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Article:	Khaled Hosseini's <i>The Kite Runner</i>: A Postmodern Reading
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ABSTRACT

This study investigates Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* through the literary lens of postmodern theory. The multilayered novel through different perspectives including trauma-ridden narrative, allegory and subjectivity, nihilism, and desperate hope at times of turmoil, are studied in this piece of research. I argue that the novel is a classic example of a postmodern literary text with the elements of inclusiveness and saying the unsaid as its stark features. Through postmodern literary analysis, the novel essentially "humanizes" the Afghan image in a way unprecedented before and serves to be a befitting example of postmodern writing.

Keywords: Postmodern, *The Kite Runner*, trauma-ridden narrative, nihilism, subjectivity, turmoil, Afghan

Introduction

1.1 Postmodernism

Postmodernism, the term first coined by Arnold Toynbee, served as an extensive outbreak and an extension to the movement of modernism from the early twentieth century. According to Lyotard (1984), the period of modernity is considered from Enlightenment to the mid-twentieth century while postmodernism after that. However, postmodernism, rather than breaking cleanly from modernism, intensified its structure as it deliberately failed to meet the ground rules of theatre and books by renewing the very acts of seeing and understandings of world of beings (Connor, 2004). Postmodernism succeeded modernism, an early movement in the 1900s that produced two bloody world wars. The general atmosphere of bloodshed throughout the world left undying marks upon modern literature and posed pressing questions about existence of rationality. Postmodernism acted as a “dramatic deviation” from prescribed rules and regulations. Rather than applying norms of abstraction and reduction, postmodernism acknowledged emphatically and wholeheartedly the inclusiveness of the world that was already in chaos. Incorporating aspects of inclusiveness, postmodernism encompasses themes of migration, racism, psychological traumas, and their healing, sexual abuse with its horrific demeanor, hegemonic authoritarianism, catastrophes of war, nihilism, aloofness, and other such gruesome predicaments in a postmodern world of beings. Connor (2004) describes postmodernist texts to be “excited by the prospect of the illegitimate, the unspeakable, and the unknowable”.

The postmodern world is shaped by inclusiveness, multi-ethnicity, democracy, and subjectivity. While postmodernism has different interpretations in different fields, it has particularly enriched literature as a ground of exploration. In postmodern literary texts, the boundary between reality and fiction is blurred and nothing appears to be eternal, therefore (Hooti, 2011). Ambiguous narration, one of the key features in postmodern texts, provides fragmented ideas with complex subjectivity that presents different interpretations upon every reading. Narrative fiction serves to be one of the most explored writing forms in postmodern literature. While ambiguous narration presents vague ideas, the narrative keeps shifting from present to past such that constant flashbacks provide a traverse picture of the whole storyline. Thus discrediting and nullifying previous approaches to writing, postmodernism (following modernism) set new trends matching up the chaotic world outside. Hutcheon (1987) describes postmodernism (and modernism) to be characterized by a crisis of culture that simultaneously negated previous approaches to literature and worked as a transformation and development in modernism that correlates with a new type of social and economic order.

1.2 *The Kite Runner*

The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini is a bildungsroman novel that has been an enormous success around the globe for its painfully true depiction of the horrifying tale of war that hit Afghan society. The novel became an instant hit with the audience when made into a film in 2007. The story traverses three decades of Afghan society, from profound peaceful days to the bloodthirsty decade of the 1990s, recounting intriguing themes including friendship and betrayal, peace and war, carefree childhood and psychological traumas, migration and child abuse, violence and tyranny, and authoritarian law of land. According to Jefferess (2009), the

novel represents Afghan culture in a way unprecedented before, as it essentially “humanizes” Afghan culture and provides meaning and depth for non-Afghan readers in the scenario of the post-9/11 world. The novel gathered huge success and appreciation among its readers. Jefferess (2009) goes on to describe that the novel provides a “morality tale” transcending through decades and gives particular insights into Afghan society. The novel was praised by Publishers Weekly for its description of the culture of an “obscure nation” that has become “pivotal in the global politics of a new millennium”.

