in the past—and accept whatever would happen to me. Or I could run. In the end, I ran.”

“But he’s not my friend! I almost blurted. He’s my servant! Had I really thought that? Of course I hadn’t. I hadn’t. I treated Hassan well, just like a friend, better even, more like a brother. But if so, then why, when Baba’s friends came to visit with their kids, didn’t I ever include Hassan in our games? Why did I play with Hassan only when no one else was around?”

“I thought about Hassan’s dream, the one about us swimming in the lake. There is no monster, he’d said, just water. Except he’d been wrong about that. There was a monster in the lake. It had grabbed Hassan by the ankles, dragged him to the murky bottom. I was that monster.”

The above lines by Amir portray how much he is consumed by his guilt of not being able to preserve Hassan’s sanctity. He harks back to the time when Hassan narrates to him his dream of swimming in the lake where there is no monster but Amir feels like a monster himself after what he did to Hassan.

“There is a way to be good again, he’d said. A way to end the cycle. With a little boy. An orphan. Hassan’s son. Somewhere in Kabul.”

The above lines by Rahim Khan, abbreviates the extenuating trajectory of Amir’s character. After all the years bygone, Amir’s return to Afghanistan to rescue Hassan’s son, Sohrab, signifies that he wanted to expiate for his previous wrongdoings. Through this theme, Hosseini elaborates upon the ethical complexities of human behavior and the possibility of sacred deliverance through valiant and altruistic acts. Amir knew about the tyranny of Talibani rule on Afghanistan yet with valor and compliance he went to bring Sohrab back so that the child could be in safe hands after the death of his parents [3].

“Baba and I were more alike than I’d ever known. We had both betrayed the people who would have given their lives for us. And with that came this realization: that Rahim Khan had summoned me here to atone not just for my sins but for Baba’s too.”

“All I saw was the blue kite. All I smelled was victory. Salvation. Redemption”.

In *And the Mountains Echoed*, penitence also appears, though more inconspicuously. Parwana, the sister who deserts her disfigured twin Masooma, lives with longstanding repentance. All her life she was resentful towards her sister because of her nous and charm so much that she was the harbinger of sorrow in her life. Nila Wahdati’s stranding of her daughter Pari also indicates a deeper emotional turmoil rooted in unparalleled iniquity and agony.

“She is furious with herself for her own stupidity. Opening herself up like this, voluntarily, to a lifetime of worry and anguish. It was madness. Sheer lunacy. A spectacularly foolish and baseless faith, against enormous odds, that a world you do not control will not take from you the one thing you cannot bear to lose. Faith that the world will not destroy you”.

“They say, Find a purpose in your life and live it. But, sometimes, it is only after you have lived that you recognize your life had a purpose, and likely one you never had in mind”.

Guilt in both the novels is a recurring theme, exploring how the characters go through an alteration in their lives because of their deep seated absolution and how they atone for those sins later. Hosseini in both the novels has shown us the arc of these characters weaved together beautifully leading to a poignant and soul stirring narrative.

2. Kinship

The most integral theme of a novel is the dynamics between the family members. What weaves the novel together is the relationship between the characters portrayed by the author. In *The Kite Runner*,

Hosseini examines the father-son camaraderie, particularly between Amir and Baba, and later between Amir and Sohrab. Baba's stirring remoteness and ethical enigma add to Amir's shortcomings and internal dilemma.

"I watched him fill his glass at the bar and wondered how much time would pass before we talked again the way we just had. Because the truth of it was, I always felt like Baba hated me a little. And why not? After all, I had killed his beloved wife, his beautiful princess, hadn't I? The least I could have done was to have had the decency to have turned out a little more like him. But I hadn't turned out like him. Not at all".

Amir always felt he was the reason behind his mother's death, she died immediately after giving birth to him, leaving him with a bereaved father. All the years of his existence, Amir sincerely wished for his fathers' proclivity and warmth but his father never reciprocated the kind of love he desired.

"You're twenty-two years old, Amir! A grown man! You ...' he opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again, and reconsidered. Above us, rain drummed on the canvas awning. 'What's going to happen to you, you say? All those years, that's what I was trying to teach you, how to never have to ask that question".

