

The Dichotomy of Present and Past in Khalid Hussein's *The Kite Runner*: A Chronotopicview

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Abstract

The present study analyzed the novel of Khalid Hussein's *The Kite Runner* using Bakhtin's concept of diasporic chronotopes to highlight the role of the diasporic present and past, physical and mental chronotopes in shaping and reshaping the present. The study was carried out through an analysis of cultural values of indigenous and the host culture of Amir who represents the problems of identity crisis of the migrant of diaspora communities. The study found that the memory is an unavoidable factor that leads the diasporic people like Amir to live in the present by travelling into the past, physically and psychologically. Moreover, the study highlighted that the diasporic experiences promote cultural and identity conflict making the diasporas into hybrid products. The study concludes that the problem resulting from the diasporic experiences are the by-product, but being diaspora is not always a problem. Amir's journey subtly stresses that the newly acquired cultural values are compatible with the indigenous culture and values system. This article identified new areas in literary piece which is beneficial for the scholars and learners to understand the text with new touch. The current research will create room for the future scholars to select the same literary piece while identify new elements in Afghan culture or adopted culture.

Keywords: Dichotomy, Diaspora, Chronotope, Hybrid, Culture, Identity

Introduction

The present study aims at a postcolonial study of the novel *The Kite Runner* (2003) by Khaled Hosseini through the framework of diasporic chronotopes propagated by Mikhail Bakhtin to highlight that how the migrant communities hang in between the two different chronotopic experiences. The

term was developed by Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin in his (1937) essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel". In literary theory and philosophy of language, the chronotope is how configurations of time and space are represented in language and discourse. It draws attention to the concrete physical spaces

in which stories actually take place. Time takes on flesh and becomes visible for human contemplation, and at the same time, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time and history and the enduring character of a people. The study highlights that how memory and indigenous culture play their role in derailing the migrants in a newly acquainted culture. It is important to know that what role does their present or past play in shaping a new and hybrid identity in a diasporic community. The diasporic subjects are entangled in the two times: the present connecting them to the new cultural community they are part of; and the past connecting them back to their homeland through memory and homesickness.

Utilization of time forms a significant feature of the narrative in the novels. Bakhtin is of the view that literature's main method of representation is temporal and therefore nothing could possibly be explained outside the passage of time. According to this concept, if the passage of time is taken away from its relationship to past and present, then the present loses its validity (146). With this view when one looks at the narrative within the novels, one can notice that the present is continuously incorporating the past but not so much the future. The reason is that the aspect of time has a dual nature as much of it is rooted in the past. This past gets disassociated due to social constructions and the writers try to build up new terms "to uncover social

contradictions" (147). Such a factor of building up utilizing the past has been referred to as "transpositioning or historical inversion" (147) by Bakhtin. The diasporic writer definitely stresses the time factor by the narrator's move from the past to the present and from the present to the past and at the same time also gets located in the location in which one exists. The diasporic character exists in between an individual significance, namely the past and the physical dimension, namely the present (150). Literature emerging from the background of diaspora has led to two distinctive types of writing. The first of these is more autobiographical with references to the narration of self. The second is more scholarly dealing with studies on diaspora.

Tololyan makes a distinction between these two types of writing by explaining that there are two discourses, named the emic diaspora and the etic diaspora. The emic diaspora refers to the diaspora that talk about them, while the etic refers to scholarly works on diaspora. He further states that, "the self-study of Diasporas produced representations and various forms of self-knowledge, some embodied in quotidian practices, some in public performances and others in oral and written archives and the thriving native language press of groups such as the Armenians and the Chinese" (654). He is of the opinion that diasporas in the emic discourse generally keep making self-representations by referring to their

selves in English. The other matter that is significant in diaspora studies, according to Tololyan, is the aspect of representation: “Who represents diasporas the community itself or scholar’s matters. As the works of Louis Althusser and Pierre Macherey imply, the diasporic social domain that exists when only emic study and self-representation is going on takes a different shape when it is constituted as the object of knowledge of diasporic studies” (654). Furthermore, “theoretical conceptions, specialized terminologies, acknowledged and unacknowledged disciplinary interests and intentions, a will to knowledge, and a variety of methodologies combine to reformulate diasporas” (654). Thus diasporians become “objects of knowledge and cosubjects” (654). Tololyan finally hints at an additional factor in this aspect.