The aforementioned abridged look into the novel highlights its various postmodern viewpoints taking into account the war-ridden lament tales of Afghanistan, the novel meticulously compares lives of people living in the USA and in Afghanistan. The author provides heart wrenching narrative of horrors of migration that refugees face when forced to move out from their homeland. In addition, the novel not only provides intrinsic details about culture and lives of people in Afghanistan, it gives readers glimpse of the peaceful days that the battlefield country once enjoyed. *The Kite Runner* further stretches readers’ imagination of today’s world of Afghanistan by encountering themes of racism, murder and violence, authoritarian regimes and their violent laws, terrorism and its horrendous effects, crisis of identity, and the resultant nihilist aloofness. Intrinsic details of postmodern writings are visible in Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*. I argue that the many-stranded and multi-colored novel *The Kite Runner* serves to be a befitting example of postmodern fiction. Some aspects to be discussed in detail in this research are psychological traumas linked with sexual abuse and appalling outcomes of war, allegory and, subjectivity, nihilism, and a desperate flicker of hope. In this article, I critically investigate the postmodern aspects of the novel. I do not provide a critical reading of the post 9/11 world from the novel’s reference as elaborated by Andrews (2010), instead, I dig up the novel from the postmodern perspective and find out the chaotic and problematic aspects of the postmodern world that the author deliberately highlighted in the novel. I aim to investigate postmodern functionalities of an Afghan American author’s novel, *The Kite Runner*. It is surprising how rarely such a similar approach has been applied to this much thoroughly investigated novel. Starting from the questions: *Does the author deliberately highlight chaotic postmodern problems in the novel?* And, *To what extent postmodern frame of reference fits in Khaled Hosseini’s The Kite Runner?* This research aims to address the gap of study in literature and focuses on finding postmodern pertinent under theoretical assumptions of Postmodernism school of thought.

2.0 Literature Review

The Kite Runner by Khaled Hussein is not only acknowledged for its ethnic and historical demonstration of values across cultures, it is also immensely hailed for its deeper interpretation of traumatic and distressing psychological issues that transcend beyond Western hemisphere of the globe. For instance, Kai-fu (2019) studies the protagonist Amir’s dynamic character in the novel channeled by psychological changes that triggered acts of betrayal, guilt and redemption at different stages of his life. Applying Erikson’s psycho-social development theory, Kai-fu (2019) studies role of shame and guilt that led Amir’s journey of mistrust and doubt to fearless devotion and lionhearted heroism. A similar study conducted by Pal (2019) digs into psychological trauma that Amir faced throughout his adulthood over a guilty choice he made in his childhood. The study focuses on the recurring nightmare that paralyzed Amir’s adulthood with guilt and shame that were later followed by act of redemption. Pal studies

traumatic episodes experienced by Amir with recurring flashbacks and distressing memories. Another study conducted on traumatic aspect of the novel by Chun (2014) investigates racial conflicts and sabotaged cultural identity under framework of trauma theory. This study undertakes analysis of *The Kite Runner* as a trauma fiction under the influence Sigmund Freud's findings. The study discovers role of fierce cruelty in war torn state of Afghanistan and deadly recent past accompanied by brutal authoritarian law of land and local bullies as primary tools in shaping identity of characters in the novel.

The novel has also been under investigation for its various allegorical interpretations. Jefferess (2009) studies *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini as an allegory to global ethics using Mamdani's analysis of "Good Muslim" and "Bad Muslim" and Buter's theory of human interdependence. Jefferess (2009) argues that *The Kite Runner* represents a possible shift in cosmopolitan world from racial identity to a modern version of humanity. The novel has also been subjected under allegorical interpretation by O'Brien (2018) who traces the protagonist Amir's journey through "personal and political turmoil" and importantly as a "witness to trauma". O'Brien studies the assault faced by young Amir as an allegorical representation of chaotic Afghanistan in 1970s and long decades of unending unrest since then.

Rosyida (2018) studies the portrayal of historical events in *The Kite Runner* using Mimetic theory and analytical approach of Historical Criticism. The researcher investigates Afghan history through events described in the novel including Soviet invasion, fall of monarchy and rise of Taliban to tragedy of 9/11. Studying a blended mixture of imagination and reality, this research aims to investigate historical descriptions in the novel. Bouguerra and Maadad (2018) investigate the turn of tables in *The Kite Runner* that forced its readers to reconsider their perception about Afghanistan. The research focuses on an unpopular approach exercised by Khaled Hosseini who portrayed Afghans as "humans" providing literary lens of oriental perspective. The analysis goes side by side with investigation in historical context since days of monarchy in 1970s to time period of great turmoil and chaos that reached its zenith after the twin tower tragedy. The research explores the novel through new-orientalist perception of study that has marked a change in readers' perception towards Afghanistan.

