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"Because the past claws its way out":

Home and Memory in Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner

Abstract: The concept of 'home' is indispensable to the study of diaspora. It raises imperative questions of identity and belonging. It also brings into discussion the notions of acculturation, sense of alienation and displacement, assimilation, exclusion, memory, nostalgia, etc. As diasporic texts essentially address the notions of dislocation, migration, and (re)settlement, the concept of home is liquidated to an unfixed and unsettled space, which keeps on changing as one shifts in time and space. This paper seeks to show how, rather than referring to one physical place as a single home, the diasporans refer 'home' to multiple physical places and symbolic spaces, as evident in Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner. Bringing into forefront the comparative description of pre-war and post-war scenario of Afghanistan, this paper will also examine how Amir's cultural identity in America, after his displacement from Kabul via Peshawar, how Amir shares a sentimental bond with his 'originary' homeland, and how he shows his desire to return to his homelands like the other diasporans. This paper will undertake to show the varying notions of 'Memory' as metaphorical concept, 'Home' as a fluid construction in multiple spaces, and 'Homecoming' as intimacy, traumatic but warm in The Kite Runner.

Keywords: refugee, community, identity, displacement, memory, home

The concept of 'home consciousness' is central to diasporic writings. In an exilic predicament, one conceives the idea of 'a remembered home' in relation to roots, suggesting a rift between time and space. In diasporic approach, a 'home' is understood as an abode in the present or as belonging to the past. A 'home' is that which may have been left lately or years back; it may exist in the memory, as nostalgia or a 'home' that used to be and which may not exist now; it may be hospitable and warm, or traumatic and not 'homey' at all; a 'home' may appear unusual on return after days of migration of the diasporans. The picture of home flashes in the diasporic imaginary as 'return of the repressed' that makes one remember one's roots or origin.

The frequently asked question of the diasporans 'Where do I belong?' (Blunt and Dowling 219) brings forth the essential need to elucidate and interpret the term 'home' in the context of diaspora. Mallet inquires: "Is home (a) place(s), (a) space(s), feeling(s), practices and/or an active state of being in the world? ('Understanding Home' 65). Halleh Ghorashi states that "home is not linked to a certain physical space but a position in life; it is about 'feeling at home'" (Ways to Survive 189). Avtar Brah in his book Cartographies of Diaspora, distinguishes between 'homing desire' and 'desire for homeland' as "mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination … and the lived experience of a locality" (188). Heidi Armbruster finds 'home' as "linked to meanings of identity and belonging" ('Homes in Crisis' 17). In Gender in Transnationalism, Ruba Salih describes home "as the physical space … (one) inhabits and as the symbolic conceptualization of where one belongs" (70). Rapport and Dawson locate important differences between 'home' as "a conceptual or discursive space of identification and 'home' as a nodal point in concrete social relations" (Migrants of Identity 17).

The retention of their 'home consciousness' give rise to hybrid or hyphenated identities among the diasporans, as well as loss of their 'self' in their new homelands. Therefore, they

seek to retrieve and restore their 'self' by the act of writing. Often the awareness of their home is so strong that it remains visible in their writings as nostalgia/memory and anguish. These memories are fluid constructions of feelings of belonging and foreignness, which is not fixed rather related to one's present position in life and his idealization of home, and it flows in the background of remembering. Ghorashi writes in this context: "the meaning of a place that is then essential. The creation of meaning comes from memorized experiences of certain places. These memories which change over the course of time, remain part of one's life; and, it is through these memories that feelings of belonging can be created" (Ways to Survive 20). This paper examines Amir's wistful yearning for home, his past, his childhood after his dislocation from Kabul to California in Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner. Published in 2003, this novel deals with friendship, love, betrayal, loss, guilt, fear, shame,violence, redemption and other universal human experiences exhibited through the 'ethical parable' of Amir and Hassan.