The seminal work of fiction by Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, was first published in the year 2003. The novel unfolds the story of an indigenous young boy Amir born to a noble family of Afghanistan in a village in Kabul. The story of novel covers a wide range of chaotic incidents invoking social and political unrest after the decline of Afghan indigenous monarchy by the proxy war by soviet Russia. As a result of the uncertain future amidst chaos and psycho social sufferings, a plethora of people migrated to Pakistan and the US to seek refuge and search for a better and peaceful life. The life experiences

of Amir are the representatives of so many Afghan families who were forced by manifold tensions and anarchy to another country. The Protagonist, Amir travels to US with his father after the state of confusion, anarchy and chaos in Afghanistan to take refuge from the uncertain and disaster. Being son of an elite father, Amir had the privilege to easily get adjusted in the new culture. Being, a grown up young man, Amir recalls his childhood memories in the days of peace in Afghanistan. He had a childhood friend Hassan who was sexually abused in front of him and he could do nothing about that. The guilt and sense of redemption not only does make him to think about his past, but forces him to visit Afghanistan to save Sohrab, the son of his childhood friend Hassan from the Taliban.

Background of the Study

The novel unfolds with Amir who is the son of a rich Pashtun family, and Hassan, who belongs to Hazara family who is serving, Amir’s father. Both the boys are close friends since the childhood and spend their days flying the kites together in the peaceful suburbs of Kabul city. The story further unfolds that the kite flying is a sort of escape for the kids from the horrific reality of the country they were living in. In his views, Hassan is an unmatched kite runner in the whole of the town who also knows exactly where the kite will fall without seeing it. One thing is common in both of them as they are motherless children. Both the boys

were deprived of their motherly love and affection because Amir's mother left for heavenly abode during his birth, while Hassan's mother left him to the care of his father only.

Living in Afghanistan, both Amir and Hassan both were treated as brothers by Amir's Baba who was then a successful trader in Kabul. Even, Amir's father used to buy the same things for Hassan that he used to buy for his own son. The love and care of Amir's father is evident from Amir's father's paying the money for Hassan's surgery to fix his cleft lip. In contrast, his father's behavior with Amir was often cynical as he always considered him physically weak and less courageous than Hassan. Often threatened for punishment for envy for Hassan, Amir always found fatherly love and affection in Rahim Khan's company.

Rahim Khan was one of the close friends of Amir's father who was the only person who supported him in his interest for literature which his father considered a womanly passion in him and often discouraged. In an episode, in the company of his father, Amir resents and detests his father's habit of consuming alcohol considering it forbidden in Islam. To answer him, he informs Amir that the representatives of Islam are corrupt hypocrites and stealing and theft are the real sins in Islam.

As the story proceeds, the readers are introduced with a young adolescent but typical Afghan boy Assef who is violent and sadistic in his temperament. Assef is also older than both Amir and Hassan in his age. Representing the racially prejudiced Afghans, Assef often bullies Amir for having a friendship with a Hazara child. Hazaras were then considered an inferior and outsider race because they were not the indigenous inhabitants of Afghanistan. Ironically, Assef too is not a pure Afghan because his own mother is a German. Assef has hatred towards Hassan and does not like the fact that he is a close friend of Amir. Therefore, one day Assef assaults an attack on Amir to which Hassan responds by threatening to shoot at him with slingshot. Though, Assef retreated for the moment but he swore to avenge his humiliation some other day.