Yuan-yuan (2018) studies ethical perspective in its three wide awake fabrications that shaped Hassan's character. The research investigates deformed national, family and religious hierarchy that forced Hassan into a slave like manner of living. The study also appeals broad humanistic feelings towards war wretched land of Afghanistan that has been suffering wrath of Western world for almost four decades now. Tsai (2018) investigates role of survivor's guilt in creating traumas that last through generations. The short paper aims to study unbearably heavy weight of guilt and shame rooted in childhood memory of the characters in the novel. Against the backdrop of political unrest and war-torn society, the research digs into tumultuous ethnic tensions in Afghanistan using Jacques Derrida's and Giorgio Agamben's theoretical concepts. The research further analyzes the disrupted relationship between father and son that acted as a catalyst in provoking the horrendous childhood incident that haunted Amir (the protagonist) for the rest of his life.

Given the vast number of studies on Khaled Husseni's novel *The Kite Runner* on psychological and ethnic perspectives, this study aims to investigate postmodern aspects of the novel. This piece of research analyzes the novel under postmodern lens and pinpoints different

intriguing themes that were uncommon in literature written before the postmodern era manifested itself into genre of fiction.

3.0 Discussion and Analysis

3.1 Trauma Ridden Characters

According to Freud (1990), trauma is a result of devastating experiences by survivors that had threatened their life, a glaring example of such events can be war or an accident. Garland (1998) exclaims, "It is a piercing of the skin, a breaking of the bodily envelope". Caruth (1996) defines trauma as a response to an "overwhelming event" that are not grasped properly at first but later comes back as frequent flashbacks and nightmares causing immense psychological misery for the survivor. According to Craps (2014), understanding of trauma must not be limited to Western perspective of individual struggle against unfavorable events. In contrast, under non-Western context, it is imperative that we must consider the universality of the trauma associated triggers. Under non Western context, factors including racism, economic backwardness, political oppression and other such triggers, that are not otherwise included in conceptualization of trauma under Western perspective, must be encapsulated in general terminology of trauma (O'Brien, 2018).

Chun (2014) narrates that trauma fiction has become a key area of interest in literature over the past century. In other words, postmodernism has engaged itself with overwhelming violent and demolished state of human mind. Trauma, although a psychoanalytic area of study, has been pursued heftily by postmodern writers. Through different theories, novelists and researchers have been creating a great amount of work on trauma fiction. According to Caruth (2001), literary fiction creates an imitating trauma picture for readers that enables them to understand the agonizing state of mind that the characters go through. According to Zaph, "[Twentieth-century trauma narratives] remain connected, at least in principle, to a long tradition of literary representations of 'other people's pain', whose ethical implications are tied to their fictional status and to the fact that the other people and their fates whose pain the reader is witnessing or sharing are the fates of imaginary people in a deprivatized and meta-discursive space of textuality". Keeping in line with postmodern analytic lens, the novel has the tendency to instigate trauma sympathy with the victims in the novel. Pal (2019) holds that literature serves to be a befitting medium to encompass the wide concept of trauma.

Trauma fiction, a key literary genre of postmodern literary writings, provides a transposition of psychological turmoil from book to reader's mind justifying actions of the trauma ridden characters. Such an occurrence happens in Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, when the protagonist is forced to watch the harrowing event of his best friend's assault and chooses to run away out of fear and traumatic shock.

The Kite Runner is set in 1970s era that leads to the later events in early 2000s. Setting in the tragic history of Afghanistan packed into bloodshed and ethnic cleansing, the tale of the novel traverses to several characters with parallel development of characters' psychological journeys. Amir's troubled childhood with traumatic events portends a problematic psychological journey towards adulthood. The corollary of Amir's longing for his father's love and approval, traumatic events of his childhood tainted with war and bloodshed, his inability to prove himself a brave and worthy Afghan in his father's eyes and his despicable act of betrayal towards his beloved friend turned out to be a horrendous traumatic conflict that wrecked his adult life. Chun (2014) states that Hosseini complicates the trauma fiction by

presenting Amir as both a sinner and a victim by the constant suffering in form of nightmares, insomnia and hyper vigilance.

“‘I watched Hasan get raped’. I said to no one... A part of me was hoping someone would wake up and hear, so I wouldn’t have to live with lie anymore. But no one woke up and in the silence that followed, I understood the nature of my new curse... I thought about Hassan’s dream. There was a monster in the lake... I was that monster. That night, I became an insomniac.” (Hosseini, 2003)

The excruciating pain of trauma and shock leaves Amir in a mental chaos. Pal (2019) exclaims that trauma victim indulges in desperate denial trying to forget or simply not remember the shock e/she has experienced. The similar state of denial is faced by Amir when he refuses to face Hassan after his shocking betrayal and act of cowardice. The continuous attempt of denial and desperate need to emerge out of the traumatic shock leads Amir to narrate the events in disorderly and vague manner. Consider the given lines from the novel.

