

Displacement in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

Sabita Tumbapo*

Department of English, Pokhara University, Lekhnath 33700, Nepal

DOI: 10.36347/sjahss.2019.v07i09.004

| Received: 02.09.2019 | Accepted: 09.09.2019 | Published: 18.09.2019

*Corresponding author: Sabita Tumbapo

Abstract

Review Article

The Kite Runner is a blend of sorrow, union and anything that oscillates between trauma and joy. Although primarily sprawled on a murkier backdrop of human suffering, the novel is suffused with instances of realizations of human errors coupled with rectification of acts far from moral. And displacement, which is the backbone of the novel, has even led to empowerment of some characters and brought about some heartening twist to the plot. The plot of the novel vividly depicts the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and how that adds to the problem of Afghani population from different socio-economic strata. This paper will talk about how displacement in different part and parcel hits hard characters from varied socio-economic standing, both earlier and in the aftermath of the Russian invasion.

Keywords: Displacement, Culture, Trauma, Nostalgia.

Copyright © 2019: This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution license which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use (NonCommercial, or CC-BY-NC) provided the original author and source are credited.

INTRODUCTION

Khaled Hosseini, who had the firsthand experience of the pangs of pain of Russian invasion of Afghanistan in the 70's, in *The Kite Runner* dissects intricately engaging human relations, conditioned by displacement both at emotional and physical level, and posits how that culminates into excruciating trauma. Set in Afghanistan of the 70's, *The Kite Runner* showcases a story of an influential Afghan family vis-a-vis the then prevalent socio-cultural scenario. The lead characters comprise Baba, Amir, Rahim, a friend and business partner to Baba, Hassan and Ali. Towards the end of the novel it is revealed to the readers that Hassan is actually Amir's half-brother. Hassan and his father, Ali, are domestic help at Baba's but live as family despite marked differences in their socio-economic spheres. Sohrab, Soraya, Sanaubar and the general are other seemingly fringe characters that help advance the plot and expose the upshots of displacement at varying degrees at various visible and unseen locations of the mind and map.

The Kite Runner takes the readers to and fro on a perilous ride across some hostile landscapes before finally "safe landing" in the U.S. However, this crash landing comes as an inevitably inescapable upshot of migration. In this connection it would be pertinent to look at the theory of migration and displacement from the lens of Kath Woodward. She states[1] "The movement of people has been the result of coercion or has been the outcome of voluntarily made decisions-

that is the result of Push and Pull factors", - migrations "do not just happen": they are outcomes . . . in a general dynamic of change" (p. 145). Amir and Baba can be observed through this very conceptual frame offered by Woodward as they too escape the intimidating political climate of Afghanistan by whisker and eventually register themselves as the members of the Afghani diaspora in the U.S. Their case was obviously the result of coercion, if not fully direct, perceived, and that had them deserting their homeland however reluctantly. The push factor apparently was the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and the pull factor was the refuge that the U.S. then seemed to have offered them. Whatever thus may be the cause of displacement; migration ensues and triggers an implicit or unswerving trauma.

It would be relevant to expose the cultural aspect to unravel the element of trauma through cultural divide that dominates the novel. While critical race theory offers a framework for analyzing agonies and miseries of all minorities, feminism provides tools for discussing discriminatory practices against females. Ashok Bhusal [2] states in his "The rhetoric of racism and anti-miscegenation laws in the United States" that "What is necessary at this point is, with the tools offered in critical race theory, is to complete a deeper study of minorities and bring their stories, their voices, into academic scholarship" (p. 88). It means it is important that we talk about stories of trauma and displacement, and discriminatory behaviors inherent in our society. Likewise, in another article titled

“Emphasizing the suppression of feminist voices,” Bhusal [3] highlights the need for emphasizing feminist voices in order to challenge the status of our society. The purpose of both of his articles is to encourage the audience to study minorities and work towards uplifting their situations.

Similarly, Suresh Lohani and others [4] in *Scholar’s Social Studies and Creative Arts* (2015) talks about how culture shapes our behavior and our way of life (p. 339). That said in the same book, he also mentions how traditional discriminatory practices that come with culture should be shunned. This aptly can be connected to the Afghani cultural setting where traditionally one group of Muslims, Pashtuns, treat the other, Hazaras, as inferior. Despite being Muslims themselves, Hassan and Ali are subject to abject discrimination since they are Hazaras whereas Baba and Amir are Pashtuns and entertain an elevated status in that part of Afghanistan; and on that account, they enjoy both cultural and economic edge over Hazaras. In the novel, the cultural collision has been one of the prime factors responsible for displacement and all the suffering and misery that follow.