The story proceeds to the season of kite-fighting in the serene and calm environment of Kabul and Amir wins the local tournament of kite-fighting and is happy to win his father's praise. In the meanwhile, Hassan runs after a kite to catch and bring it back to Amir as a trophy for his friend, but he is chased by Amir in the alleyway. Assef not only beats Hassan on that day to snatch the kite from Hassan but also rapes him. As a witness of the whole incident Amir could do nothing about saving Hassan because he was too scared by the incidents. In this episode, Amir's guilt starts as he could neither save his friend

nor could he bring the kite back. Fearful of losing his father's affection for showing cowardice, Amir did not only keep quiet but also started maintain a distance from his friend Hassan. As the story proceeds, the physical and mental conditions of Amir begin to vex and deteriorate him as the memory of the incident continuously haunted him.

In the bizarre and weird mental state, Amir even started believing that keeping a distance from Hassan would make him feel better. So, in order to get rid of Hassan, he attempted to hide his father's money and watch under Hassan's bed hoping that his father would expel Hassan and his father from the job as he knew his father hates theft as a sin. On the other hand, Hassan sacrificing his father's honor and job confesses that he has stolen the money and watch, but Amir's father forgives him considering him a small child. But Hassan takes leave with his father as Amir told his father Ali about what happened on the day of tournament. The courage to tell his father about the incident frees him from the haunting guilt but for a very short period of time.

The story takes a leap forward for five years. The conditions of Afghanistan have changed from calm, serene and peaceful country to a tumultuous and disastrous region of violence, bloodshed and uncertainty about any good in future. The Soviet military and the Afghan monarchy engaged in a proxy war. In such a state,

Amir and his father escaped first to Pakistan to save their lives and then migrated to California where they settled down for the rest of their lives. His father started earning a livelihood by working at a gas station. Amir, on the other hand, got admission at San Jose State University after graduating from his high school in California. To further support themselves, Amir and his father used to sell used products at flea market every Sunday. As the time passes by, Amir's father got ill of terminal cancer and Amir falls in loves with a beautiful refugee girl Soraya Taheri. Amir's father asks for Soraya's hand for his son to which Soraya's father agrees. Hence, Amir and Soraya get married. After the death of his father, though living a happy married life, both Amir and Soraya come to know that they can never have children.

Amir, then, starts his career as a fiction writer. Fifteen years of happy married life have passed. The one day, Amir received a phone call from Uncle Rahim who is about to dies. Rahim requested him to visit him one time before he dies. Rahim also informed him about the death of Hassan and his father in the violence and bloodshed they left in Afghanistan long ago. To Amir's shock, Rahim also inform him that Hassan and Ali died defending Amir's baba's house from the confiscation by the Talibans. Most important of all, Rahim informed Amir that Hassan was not Ali's biological son, but his half-brother by Ali's wife

and his father. Before dropping the call, Rahim requested him to rescue his nephew Sohrab, who is Hassan's son, from an unknown orphanage in Afghanistan.

In the anti-climax, Amir comes back to Afghanistan to search for Sohrab with the help of a local taxi driver Fared. During the search, Amir comes to know that Assef has turned out to be one of the Taliban who often visits the orphanage to get a girl or boy on cash for sexual abuse. At the arrival, they come to know that Assef has taken Sohrab. With the help of the orphanage director, Amir succeeds to trace Sohrab at Assef's house. Assef agrees to free Sohrab on the condition if Amir wins a duel against him. During the fight, Amir is badly beaten by Assef, until Sohrab shoots a fire of slingshot and wounds Assef's eyes. With the help of Sohrab, they manage to run away.

Later on, when Amir recovers from his wounds, he informs Sohrab of his plan to adopt him and bring back to America. On the way back, the American authorities demand the certificate of Sohrab's orphanage that Amir failed to produce. Hence, Sohrab has to stay at an orphanage for a short period of time. Terrified of his past experiences at an orphanage, Sohrab attempted to commit suicide. However, somehow, Amir manages to bring Sohrab to America but Sohrab is reluctant to get mixed with his new parents until Amir tells him about his

father Hassan and his trick and kite running. Sohrab finally starts interacting with them with a lopsided smile on his face. The story ends with Amir Sohrab, reminiscing Hassan's dialogue: "For you, a thousand times over".