“To my dismay, Hassan kept trying to rekindle things between us... ‘I wish you’d come along’ he said. Something thumped against the door, may be his forehead. I don’t know wat I’ve done Amir agha. ‘You haven’t done anything, Hassan. Just go... I want you to stop harassing me. I want you to go away’.”

Investigating the above mentioned conflicts through postmodern analytic lens, one finds the trauma ridden character of Amir as an exemplary postmodern archetype.

3.2 Allegory and Subjectivity

Postmodernism takes into account the subjective viewpoint of the world under chaos. The subjectivity that the postmodern movement observes, looks beyond the generally acknowledged beliefs. Hooti, Noorbakhsh and Torkamaneh (2011) narrate that in literary movement of postmodernism, “Truth and fallacy are synonyms... Traditional thinking and rationality are absolutely spurned by postmodernism.” Therefore, rationality and reality seem to be obsolete in postmodern literary writing. The untraditional and unspeakable narratives are presented by the writer opening new gateways to the truths already established. In *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini portrays the subjective Afghan truth to the outer world. Through allegorical representation, a non-popular and untraditional opinion about Afghan culture is presented to Western world.

According to O’ Brien (2018), Amir’s trauma is translated into national trauma of Afghan society. The allegorical representation of Hassan’s rape stands for Afghan trauma in general. She goes on relating Assef’s brutal character with Afghan invaders including Western powers and Soviet oppression that later on ushered the horrific Taliban led war inside Afghanistan. To quote the Afghan narrative, Hosseini states in the novel.

“Afghanistan is like a beautiful mansion littered with garbage, and someone has to take out the garbage.” (Hosseini, 2003)

In the chaotic postmodern world after 9/11, the literary movement of postmodernism breaks contemporary truths through lens of subjectivity. Jefferess in his study of allegorical representations in *The Kite Runner* states that Amir’s quest “to be good again” is actually against the backdrop of today’s cosmopolitan postmodern world. In the historical context of Afghanistan’s war ridden past, the humanitarian ethics are allegorically represented by Hosseini in the novel. The humanitarian crisis that followed the conflicts of 1970s allegorizes the paucity of humanitarian ethic in today’s world. With Amir’s struggle against traumatic and

sinful past, his attempt to redemption and salvation highlight the need of healing for the world of today which is fighting with dearth of humanity.

In other words, the multicultural, inclusive and democratic world of today is allegorically represented with subjective truth by Hosseini in *The Kite Runner*. Under postmodern literary lens, one finds the persuasion by the author to accept differences in a multicultural democratic society.

3.3 Nihilism

According to Deleuze (1962), nihilism refers to nothingness in life. The will to do nothing and meaninglessness in life signifies the will to be non-existent which is expressed in higher values. To put it simply, nihilism is the destructive mood of nothingness that incites will of nothingness. Hooti, Noorbakhsh and Torkamaneh (2011) explain that postmodernism is innocently associated with nihilistic ideology that reinforces the will of destructiveness. Postmodern society is often comprehended to be a nihilistic society with an overall mood of despair coupled with hopelessness and nothingness.

Similar ideology of nothingness is evident in *The Kite Runner*. With Amir's psychological trauma, nihilism becomes an overall mood in the novel. Sexual abuse of Hassan in the gloomy decade of 1970s which ushered a bloody age of war and destruction that followed for years to come, a general atmosphere of despair is signified in the novel. Amir's nihilistic view towards society signifies the overall destructive atmosphere in Afghan land. With Soviet invasion in 1970s, followed by the arrival of Western powers and later on the oppressive Taliban rule, overall give a nihilist perspective towards life by the characters.

"All I could muster was a mild form of embarrassment. That and emptiness." (Hosseini, 2003)

Amir's act of betrayal gives him a nihilist attitude towards life. In a generally gloomy mood, that encircles the novel after Amir's decision to leave his Hazara friend in lurch, Amir finds solace in escapist strategies.

"School gave me an excuse to stay in my room for long hours. And, for a while it took my mind off what had happened that winter, what I had let happen." (Hosseini, 2003)

The general atmosphere of gloominess and nihilist despair continues by the end of the story. The despaired mood is multiplied with Amir's return to Afghanistan after staying abroad for decades. His birthplace became unrecognizable and the childhood memories he had now belonged to nowhere.