It is this very conflicting cultural climate that creates a schism between Pashtuns and Hazaras and the resultant evil shadow is cast over Amir’s household, twisting the progression of the plot. In *The clash of Civilization* Samuel P. Huntington [5] says, “It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic” (p. 39). The great division among human kind and the dominating source of conflict will be culture for “The principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and group of different civilization. . . The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future” (p. 39). It is evident in *The Kite Runner* that the major source of the clash between communities is cultural divide and this impediment is hard to overcome for it does not often travel on a visibly linear path. Most of the times it treads on almost imperceptible psychological medium as often exhibited by erratic characters such as Assef, Amir and Baba. A little dig into the history of Hazaras should prove instrumental in understanding how in the novel culture has given birth to conflict and nurtured it.

The Hazaras originally came from further east in Asia, and their features are more Asian than Arabic. “Once, while looking through history books, Amir discovered information on the Hazaras. They had an uprising during the nineteenth century, ---The book mentions some of the derogatory names they are called, including “mice-eating”, “flat-nosed”, and “load carrying monkeys” p. [4]. All these are systematically used rhetorical terminologies used by Pashtuns against Hazaras to enjoy a distinct edge over them. Phanindra Upadhyaya in *Random Musings in Rhetoric & Writing Studies*, writes “No matter in what way rhetoric is used,

it has its roots in power” (27). The reason for the animosity between Hazaras and Pashtuns in *The Kite Runner* is primarily that the Hazaras are Shia Muslim while the Pashtuns are Sunni Muslim and clearly Pashtuns want to continue dominating Hazaras. Culture also plays a role in a conflict. *The Kite Runner* as shown through a tussle which characters such as Assef deliberately ignite against Pashtuns such as Hassan. Further, the residence of Baba is situated in a Sunni dominated location, Hassan and Ali are constantly poked and humiliated by other Sunnis, especially Assef who sports the bad boy tag amongst his peers as Amir mentions that “some boys in Wazir Akbar Khan had nicknamed him Assef *Goshkhor* or Assef “the ear eater” (Hosseini p. 34) [6]. In the context, it is important to recall Ashok Bhusal’s work [7] titled “The Rhetoric of Racism in Society,” where he aptly says that “racist attitudes and behaviors cause problems for the marginalized communities” (p.114).

Assef lives on a par with this trait of character till the end of the novel. Thus even within the frontiers of their own country, Afghanistan, owing to their affiliation with minority derivative of Islam, Hassan and Ali are the victims of both emotional and geographical displacement. They were never accepted in the mainstream society as its dignified members. A theoretical lens of migration and displacement has that “the movement of people has been the result of coercion or has been the outcome of voluntarily made decisions- that is the result of Push and Pull factors”- migrations “do not just happen”: they are outcomes . . . in a general dynamic of change (Woodward p.145) [1]. This can be clearly linked here with the Hazaras who within their own domestic realm were subject to abject discrimination, all thanks to push factor, the on and off dormant and manifest conflict with the Pashtuns. And this development did not just take place overtly but gradually resulted in displacement as the outcome of the communal violence that erupted between the Sunnis and Hazaras long back.

Wherever Hazaras dispersed, they became the subject of intimidation. The grudges persist hitherto. The displacement has changed many facets of the Afghani society, including the identity and self- esteem of the Hazara. The insecurity that a Hazara family is compelled to experience in a certain location comes as a privilege to the other threatening group, Sunnis. This leads to the creation of a dominant discourse in the society with regard to what elevates a group to a superior position and what relegates the other to an inferior one. Apparently the Hazaras pay the price for the further elevated status and exceeding dominance of the Sunnis. The privilege of the Sunnis thus comes at the expense of the Hazara’s trauma.

However, despite settling in the US, the pain lingers. The unabated hatred which Baba harbors in his heart towards Russians lives on as a tragic stretch in the

novel. In one of the scenes, while celebrating the joy of Amir's graduation, Baba offers drinks to other customers at a bar and shouts hysterically "Fuck the Russia!" (Hosseini, p. 115) [6].