Objectives of the Study

The Objectives of the study are:

- I. To explore the novel from the perspective of physical and mental chronotopic model of diasporic communities and newly acquired identity.
- II. To find out the role of the cultural diversity of the migrant community in shaping the ideologies thought patterns, cultural practices and values of the Diasporas.
- III. To highlight that the psychological trauma and sufferings of the diasporas in a new cultural setting.

Research Questions

Q.1. How memory and indigenous culture accelerate the incompatibility of the newly acquired culture in the diasporic community in *The Kite Runner*?

Q.2. How far the present and the past shape/reshape or temper the hybrid identity of the diaspora in *The Kite Runner*?

Q.3. How chronotopic experiences disturb the psyche of the protagonist in *The Kite Runner*?

Theoretical Framework

The present research attempts to analyze Khalid Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* from the theoretical perspective of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of Chronotopes to highlight the role of indigenous culture and memory in destabilizing the diasporic subjects in the migrant countries and how the present and the past play a role in shaping or altering the hybrid identity of the diasporas.

Significance of the Study

The study is significant because it explores the novel *The Kite Runner* using Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of chronotopes, providing a new framework of the literary studies in diaspora research and postcolonial studies. The study is also significant because it will facilitate the diaspora scholars in understanding the cultural and cross-cultural experiences and phenomenon of the diasporic

communities. The study also highlights the nature and behavioral changes that the diasporic go through after adapting to a new culture in new settings. Moreover, the study is significant in bringing the concept of chronotopes in the diaspora studies because it gives a new dimension and area of studies to the future scholars interested in diaspora literature.

Literature Review

Kurilah (2009) analysed the role of social and moral responsibilities in *Social and Moral Responsibility in Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner: Sociological Approach* using a sociological model of study. The study highlighted that the novel is a microcosm of socio-political, cultural, economic and ethnic conditions of Afghan people in the midst of war and chaos. On the other hand,

Jefferess (2009) talks about the ethical demand of the novel *The Kite Runner To be Good (again): The Kite Runner as Allegory of Global Ethics* and says that "there is a way to be good again" in association with the demands of contemporary humanitarianism. The study takes a critical outlook of the novel by focusing on it from the perspective of Mamdani's dichotomy between good or bad Muslim, Appiah's conception of cosmopolitanism and Butler's theory of human interdependence. The study concludes that the novel ponders on the shift of racial supremacy as the discursive power

behind political identity to modern framework of human identity.

Hosseini and Zohdi (2016) explored the novel *The Kite Runner* from the perspective of racial discrimination and ethnic issues prevalent in the context of Afghanistan in their research under the title *The Kite Runner and the Problem of Racism and Ethnicity*. They focused on the social, scientific and cultural studies conducted on racially segregated people by taking in view the example of Afghan people as depicted in the context of *The Kite Runner*. The study gives an account of socio-political and religious causes of racial conflict between Pashtuns and Hazaras using Feagin's theory of denial of human difference. The study concludes that the biological differences are just an excuse to racially segregate the people of power and egoistic oriented goals.

Raza (2016) has analysed the novel *The Kite Runner* with the title *The Kite Runner: Children, Violence and the Ethnic Imaginary in Afghanistan* and suggests that the novel is an outcry against the violence of Afghan Talibans against the subject people and their sexual violence and abuse against children. The study comments at the ethnic and sectarian violence in the context of Afghanistan as well. He concludes that at literal level, *The Kite Runner* stylistically problematizes the imaginary of ethnic and sectarian practices using the characters of children as aesthetically appealing figures

displacing the ethnic imaginary associated with sectarianism.

Du (2017) conducted a qualitative study of the novel with the title *A Journey of Self-actualization of Amir in the Kite Runner* and says that *The Kite Runner* is a journey of Amir's self-actualization and spiritual growth besides being a narration of sufferings and cultural history of Afghan nation. Amir's journey is not just a journey of salvation, but it is also a journey of return back to humanity. An analytical study of Amir's experiences in different age groups sheds light on the fact that Amir has established love, dignity, responsibility, loyalty and courage as subsidiary pursuits besides redemption.