"I feel like a tourist in my own country, I said. That's the real Afghanistan, Agha Sahib. That's the Afghanistan I know. You? You've always been a tourist here. You just didn't know it." (Hosseini, 2003)

The hopelessness goes on when Amir narrates, "I closed my eyes and searched for the sweetness. I didn't find it."

The nihilist view towards life multiplies drastically by the later part of novel. With continuous war that had already lasted for decades and was nowhere going to end soon, the general mood of despair is associated with longing for the end of everything. The general mood of destructiveness then breeds insensitivity towards pain and death. Consider the following horrific event from the novel.

"[The Talib] hurled the stone at the blindfold man in the hole. It struck the side of his head. The woman screamed again. The crowd made a startled 'OH' sound. I closed my eyes and covered my face with my hands. The spectator's 'OH' rhymed with each flinging of the

stone, and that went on for a while. When they stopped, I asked Fareed if it was over. He said no. I guessed the people's throats had tired... I reopened my eyes when I heard people around me asking, "Mord? Mord? Is he dead?" (Hosseini, 2003)

In light of above mentioned quotes from the novel, it can be stated safely that *The Kite Runner* appropriately fits into nihilistic plot that lies in postmodern category of literature.

3.4 The Desperate Hope

"I pray that He is as merciful, benevolent, and gracious as His book says He is. I bow to the west and kiss the ground and promise that I will do zakat, I will do namaz, I will fast during Ramadan and when Ramadan has passed, I will go on fasting... I will do all of this and I will think of Him every day from this day on if He only grants me this one wish... I hear a whimpering and realize its mine, my lips are salty with tears trickling down my face. I feel the eyes of everyone in this corridor on me and still I bow to the west. I pray. I pray that my sins have not caught up with me the way I'd always feared they would." (Hosseini, 2003)

Beyond the world of hopelessness and despair, a bleak sense of hope is represented through Amir's desperate attempt to save Sohrab (Hassan's son). Amir's turning back to religion, a personal choice he made, highlights the postmodern view of Islam in readers' eyes. According to Jefferess (2009), the novel translates "differences into sameness" by portraying Islam in a non-traditional manner. The final attempt of Amir's struggle for redemption by saving Sohrab from Assef's capture provides him salvation and a sense of satisfaction. However, Sohrab's attempt to suicide again diminishes the slightest hope that Amir had. For the Hazara boy, the last resort Amir found was to bow down and pray.

The symbol of hope in the novel is represented by Hosseini through Sohrab's character. As the story in the novel proceeds, readers wonder who actually rescued the other. Although it was Amir who apparently rescued Sohrab from Assef, the dauntless audacity of Sohrab against Assef ultimately saved the day. Beyond the apparent rescuing attempt from Assef's cruelty, Sohrab became Amir's hope for salvation and to get rid of a lifetime of torment. Because Sohrab stands to be a source of redemption for Amir, his attempt to suicide later on brings Amir to his knees. Seeing the last flicker of hope dying gives Amir chills down his spine. Resultantly, he finds shelter in religion.

Unlike the non-famous version of Islam popular in Western societies, the novel breaks away from already created rational approaches by depicting the unsaid, which is another striking feature of the postmodernist literary movement. Religion in contemporary literature, under the umbrella term of postmodernism, is portrayed to be a highly personal and subjective matter. Moreover, presenting the orientalist perspective, unlike the notorious representation of Islam in Western media and literature, gives the novel an inclusive approach toward multiethnic postmodern society.

4.0 Conclusion

To conclude, with stark features of postmodern literary theory, *The Kite Runner* serves as a befitting example of postmodern novel. With themes of inclusiveness, issues of trauma, nihilism, subjectivity and allegorical representations, the overall category of the novel falls into postmodern writing. Through trauma ridden character of Amir, the bildungsroman tale traverses over decades and provide the readers an insight into the tumultuous psychological conflict faced by the protagonist throughout his life until he finds salvation. In addition, nihilism which is a massively dominant theme in the novel, signifies the postmodern

importance of the tale. The generally gloomy tale signifies the meaninglessness of postmodern world that is bred by war and bloodshed. Similarly, allegorical representations and the subjectivity towards faith, customs and religion provide readers with non-traditional viewpoint of apparently infamous issues. Finally, the portrayal of desperate hope through Amir's character signifies the flicker of dream that could one day bring a change "to be good again". In a nutshell, Hosseini's famous novel *The Kite Runner*, serves to be a classic example of postmodern literary writing.

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