The novel begins with Amir's description of his childhood, the time he spent with Hassan, the hills, the alleys, his beautiful house in Kabul, the meadows and the lush green fields, the poplar trees in the driveway of his father's house, the days when their pockets filled with dried mulberries and walnuts, the days of giggling and laughing, the beautiful bazaars and the mosques of his city, how life was beautiful that time before the sky spat bombs and Amir and his father, along with many other Afghans had to flee to escape their war-torn country and they became refugees. This paper undertakes to show how the author changes his narrative by bringing a sheer contrast between past and present, as the later part of the book deals with pillaged, ransacked countryside and devastated cities of Afghanistan. This paper also locates how Hosseini tries to reconstruct Amir's fragmented 'self' in an absolutely alienated setting in his new home in America and Amir's return to Kabul reflecting Hosseini's own journey to his 'old home'.

In 1970s and 1980s, America attracted a large number of people, specifically, the students

through scholarships and the highly qualified professionals through thriving working opportunities and fascinating living conditions. Many of them surrendered their original national passports and they stayed back in America. Movement of a community from their homeland to a new land is generally seen on account of search of work, in pursuit of trade, lack of food, slavery, natural calamities, war, or the reason may be the expansion of colonial ambition. In the novel, The Kite Runner, Amir and Baba leave Kabul together with other Afghans and stay temporarily in Peshawar in Pakistan when the Russian soldiers seized Afghanistan. A little later, at the beginning of chapter eleven, Amir states that they finally moved from Pakistan to Fremont, California in 1980s, because "Baba loved the idea of America" (Kite Runner 116).

In America, Amir and Baba concentrates on homemaking. 'Homemaking' is often "conceptualized as a process made up of efforts undergone by an individual or community in economic, social, psychological and political spheres to create a habitable domestic environment" (Leung 164). Substantially, memories play a vital role in migrant's lifelong projects in homemaking. This is often mixed with trauma. Amir opens up his heart and says: "For me, America was a place to bury my memories. For Baba, a place to mourn his" (Kite Runner 120). Memories of migrants, both personal and collective, often act as cross-index to explicate our past and present experiences. Davidson rightfully observes that "memories are always unfixed, contested and multiple although people attempt to stabilize the meanings of particular envelopes of memory." ('The Play of Identity, Memory and Belonging' 26). In the new land, memories trigger the point of their origin too. "Migrants, more often those who are rooted, have to juggle their memories in the process of moving across geographic and cultural boundaries, making new homes, both in psychological and material ways" (Leung 164). Baba missed the sugarcane fields of Jalalabad and the gardens of Paghman. He missed the din and bustle of Shor Bazaar, and the people he knew, and those who knew him, his father and his

grandfather, people "who shared ancestors with him, whose pasts intertwined with his" (Kite Runner 120). In the words of Amir, "Baba was like the widower who remarries but can't let go of his dead wife" (Kite Runner 119).

In the study of diasporic groups, it is important to note that the migrants face discrimination in the new land, and thereafter, a troubled relationship with the host societies continue. This 'othering' of diasporans brings into discussion the notion of exclusion, (im)possibilities of making oneself 'feel at home' and their dreams of return. Moreover, collective memories of home, sometimes, restrict the migrants from recognizing the new land as home. Avtar Brah writes: "It is quite possible to feel at home in a place and yet, the experiences of social exclusions may inhibit public proclamations of the place as home" (Cartographies of Diaspora 190). The consequence of such experiences of exclusion create negative diasporic consciousness among the migrants. In The Kite Runner, Baba is seen looking for work the very day they arrived there, because Amir remembers that, in Afghanistan, "after everything he'd built, planned, fought for, fretted over, dreamed of … the summation of his life (was): one disappointing son and two suitcases" (Kite Runner 114). Financially, mentally, physically, and psychologically, Baba found himself at a loss and pushed to the periphery of life in America, after what he had done for him, for his family and for everyone in Afghanistan. In the new land, apart from cultural conflicts, life threw challenge to both Baba and Amir and it demanded time to settle down. After one month of their arrival in U.S.A., Baba found a job of an assistant at a gas station owned by an Afghan. He worked six days a week, pulling twelve hours shifts, pumping gas, running the register, changing oil and washing windshields.