These lines emote Amir's feeling towards his Baba, how will he survive without the endearment and support of his father once he dies.

"Amir is going to be a great writer,' Baba said. I did a double take at this. 'He has finished his first year of college and earned A's in all of his courses."

The above lines by Amir's Baba to General Tahiri enumerates the camaraderie between the father and son. Baba himself didn't quite appreciate Amir's writing yet he persuaded General Tahiri so that he could agree for Soraya and Amir's marriage.

In *And the Mountains Echoed*, familial bonds are explored through the myriad characters in the novel. The novel encapsulates the relationship and the dynamics between the characters within nine chapters, each chapter enumerating on one family and characters specifically. Whether it's the familial ties between siblings, Abdullah and Pari; Sisters Masooma and Parwana or the mother and daughter camaraderie between Nila Wahdati and Pari. Hosseini has examined all the relationships aptly.

"She hunkered down beside him now, her glasses pushed up on her hair. There was wetness in her eyes too, and when she dabbed at them with the handkerchief, it came away with black smudges. "I don't blame you if you hate me. It's your right. But—and I don't expect you to understand, not now—this is for the best. It really is, Abdullah. It's for the best. One day you'll see".

"But there was no forgetting. Pari hovered, unbidden, at the edge of Abdullah's vision everywhere he went. She was like the dust that clung to his shirt. She was in the silences that had become so frequent at the house, silences that welled up between their words, sometimes cold and hollow, sometimes pregnant with things that went unsaid, like a cloud filled with rain that never fell. Some nights he dreamed that he was in the desert again, alone, surrounded by the mountains, and in the distance a single tiny glint of light flickering on, off, on, off, like a message. He opened the tea box. They were all there, Pari's feathers, shed from roosters, ducks, pigeons; the peacock feather too. He tossed the yellow feather into the box".

Hosseini's portrayal of families accentuates both the solidity and frailty of familial ties, revealing how they are scrutinized by superficial forces and sartorial choices [4].

3. Memory and Trauma

Memory and the trauma inflicted by it, is a powerful theme and a matter of utmost concern in the works of Khaled Hosseini. Memory is unfailing and it continues to harbor or infect the minds of the individuals [5].

In the Kite Runner, the memories of Hassan continue to haunt Amir even after several years, the treachery, the loss of a beloved friend and companion and his own delinquency of not being able to conserve Hassan's sanctity from his friends just because he was a minority, perturbs him even after many years.

The novel reveals how memory can both conserve innocence and serve as a lethal reminder of penitence. Similarly, Sohrab's trauma from abuse under the Taliban shows how ferocity leaves ingrained marks on memory. Even the trauma of not having his parents around him and settling in an uncharted territory with Amir would have been petrifying for the kid.

"Then Hassan did pick up the pomegranate. He walked toward me. He opened it and crushed it against his own forehead. 'There,' he croaked, red dripping down his face like blood. 'Are you satisfied? Do you feel better?' He turned around and started down the hill".

"I wished I too had some scar that would beget Baba's sympathy. It wasn't fair. Hassan hadn't done anything to earn Baba's affections; he'd just been born with that stupid harelip".

"A havoc of scrap and rubble littered the alley...But there were two things amid the garbage that I couldn't stop looking at: One was the blue kite resting against the wall, close to the cast-iron stove; the other was Hassan's brown corduroy pants thrown on a heap of eroded bricks."

"I actually aspired to cowardice, because the alternative, the real reason I was running, was that Assef was right: Nothing is free in this world. Maybe Hassan was the price I had to pay, the lamb I had to slay, to win Baba".

The above lines encapsulates and emotes the feelings of Amir, the unhappy memories of an equally glum event where he had no option but to slaughter Hassan so that he proves his worth to his Baba. He was ashamed of not protecting Hassan from Assef but in his mind he had decided to oust Hassan and Ali so that his Baba will give him his undivided attention and love which would not have been possible with Hassan around.

"Baba and I immersed ourselves in a sweet illusion, saw each other in a way that we never had before. We'd actually deceived ourselves into thinking that a toy made of tissue paper, glue, and bamboo could somehow close the chasm between us".