Nicholas Mirzoeff [8] in *An Introduction to Visual Culture* states that "Diaspora has long been understood as determined by the past, by the land which has been lost" (p. 231). They were conditioned into accepting the jobs which for them would never be acceptable if it were Afghanistan. Ali died in a landmine explosion and Hassan ultimately was killed by the Russian army. Likewise, Sohrab was enslaved by Assef. Thus displacement offered Ali's family with abject rejection and blatant humiliation.

Jeffery C. Alexander [9] in his essay *Toward a theory of cultural trauma* writes, "Trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous events that leaves indelible marks upon their group unconsciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (p. 2). There are a plenty of instances in the novel that depict how trauma stricken characters undergo immense psychological turmoil. With harrowingly transformed scenario they are divorced from their earlier identities and reach a new compromise thereby shedding those traits of character that privileged them to enjoy certain distinct profile in the society. One such vivid example is Amir.

For Amir the past is always with him, from the book's first sentence, when he says "he became what he is today at the age of twelve", to its final sentence. That is because Amir defines himself by his past. His feelings of guilt for his past actions continue to chase him. He says on the book's first page with a tint of regret, "the past can never be buried" (Hosseini, p. 2) [6]. Amir's displacement- not an external one but an internal one, from the ethical domain into an unethical one- has him infused with trauma which only becomes more colored with physical displacement from Afghanistan to the USA. Amir even feels responsible for the Taliban murdering Hassan as when talking to Rahim Khan he says, "we had both betrayed the people who would have given their lives for us" (p. 197) ; he thinks he set in motion the events that led to Hassan's death when he deceitfully pushed Hassan and Ali out of his house. Although a change of setting has proved to be of some solace, the fact that Amir is constantly devastated by the memories Afghanistan of yesteryears. This proves that an endeavor to escape from the sinful past turns to be an act in futility for him, injecting him with trauma that he sometimes fails to acknowledge to himself yet cannot rid permanently.

Hassan's demonstration of trauma is not verbally audible but tacitly perceptible through his facial expressions and silence he maintains. For example, he shows no desire to refute a grave allegation

slapped onto him by Amir as when he looked at Hassan "his head was downcast, his soldiers slumped, his fingers twirling a loose string on the hem of his shirt" (Hosseini 93). This is another instance of displacement where Amir utterly sidelines Hassan from the arena of his life, and more importantly, from Baba's life. The pain on the part of Hassan does not always emanate through the means of tears and cries but often surfaces in the form of dejection that seems to speak manifold times louder than words. Shortly after Hassan and Ali are displaced, however, even Baba and Amir find themselves miserably forced to move to the US.

However, the grass was not totally green on the American side. The duo as on arriving in the U.S. had to start everything from the scratch. Baba, for instance, took up the job of an assistant at a gas station. And worst of all, they had dissociate themselves, both physically and emotionally, from their native land. The push factor behind their displacement was the catastrophic political development that followed the invasion that literally changed the overall picture of Afghanistan. This pain of displacement bitterly reflects in Baba's words as he roars against the brutality of Russian army personnel and asks Karim to tell the Russians "I'll take a thousand of his bullets before I let this indecency take place" (Hosseini, p.101). This is an example of how when shattered by displacement, fear takes a backseat and courage musters in an individual overshadowing whatever harrowing consequences may be in the offing.

Even Amir, despite the change of location- is preoccupied with the past and recalls how "Russian tanks would roll into the very same streets where Hassan and I played, bringing the death of the Afghanistan I knew and marking the start of a still ongoing era of bloodletting" (Hosseini, p. 19). Just like for the internal displacement of Hazaras the influence and power of the Sunnis was responsible, with the external displacement of the Afghanis, both Hazaras and Pashtuns, it was the intervening and expansionist enactment of the Russians that was to blame. It would, however, be a fallacy to associate displacement only as a subject of externally orchestrated invasion of one country by the other; it can also operate with the same magnitude even within the very nation. When Hazaras were displaced it was the Pashtuns who enjoyed some deliberate and probably some unanticipated advantages. However, when Russians invaded Afghanistan the pain of displacement was shared, if not equally, by all the Afghanis irrespective of their castes, creeds and cultural associations.

The starkly contrasted geographical and cultural entities transcend time and space, and exemplify displacement that is full of harrowing emotional ruptures. These can be understood against the Russian army personnel's aggressive behavior against the backdrop of the calm of the mountains that

separated Afghanistan from Pakistan. Further, if personified, the unvoiced and almost unexposed emotions worn by the placid lakes and surging rivers go in binary opposition with the tumultuous feelings harbored both by the displaced ones and the ones that displace them. They may though be generally visualized as something abstract and subjective, a scratch beneath the surface, the ones displaced will not fail to internalize the agony that soothing facade of these landscapes nurture in their hearts.