At times the diasporans exhibit a very strong 'home-consciousness' and often seek to impose their lost culture, traditions and even their own aspirations in their children. It creates generational conflicts to a greater extent or what is known as 'Intergenerational Gap' in the diasporic communities. In Hosseini's Kite Runner, similar conflict is being seen when Amir

wants to do major in English and become a writer, Baba grunts: "Stories, you mean. You'll make up stories" (124). Amir justifies that a writer is being paid well if he gets discovered. But Baba's dissatisfaction shows up when he questions Amir: "And what will you do while you wait to get good and get discovered? How will you earn money? If you marry, how will you support your khanum?" (Kite Runner 124)

Diasporans always experience something 'new' in their 'new land'. In America, Amir's dream come true. In Afghanistan, Amir had seen seas and oceans at the cinema only. He remembers his old friend Hassan whom he used to tell how he visualized the day when they "would walk on a strip of seaweed-strewn beach, sink (their) feet in the sand, and watch the water recede" from their toes. In America it was mesmerising for Amir as he surprisingly passes the remark: "the first time I saw the Pacific, I almost cried. It was as vast and blue as the oceans on the movie screens of my childhood" (Kite Runner 126). Fortier observes that this creates a duality between 'homeland as the object of longing […] and hostland as the object of efforts to belong" (Migrant Belongings 160). It deduces multiple meanings of the idea of home, which may not be necessarily confined to physical places but it may suggest symbolic spaces of belonging too. Long after Ali and Hassan left Baba's house in Kabul, on being asked by Rahim Khan to return, Hassan, at first, denied considering "the village was his home now; he and Farzana had made a life for themselves there" (Kite Runner 191). In Pakistan, when asked by Amir, Rahim Khan said that he could not leave Afghanistan, though the terror of the Talibans loomed large on the people of the city. He cites reason saying that "Kabul was my home. It still is" (Kite Runner 184). In another instance, In Pakistan, seeing Rahim Khan vomiting blood, Amir offered to take him to America: "Let me take you home with me. I can find you a good doctor" (Kite Runner 186). Rahim Khan appreciated Amir saying: "America has infused you with the optimism that has made her so great" (Kite Runner 186). So it is evident that the concept of home varies in context.

But, in his new land, Amir suffers from existential rootlessness. This continued throughout during his stay in America. At the end of the text, he identifies his longing for his home in the words of Hassan's son, Sohrab: "I want my old life back … I want Father and Mother jan. I want Sasa. I want to play with Rahim Khan Sahib in the garden. I want to live in our house again … I want my old life back" (Kite Runner 324-325). This triggered Amir's memory and his desire of seeing and being in his old home, because memory, cannot be the direct result or sum up of all past experiences. "The act of remembering is always contextual, a continuous process of recalling, interpreting and reconstructing the past in terms of the present and in the light of an anticipated future" (Stock 24). The process of remembering is, at times, dialogic and memory of past evolves in continual dialogue with new memories of new places and with varying circumstances. Most importantly, it is to be noted 'what' and 'how' is remembered of the 'originary' homeland. Amir convinces himself while consoling Sohrab: "I can't give you that" (Kite Runner 325). He thinks of his old home contextually and justifies:

> Your old life, I thought. My old life too. I played in the same yard, Sohrab. I lived in the same house. But the grass is dead and a stranger's jeep is parked in the driveway of our house, pissing oil all over the asphalt. Our old life is gone, Sohrab, and everyone in it is either dead or dying. It's just you and me now. Just you and me. (Kite Runner 325)