And the Mountains Echoed adopts a splintered narrative where sundry and disparate characters in the novel are subjected to either generational trauma or self-inflicted trauma. Characters like Pari and Abdullah who are siblings go through an array of emotions and trauma while being separated by each other. Their gleeful moments spent together turn into despair when the Wahdatis' adopt Pari as their daughter leaving them with just memories of each other, which Abdullah couldn't recall in his old age because of his Dementia. Abdullah's daughter, Pari II however reunites both the siblings in the end of the novel.

"Well, it's hardly a mystery, mon amour, Maman had said. You miss your father. He is gone from your life. It's natural that you should feel this way. Of course that's what it is. Come here. Give Maman a kiss. Her mother's answer had been perfectly reasonable but also unsatisfactory. Pari did believe that she would feel more whole if her father was still living, if he were here with her. But she also remembered feeling this way even as a child, living with both her parents at the big house in Kabul".

“And so Baba’s little sister, Pari, was my secret companion, invisible to everyone but me. She was my sister, the one I’d always wished my parents had given me. I saw her in the bathroom mirror when we brushed our teeth side by side in the morning. We dressed together. She followed me to school and sat close to me in class—looking straight ahead at the board, I could always spot the black of her hair and the white of her profile out of the corner of my eye”.

Parwana, Nabi, and others in the novel also experience trauma rooted in desertion and exile. Hosseini presents trauma not as a singular event but as a cascade that eclipses generations and borders [6].

4. Banishment and Expulsion

The ordeal of banishment and exile is a continual theme in Hosseini’s work, also because he himself was accustomed to displacement in his life because of the Civil War. His works delineate and intimates the emotions of all who have to leave their hometown because of dystopia [7].

In the *Kite Runner* too, Amir and Baba face the brunt of expulsion because of the Taliban invasion on Afghanistan. Their banishment is not only geographical but also traumatic since Amir tries to forget his past after leaving Afghanistan and start anew in America but his Baba still wants to cling to it. They were reputed back in Afghanistan as an affluent and eminent family while in America Baba works in a gas station to keep himself engrossed.

“For me, America was a place to bury my memories. For Baba, a place to mourn his.”

“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 a good past, a brushstroke of color on the gray, barren canvas that our lives had become”.

“I want to tear myself from this place, from this reality, rise up like a cloud and float away, melt into this humid summer night and dissolve somewhere far, over the hills. But I am here, my legs blocks of concrete, my lungs empty of air, my throat burning. There will be no floating away”.

“America was different. America was a river, roaring along, unmindful of the past”.

In *And the Mountains Echoed*, characters like Nila Wahdati, Pari, and Idris also navigate exile and migration. The novel spans several locations like Afghanistan, Paris, San Francisco, and Greece reflecting the universal dissemination of Afghan diaspora.

Hosseini critiques the soul stirring and emotive cause of migration that relentlessly affects the children and the elderly people in the family. Home is where the heart is; and individuals often have an affinity towards their belongings and their place of birth but wars and invasions cause these people to leave everything behind and start afresh. Hosseini has encapsulated human sentiments related to exile pertinently in both of these novels [8] (Shahidian.).

5. Sacrifice and Selflessness

Sacrifice whether discretionary or obliged, is a central theme in Hosseini’s works. The characters in the novels have done copious sacrifices to protect their loved ones. Baba sacrificing his honor and prestige while earning a livelihood working in a gas station in America for Amir.

“Sometimes, I think everything he did, feeding the poor on the streets, building the orphanage, giving money to friends in need, it was all his way of redeeming himself. And that, I believe, is what true redemption is, Amir jan, when guilt leads to good” [9] (Longhai.).

“Hassan, with a look of mock surprise on his face, had stepped forward. 'For you, a thousand times over,' he said”.

“A boy who won't stand up for himself becomes a man who can't stand up to anything”.

Hassan's unwavering love and support for Amir was portrayed commendably by Hosseini, in the Kite Runner. Hassan loved Amir dearly so much that he never questioned any of his actions towards him, he was always meek and submissive, complying to all what Amir said or wanted even when he was been assaulted he knew that Amir witnessed what all his friends did to him, but even at that moment Hassan never raised a brow on Amir, that's how much Amir meant to him .