The geographical features even, literally speaking, add to the intensity of the trauma for they create a certain barrier and accelerate pain in the process of displacement as Amir glumly “stumbled to the edge of the cliff overlooking the deep valley that was shrouded in darkness” (Hosseini, p. 97). A similar geographical and cultural location elsewhere, for example America, however, exudes a contrastingly positive reflection. Amir, the lead character, after having immersed in America for sometime mentions “America was different. America was a river, roaring along, unmindful of the past. I could wade into this river, let my sin drown to the bottom, let the waters carry me someplace far. Some place with no ghost, no memories and no sins” (p. 119). It is in a way fascinating to read how an attachment to an alien location loosens the bonding which one is supposed to experience towards one’s native land. Displacement thus has manifold dimensions and does not operate on a unidirectional linear path of nostalgia and relatedness. The most alien locations with the passage of time many convert into most comforting one.

The painful instance of displacement which Ali and Hassan embrace in the novel, on the other hand, is only the straw that broke the camel’s back as Amir deceitfully frames Hassan for stealing his valuable watch. This was done with a clear intent of displacing Hassan and his father from the vicinity so that Amir would enjoy undivided attention of Baba who he felt in some way treated Hassan with great degree of intimacy; on answering the question of Amir whether Baba had any plans of getting new servants, Baba snaps back “He’s staying right here with us, where he belongs” (Hosseini, p.79). This is an interesting intersection of internal and external displacement. Internal displacement is witnessed in a sense that Amir felt that he did not share the attributes of his father such as the desire for adventure sports and self-confidence; he was, on that account, not much appreciated by his father. Hassan, on the other hand, was more outgoing and “a boy of action” and enjoyed special treatment from Baba which Amir thought Hassan did not actually deserve. Thus owing to envy which Amir harbored towards Hassan, he badly wanted to tarnish Hassan’s image in the eyes of Baba. This he believed would enable him to entertain the complete attention of his father, thus he resorted to trickery.

Hassan and Ali consequently had to pay dearly to the ruse enacted by Amir on to Hassan, as with Hassan being accused of stealing the watch they decided to leave. Baba, of course, “forgave” Hassan for the crime that he did not even commit but Hassan still showed no interest in cleansing himself of the allegation. After all to Hassan, Amir’s wishes were final and binding; he could never think of refuting Amir’s accusation, even if that meant having to accept such a horrendous label that Amir attached onto him. Even Ali, who on all other occasions seemed passively docile, now became pro-actively responsive to the situation and was adamant about leaving the place right away. Therefore, ignoring Baba’s pleas, Hassan and Ali embark on a journey of detachment.

There is another scene in the novel, profoundly painful one that apparently manifests another ramification of displacement. This is the instance when Russian Army storm into the Afghan territory forcing Amir and Baba and the like to forsake the much cherished location of their origin. In what could be called as the nick of time, they plotted an escape from Afghanistan as the latest development of events pushed their lives to unprecedented jeopardy. This forces the family to abandon the material property and the position they had earned for themselves in Afghanistan and set off on a path of uncertainty, both geographically and mentally. For the first time, it is here that Amir and Baba, who hitherto been direct or implicit beneficiaries of displacement, come face to face with the bitter reality of the same. Just before distancing himself from his native setting, Baba overwhelmed with emotions “...emptied the box and picked up a handful of dirt from the middle of the road. He kissed the dirt” (Hosseini, p. 105). And this was just the beginning of a long chain of painful ordeals that awaited them outside the frontier of their homeland. When stopped by the Russian soldiers on the way while trying to cross the border, for instance, Baba enters into a heated argument with them in a bid to save a fellow Afghani woman from being sexually assaulted. This nearly cost him his life. However, despite knowing he may have to pay a heavy price for the resistance, Baba still prepares for an aggressive pay back and expresses solidarity for the honor of the other fellow victims. It is only by a whisker that escapes the deadly tragedy. This particular instance of displacement seems to go analogous with what the German writer, Bertolt Brecht, who describes as his own experience of exile from Nazi Germany during the years 1933- 48, in his own poem *Concerning the Label Emigrant*. An excerpt from the poem goes:

But we
Did not leave, of our own free will
Choosing another land
.....
Merely, we fled. We are driven out banned.
Not a home but an exile, shall the land be that
took us in.