This co-lateral experience of 'living here relating to a there" (Baumann 324) produces "empowering paradox of diaspora" (Clifford 322). This simultaneous and concurrent belonging, both here and there, can open up new vistas essentially creating hybrid identities among the diasporans and on the other hand, this oscillatory movement of in-betweenness in the corridor of 'contrasting settings' may remind someone some incidents that are traumatic and heart piercing. Amir explains that "It was (his) past of unatoned sins" (Kite Runner 1) that provoked him to be nostalgic, and adds, "its wrong what they say about the past, I've learned, about how

you can bury it. Because the past claws its way out" (Kite Runner 1). He questions himself, "What was the old saying about the bad penny?" (Kite Runner 281) and compares "My past was like that, always turning up" (Kite Runner 281). He confesses the fact that "long before the Roussi army marched into Afghanistan, long before villages were burned and schools destroyed, long before mines were planted like seeds of death and children buried in rock-piled graves, Kabul had become a city of ghosts for me. A city of harelipped ghosts" (Kite Runner 126). The expression 'harelipped ghosts' has a deep connotation here in connection to his childhood days. In the novel, several instances evince Hassan's unfathomable love and loyalty for Amir and the repetition of his words in the text, "For you, a thousand times over" (Kite Runner 2) discern the same, but it finds no reciprocation from Amir. Moreover, Amir witnessed but did not protest and save Hassan, the harelipped boy and his playmate, who was brutally raped by Assef and other two boys Wali and Kamal, that very day of kite fight tournament in Kabul, when Hassan ran to collect the last blue kite for Amir's victory. He suffered for being poor, for being a servant's son and for being a Hazara. Years later, Amir, while in America, gets a phone call from Rahim Khan and visits him in Pakistan, when, the ultimate revelation comes from Khan that Hassan was Amir's half-brother too. After so many years, Amir is nostalgic about Hassan but perturbed by the haunting ghostly thought of his guilt that often pricked his conscience and that reverberated in Amir's mind right from the day Hassan suffered at the hands of the boys. Amir states that: "America was different. America was a river, roaring along, unmindful of the past. I could wade into this river, let my sins drown to the bottom, let the waters carry me someplace far. Someplace with no ghosts, no memories and no sins. If for nothing else, for that, I embraced America" (Kite Runner 126).

Assimilation is a part of diasporic reading of a text. In the new land, the diasporans exhibit a sense of solidarity with the co-ethnic members of other countries and simultaneously, they show a change in their language, culture, lifestyle and even their way of writing. In the new

land, when they come in contact with a new culture, the diasporans tend to assimilate with it and consequently they are almost transformed. Amir truly embraced America and gradually picked up its culture. After Baba's death in America, Amir is heartbroken. He finds himself like an orphan in a new land. He writes: "I thought of the old story of Baba wrestling a black bear in Baluchistan. Baba had wrestled bears his whole life. Losing his young wife. Raising a son by himself. Leaving his beloved homeland, his watan. Poverty. Indignity. In the end, a bear had come that he couldn't best. But even then, he had lost on his own terms" (Kite Runner 160). He adds: "My whole life, I had been "Baba's son". Now he was gone. Baba couldn't show me the way anymore; I would have to find it on my own. The thought of it terrified me…I am going to miss him" (Kite Runner 161-162). Baba's last rites were performed following Afghan tradition, but Amir is not seen keeping penance in America while Hassan did it in Kabul when he learned about Baba's death from Rahim Khan. Rahim Khan informed Amir that the moment he told Hassan about Baba's death, "Hassan, buried his face in his hands and broke into tears. He wept like a child for the rest of the night … Then in mourning for your father, Hassan wore black for the next forty days" (Kite Runner 192-193). There are other instances of assimilation in the text. Amir, in America, unlike a Muslim, stopped praying. But he prays, while Sohrab is seen fighting for his life in the hospital. Amir confesses:

> …I remember I haven't prayed for over fifteen years. I have long forgotten the words. But it doesn't matter, I will utter those few words I still remember… there is a God, there has to be, and now I will pray that He forgive that I have neglected him all of these years, forgive that I have betrayed, lied and sinned with impunity only to return to Him now in my hour of need, I pray that He is as merciful, benevolent, and gracious as his book says He is. (Kite Runner 316-317)