Amir also risking his life for protecting Sohrab from the Talibani invaders, making it an act of sheer selflessness and valor.

Saboor, in And the Mountains Echoed, giving away his daughter Pari to the Wahdatis because of his prevalent economic conditions, thinking about Pari's betterment portraying his innate selflessness.

Nabi also sacrifices his life for the the Wahdatis , an example of great gallantry and bravery , serving the human kind .

“When you have lived as long as I have, the div replied, you find that cruelty and benevolence are but shades of the same colour”.

“A finger had to be cut to save the hand”.

This line explains that Saboor, Pari's father had to sacrifice and give away Pari to the Wahdatis' so that he could provide for the rest of the family and also he thought of Paris' betterment [10] (Shaalán.).

6. Identity and Belonging

Identity of an individual person, the culture and nation that he belongs to is another core theme in Hosseini's works. Amir's identity crisis stems from his status as a prerogative Pashtun and his unavowed proximity with Hassan, a Hazara.

Sohrab's scuffle after being liberated also reflects issues of identity, he is caught between his harrowing past and an unsettled future in a foreign land.

“Never mind any of those things. Because history isn't easy to overcome. Neither is religion. In the end, I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara, I was Sunni and he was Shi'a, and nothing was ever going to change that. Nothing” [11] (Mohamed.).

“I see now Baba was wrong, there is a God, there always has been. I see Him here, in the eyes of the people in this corridor of desperation. This is the real house of God, this is where those who have lost God will find Him, not the white masjid with its bright diamond lights and towering minarets”.

“You don't know the meaning of the word ‘liberating’ until you've done that, stood in a roomful of targets, let the bullets fly, free of guilt and remorse, knowing you are virtuous, good, and decent. Knowing you're doing God's work”.

“Afghanistan is like a beautiful mansion littered with garbage, and someone has to take out the garbage.” “That's what you were doing in Mazar, going door-to-door? Taking out the garbage?” “Precisely.” “In the west, they have an expression for that, I said. They call it ethnic cleansing”.

In And the Mountains Echoed, identity is portrayed more tactfully. Pari's quest for her origins and her parents. Nila's dual inheritance and eloquent severance and even Idris's redemption as a foreign-returned Afghan, all assert splintered identities. Hosseini shows that affiliation is not always inclined to geography but to memory, relationships, and soul stirring truths.

“Creating means vandalizing the lives of other people, turning them into unwilling and unwitting participants. You steal their desires, their dreams, pocket their flaws, their suffering. You take what does not belong to you. You do this knowingly”.

“She said there was comfort to be found in the permanence of mathematical truths, in the lack of arbitrariness and the absence of ambiguity. In knowing that the answers may be elusive, but they could be found. They were there, waiting, chalk scribbles away. “Nothing like life, in other words,” he said. “There, it’s questions with either no answers or messy ones” [12] (Ahmed.).

The characters in the novels span from one place to another in search of identity, whether it’s Pari questioning her origin from the Wahdatis’, to Abdullah searching recklessly for his sister, Amir and Baba relocating to America for afresh ordeals or Pari and Nila leaving Mr. Wahdati and living in Paris . All these characters are yearning for belonging.

Conclusion

Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* and *And the Mountains Echoed* offer fervent cognizance into the human condition through their investigation of culpability, kinship, memory, trauma, and migration. Hosseini illustrates through these novels how individual lives are moulded and sometimes fragmented by broader forces. His characters despite being substantially flawed, evoke sympathy and ethical consideration. The thematic concerns in these novels reverberate not just within Afghan society but speak to ubiquitous human grapple for recognition, love, and reclamation. Through the characters of these novels, Hosseini exclaims the emotions behind every character, how the character has been subjected to trauma and identity crisis, dislocation because of the prevalent wars and invasion, settling as an expatriate in a foreign country, leaving the family and friends behind, all these themes of displacement, identity, belonging, familial relationships, selflessness, trauma and penitence have been portrayed fittingly by the author.

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