(qtd. in Woodward, p. 146) [1]

This goes in line with the escape of Amir and Baba from Afghanistan for they too did not choose to leave Afghanistan and settle in some alien location. A family of their stature would not under ordinary circumstances feel propelled to leave home country and head towards some foreign land, however lucrative the prospects be. But what option did they have? The alternative in sight was a highly insecure and chaotic Afghanistan. They in a way can be taken as fortunate family for the U.S. had something good to offer in a sense that their lives, at least, seemed physically secure there. They also managed to indulge in some livelihood activities as Baba takes up a job and paves way for Amir's education. However, even in the US, it is the memories of Afghanistan that keep haunting the lead characters such as Baba, Amir and the general.

This novel is crafted adopting an emic approach that he has been able to observe and feel the condition of Afghanistan as an insider. Hosseini himself is an Afghan-American who was directly affected by the turmoil in Afghanistan during the time of Russian invasion. Suresh Lohani [10] in "Constructing nontraditional Rhetoric: Critical study on Gloria Anzaldua and Suresh Canagarajah" states that "Emic approach in general can be understood as a research process of human beings that involves the words and experiences of the ones that participate in the research"(p.119). Although, Hosseini's work is not completely research based, it can still be argued that his fictionalized representation of the then Afghanistan is very close to the reality. It may for this reason that he has been able to create characters that truly mirror the conditions of Afghanistan during the troubled times.

To sum up, displacement has direct emotional and social repercussions among others. Suresh Lohani [11] in "LGBTI in Nepal, Pakistan, and India: Law, religion, and individuals" presents a case that show how emotional displacement and physical displacement go together in many cases. He citing a case of LGBTI people in South Asia mentions how there are "the instances where some say that Pakistan is the gay-paradise while the others are forced into exile for being gay. In India, some are disowned by family for being homosexual and killing themselves" (p. 64-65). For whatever reasons, one is compelled to leave their native setting, it will have a lasting impact on the psyche of those individuals. Displacement also flattens one's social standing since alien locations do not endorse the position one enjoyed in their comfort zones. The US setting, for example, had rendered the identities of the lead characters such as Baba and the general quite invisible. They were like any other struggling migrant without recognition that they enjoyed back in

Afghanistan. Amir, because of his age, may have acclimated faster to the US setting. However, even he is tormented by the act he perpetrated back in Afghanistan and the desire to somehow rectify that deed coupled with blur memories of Afghanistan propel him to go back to Afghanistan, and that is what he ends up doing. Thus, whether internal or external, emotional or psychological, displacement instigated by socio-political reasons strongly conditions people's identities and hammers their social standing. Hosseini, thus, through the narration of a story that encompasses religious, political, racial and economic ingredients has vividly portrayed the plight of the characters and exhibited how these impact their overall human dispositions.

REFERENCES

1. Woodward K. *Social Science: the Big Issues*. 1st ed. London: Routledge. 2003.
2. Bhusal, A. The rhetoric of racism and anti-miscegenation laws in the United States. *IAFOR Journal of Arts & Humanities*, 2017; 4(2), 83-89.
3. Bhusal, A. Emphasizing the suppression of feminist voices. *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies (IJHCS)*, 2017; 4(2), 53-57.
4. Lohani et al. *Scholars' social studies and creative arts series for primary level students*, approved by Curriculum Development Centre Nepal, Kathmandu: Scholars Publications and Printing Pvt. Ltd. 2015.
5. Huntington, S. P. *The clash of civilization*. Ed. Frank J. Lechner and John Boli. 3rd ed. *The Globalization Reader* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008; 39-47.
6. Hosseini, K. *The Kite Runner*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. 2003.
7. Bhusal, A. *The Rhetoric of Racism in Society*. *Journal of Research Innovation*, 2019; 9(1), 111-114.
8. Mirzoeff, N. *An introduction to visual culture*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge. (2009).
9. Alexander, J. C. *Toward a theory of cultural trauma*. Ed. J..Alexander, et.al. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. 3th ed. Berkley: University of California Press, 2004; 1-30.
10. Lohani, S. *Constructing nontraditional rhetoric: Critical study on Gloria Anzaldua and Suresh Canagarajah*. *Journal of Research Innovation*, (2019); 9(1).
11. Lohani, S. *LGBTI in NEPAL, Pakistan, and India: Law, religion, and individuals*. MPhil Thesis, Department of English, Pokhara University, Nepal. 2016.