A return movement to homeland is another particular feature of the diasporans that happens

when Amir goes to rescue Hassan's son, Sohrab, from the clutches of the Talibans in Kabul. He does this to seek redemption of his sin and that of Baba. He does this because he wanted to keep up Rahim Khan's words: "There is a way to be good again" (Kite Runner 2), also he does this because he never wanted that Sohrab would grow up as another broken child of Afghanistan as there are millions. Once he succeeds pulling Sohrab through, he assures him that he would take him to America but miserably fails to keep up his promise on account of some legal obligation. He observes: "It's a dangerous business, making promises to kids" (Kite Runner 304). Amir follows the legal procedure and asks Sohrab to stay in an orphanage for some days in Pakistan before he adopts him and legally claims his visa to take him to America. Sohrab trembles remembering the days of horrors of his sexual abuse at the hands of Talibans in the orphanage of Kabul, misunderstands and misinterprets Amir, doesn't want to go back to any orphanage, and, cuts his arm and gets hospitalized. Later Sohrab recovers and goes to America with Amir.

The description of homecoming of Amir, while he goes to rescue Sohrab from the Talibans, as given in the book is quite similar to what Khaled Hosseini says for himself in the foreword of the book, The Kite Runner. Femke Stock identifies "the differences between the first generation migrants who can relate their diasporic experiences to their own memories of a time before migration, and the later generations for whom the 'new land' has never been new and whose memories of the homeland are more fragmented" (24). America was new to both Amir and Baba when both of them migrated. Amir's memory of his homeland is not fragmented at all. As Amir's and the writer's childhood mirrored each other, Hosseini's memories of his homeland are not 'fragmented' too, but remains distinct and prompt as he describes "Baba's old house in that same neighbourhood. It took me three days of searching - I had no address and the neighbourhood had changed drastically - but I kept looking until I spotted the familiar arch over the gates" (Foreword the Kite Runner). Idealization of ancestral place is part of

'home-consciousness' which is nostalgic. In their residual memory remain the image of their remembered 'old home', the image of the land left behind by their ancestors (their parents and grandparents) and the image of their often visited lanes and alleys in their childhood (Levitt and Waters 285). Amir describes his feelings when he comes back to Afghanistan:

> The ground was cool under my bare feet and suddenly, for the first time since we had crossed the border, I felt like I was back. After all these years, I was home again, standing on the soil of my ancestors. This was the soil on which my great-grandfather had married his third wife a year before dying in the cholera epidemic that hit Kabul in 1915. She'd borne him what his first two wives had failed to, a son at last. It was on this soil that my grandfather had gone on a hunting trip with King Nadir Shah and shot a deer. My mother had died on this soil. And on this soil, I had fought for my father's love..
>
> I sat against one of the house's clay walls. The kinship I felt suddenly for the old land … it surprised me. I'd been gone long enough to forget and be forgotten. I had a home in a land that might as well be in another galaxy to the people sleeping on the other side of the wall I leaned against. I thought I had forgotten about this land. But I hadn't. And, under the bony glow of a half moon, I sensed Afghanistan humming under my feet. May be Afghanistan hadn't forgotten me either.
>
> … Kabul still existed … somewhere over those mountains in the west slept the city where my harelipped brother and I had run kites …. Once, over those mountains, I had made a choice. And now, a quarter of a century later, that choice had landed me right back on this soil. (Kite Runner 222)

Positive identifications with a homeland may go hand in hand with feelings of estrangement when one … (is) denied belonging by those still living there (Stock 25-26). A feeling of

estrangement is noticeable in Amir who states that "I grew up in Afghanistan" (Kite Runner 214) but "I feel like a tourist in my own country" (Kite Runner 214). He pour our his heart and says, "it always hurts more to have and lose than to not have in the first place" (Kite Runner 211). Farid, the driver who accompanied Amir to Kabul, informs him that the streets that once smelt of Kababs now spreads the smell of diesel. Electricity is unreliable, generators hardly work, and people use diesel. Amir finds the streets bare, without trees. Farid informs him that the snipers use to hide in the trees and people therefore cut them down for firewood in winter. One can perceive the picture of post war Afghanistan at the hands of the Talibans and the description of the ruined buildings and abandoned houses seen through the eyes of Amir. Farid also informs him that there was no shortage of police in the city but one cannot find kites or kite shops on Jadeh Maywand or anywhere else in Kabul. "Those days are over" (Kite Runner 226). Previously, Rahim Khan informed Amir that the Talibans banned kite fighting and in 1998, they killed the Hazaras in Mazar-I-Sharif. Hassan and his wife Farzana, who were taking care of Amir's old home, were also shot dead by the Talibans for being Hazaras, and the Talibans captured the house then. Learning this, Amir confesses: "A sadness came over me. Returning to Kabul was like running into an old, forgotten friend and seeing that life had not been good to him, that he would become homeless and destitute" (Kite Runner 227).