Kai-fu (2019), in his research, *A Study of Amir's Psychological Change in The Kite Runner*, conducted a psychoanalytical investigation on the novel *The Kite Runner* using Erikson's psycho-social development theory to highlight the role of psychological changes in the central character of Amir, the protagonist, which led him to behave out of the box. The study explores Amir's betrayal, his guilt and journey towards redemption in relation to the psychological changes in his personality development in the different stages of his life. The study concludes that to understand reason of Amir's betrayal and his cowardice, we as a reader need to understand the inner world of his character to blame him for the cowardice.

Adhikary (2020) conducted an investigation under the title *Historicity in Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner: Encountering History in Contemporary Afghanistan* on the novel *The Kite Runner* through the lens of new historicism to find out a relationship between history and discourse in the context of Afghanistan. The real life socio-cultural and political conditions of Afghanistan during the crisis of war are beautifully knitted in the plot of *The Kite Runner*. The study concludes that the novel very subtly unveil the power politics of Russia and America by highlighting the historical and factual conditions of Afghanistan. Furthermore, the new historicist study of the novel also helps the readers in understanding the true face of terrorism, war, and cultural crisis and identity conflicts within different ethnic groups in Afghanistan. The novel is also concerned with the hard and tough time of Afghans under the barbarous control of Taliban.

Research Methodology

The study takes Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) conception of diasporic chronotopes as the theoretical model to investigate the novel *The Kite Runner* to find out the role of geographical dislocation of the migrants or refugees after the 09/11 incident. The study takes a qualitative outlook to find out the role of diasporic identity in dividing the Diasporas in two different times: one that the migrants or refugees experience

by living in their present in the host culture; the other leading them to their past through haunting memories of the subject people in their indigenous culture. For the purpose of analysis, the researcher will collect the textual excerpts from the novel after close textual reading of the text. The relevant episodes have been analyzed in the next section keeping in view the context of the different strands of the theory of diasporic chronotopes which are memory, indigenous and host culture, diasporic experiences, identity crisis, sense of belongingness, otherness, exile, alienation and conflict in the values of indigenous and the host culture. The tabulated data will be further analyzed to answer the intended research questions. The concept of diasporic chronotopes is developed out of Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) conception of chronotopes. The chronotopes theory in diasporic experiences and diaspora literature means the split in the Diasporas due to existence in two different times, Mikhail Bakhtin talks about the aforesaid aspects of diasporic experiences.

Analysis & Discussion

This section addresses the question of the existing dichotomy, in the postcolonial migrant people, of hanging in between the present and past owing to indigenous and newly adopted cultural values and identities. Moreover, memory and pangs of connectedness to the motherland, its people and culture are the factors that make the lives of the

diaspora people difficult and divided in their present and past. As Bakhtin (1981) argues that the post colonies, Diasporas or migrant communities suffer from an inevitable conflict of the personality that is existing in two temporalities present and past, the protagonist Amir has an unavoidable choice in vigorously living the present and deliberate indulgence in the past.

The very title of the novel *The Kite Runner* indicates a strong cultural, social and emotional bond between the protagonist Amir and his friend Hassan. This practice of kite running has been a ritual not only in Afghanistan but the entire South Asia. As a result, the kite running practice transforms into a strong memory for Amir as it reminds him of the gone days of golden youth in Afghanistan. The kite serves as a symbol of escape for Amir from his chronotopic present in the California. In the wake of war on terror after the 09/11 incident, a lot of families migrated to California fearing for an uncertain future and a search for better life in America and other. It is evident from the very choice of the migration of Amir's family to America that he is going to be haunted by the memory of his past in Afghanistan. The memory connects him to Hassan that forces him to redemption by helping and adapting Hassan's son Sohrab.

The storyline of the novel remains devoid of chronotopic pangs of

the novel from exposition to climax. Amir remains well settled in California as a flourishing writer and soon going to be married to a migrant Muslim woman Soraya. However, life in a small apartment in California hints at a dichotomy or disparity of the indigenous identity of Amir. Back in Afghanistan, Amir enjoyed the superior status of the son of merchant who is tended by a lot of servants. This highlights how diaspora experiences fail to challenge the serene, calm and apparently perfect lives of the migrant communities. Ironically, the diasporic identity of a well-to-do Afghani merchant and his son goes unnoticed to both of them during their stay in California. Neither, Amir nor his father ever felt this identity conflict. Their identity in the past in Kabul, Afghanistan has been changed into their identity in the present in California, America. This is because of the fact that the host culture has offered the working refugee family of an Afghan elite family with a better living standard that it never occurred to them that in the plight of a safe and better future they have lost their indigenous identity and forgot their past.

The diasporic experience of Amir remains a paradise life in California, until the Garden of Eden the perfect Diaspora life has been taken away from him by a phone call from one of his father's close friend Rahim Khan. From hence, the diasporic experience of Amir becomes a haunting memory, making him recall his past with his childhood

friend Hassan. The memory becomes the reason of identity clash. The past surfaces itself so stronger that Amir is at a loss. His conscience reminds him of the wrong he did to Hassan as a child. redemption appears to be a strong symbol of Amir's journey from his present into his past.

The question of redemption is relevant to Amir's decision to return back to Afghanistan to search for Sohrab Hassan's only surviving son. The rescue is inevitable as Amir's search for Sohrab risks his life. Here the answer to Amir's foolish attempt at rescue search is traceable to both the diasporic cultural values that Amir learned as a part of a newly acquired culture in the chronotopic present, and the indigenous cultural values that he learned as a growing child in the indigenous culture of Afghanistan. Amir's diasporic experience occurs as precursor to force him to undo the wrong he once did to Hassan by helping his orphan son Sohrab. On the other hand, Rahim Khan's advice to be good again highlights the moral value that both Rahim Khan and Amir learned as a part of the indigenous culture.

The anti-climax of the novel *The Kite Runner* presents a contrast between the indigenous culture in Afghanistan and the host culture in California. This clash is evident from the contrast between the character of Amir and Assef. It highlights the dent that the indigenous

cultural practices of the Taliban are doing to the Afghan culture and values. Assef has turned into a monster who spreads terror through hostile and warlike activities to uphold the supremacy of the indigenous people over colonizers. On the other hand, Amir's migration transforms him and makes him a better, civilized and humane citizen who has nothing to do with violence, war, hostility and terror. This contrast highlights that had Amir not been a migrant or refugee in California, he would not have been any better than Assef or perhaps a worst beast. So, where the diasporic experiences and exile present a cultural clash, identity crisis, personality conflict and values conflict for the diasporic communities or people on the side, the same provides for a better future, enlightened and advances living standards, cherish-able cultural practices and humanitarian cum better values system for the diasporas on the other hand.

Conclusion

The research concludes that experiencing diachronic chronotopes is an inevitable and unavoidable situation for the migrant or refugee Diasporas in the new and host culture. The newly acquired cultural identity comes in clash with the indigenous cultural identity as it happens in case of Amir in the novel *The Kite Runner*. Moreover, the hybrid identity is by product of migration for the diasporic communities as Amir neither completely belongs to

Afghanistan nor to America, but remains entangled in the diachronic times of present and past. In the diasporic community, where newly acquired identity and values system of Amir are in clash with the indigenous culture and values system, they turn out to be more compatible than the indigenous cultural practices and values system. The study concludes that the present has, although, reshaped and tempered the indigenous identity of Amir, but it has readjusted the newly acquired values and identity in the form of a better yet hybrid identity. In short, though, diasporic chronotopes divide the diasporas in between present and past making them suffer from the problems of Diasporas in the host and new culture, yet the dichotomy of present and past are fruitful and productive for the betterment of the mankind.

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