After a long search, when he found his house, Amir compares himself with an uprooted tree and says "I stood outside the gates of my father's house, feeling like a stranger. I set my hands on the rusty bars, remembering how I'd run through these same gates thousands of times as a child, for things that mattered not at all now and yet had seemed so important then. I peered in" (Kite Runner 240) and he pours out his heart, when, he says "Insanely, I wanted to go in" (Kite Runner 242), while, Farid the driver, kept on honking his car from behind to save Amir from the Talibans. The image of his old house is kept intact in Amir's memory who informs the readers that "the house itself was far from the sprawling white mansion I remembered from

my childhood. It looked smaller. The roof sagged and the plaster cracked …the windows broken … the paint … had faded to ghostly gray… revealing the layered bricks beneath …. Like so much else in Kabul, my father's house was the picture of fallen splendour" (Kite Runner 241). Amir's homecoming has revealed his attachment with his land. He continued his search while Farid honks saying "How much more do you need to see? Let me save you from the trouble: Nothing that you remember has survived. Best to forget" (Kite Runner 242). Amir visits the place where he and Hassan spent time together. He remembers his days touching the carving on the bark of the tree, which was almost faded then. But it still bears the mark that they once had carved: "Amir and Hassan. The Sultans of Kabul" (Kite Runner 243).

It is sincerely observed by Kuah-Pearce and Davidson that out of their memories, interwoven together with their own experiences of 'migration routes and migrant roots' (At Home in the Chinese Diaspora 2), the diasporans construct narratives of home and belonging through the act of writing. As Amir's and the writer's childhood mirrored each other, Hosseini writes in the Foreward of the book that two-thirds of the novel were his own family's experiences, first in Afghanistan and thereafter in California. He had written this Afghan homecoming trip especially, for his protagonist Amir. When Hosseini entered his old house, which was then captured by the Panjshiri soldiers, he was nostalgic like Amir. He writes: "I found that, like Amir's childhood house, the paint had faded, the grass had withered, the trees were gone, and the walls were crumbling. I too was stuck by how much smaller the house was in reality than the version that had for so long lived in my memories" (Foreword Kite Runner). While coming back, a poignant feeling seized Hosseini's mind. He writes:

The emotional impact of finding my father's house would have been even more intense if I hadn't written The Kite Runner. After all, I had already been through this. I had stood beside Amir at the gates of his father's house and felt his loss. I'd watched him set his hands on the rusty wrought-iron bars, and together we'd gazed at the sagging roof and crumbling front steps.

Having written that scene took some of the edge off my own experience. Call it Art stealing Life's thunder. (Foreword Kite Runner)

To conclude, in the words of Avtar Brah, "the concept of diaspora embodies a subtext of home" (Cartographies of Diaspora 187). The term 'home' may refer to multiple spaces at a given point of time in diasporic settings. Home can be a part of recollection, it can be inhabited by or it can be longed for, and so is the feeling of belonging too, because Mallet rightly puts forth: "Home is variously described as conflated with or related to house, family, haven, self, gender and journeying" ('Understanding Home' 65). Home is where one grows up wanting to leave, and grows old wanting to get back to. Home is where love resides, memories are created. However and whatever the notion of 'home' is conceptualized, Hosseini aptly says, but "life goes on, unmindful of beginning, end, kamyab, nah-kam, crisis or catharsis, moving forwards like a slow, dusty caravan of kochis (nomads)" (Kite Runner 327).

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