

MOUNTAINS, HILLS, BOULDERS AND RUBBLES: A PSYCHOGEOGRAPHICAL APPROACH TO KHALED HOSSEINI'S 'THE KITE RUNNER'

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Abstract:

This article is an attempt to look at the novel 'The Kite Runner' by Khaled Hosseini through the spectrum of Psychogeography. The term 'Psychogeography' refers to the influence of geographical elements of an area on the consciousness of an individual and how it affects him. The different elements of a landscape, be it a tree, a dilapidated structure, the sun setting over a mountain, the cobbled streets, the confusing landmarks or the façade of man-made structures play a major role in influencing the consciousness of an individual. Or it seems that the elements in the environment partake of the emotions of the individual concerned. This article tries to present psychogeographical approach to 'The Kite Runner' through the eyes of Amir, the protagonist of the novel.

Key Words: *Psychogeography, dilapidated structure, consciousness, individual.*

Psychogeography as a term originated in France. Guy Debord defines the term as the “study of the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals.” (Marshall PLC). It deals with how the urban spaces and its structures affect the moods and emotions of the individuals. Merlin Coverly, in his book *Psychogeography*, is of the opinion that “Psychogeography is, as the name suggests, the point at which psychology and geography collide, a means of exploring the behavioural impact of urban place” (Marshall PLC).

In Khaled Hosseini's 'The Kite Runner', Amir, the protagonist enjoys an enviable life, at forty, having settled as a writer with couple of books published, a wonderful house and a wife. But his past comes calling in the form of Rahim Khan, a close friend of his father. Rahim Khan urges Amir to meet him for one last time and also promises that “There is a way to be good again” (Hosseini, 177). Amir conveys the message to Soraya, his wife, and steps out for a walk to spend some time alone. The tone of urgency and the last words of Rahim wake up Amir's sense of guilt. As Amir walks along the Spreckles Lake, the bright sun and the cool breeze influence him. The ambience was totally in contrast to what he was experiencing as “It was a beautiful Sunday afternoon, the sun sparkled on the water where dozens of miniature boats sailed, propelled by a crisp San Francisco breeze” (Hosseini, 176).

Soothed by the breeze, and the warm sun, Amir looks up. He sees two kites floating high above the trees and that opens the flood gates of old memories. The kites, with their long blue tails, take him back all those years when he alienated himself and hence lost contact with a faithful friend. The passing remark of Rahim Khan that there is a way to be good again, makes Amir realize that Rahim knew what Amir thought that only he knew. Amir felt that his suspicions “had been right all those years.” So Rahim Khan knew “about Asif, the kite, the money, the watch with the lightning bolt hands. He had always known.” (Hosseini, 177). That statement of Rahim was a stronger bait that Amir couldn't resist. Though Amir couldn't have guessed the reason behind Rahim's request, yet he had an uneasy feeling that it could be about his worst blunder which he was trying hard to run away from.

The bustle of Peshawar reminded Amir of Kabul in its more busy and crowded form. It brought back memories of Chicken Bazaar, where Hassan and he used to buy chutney-dipped potatoes and cherry water. Every sight and smell on the busy street brought in fresh memories. It gave Amir an eerie feeling of being back in Kabul-the streets filled with vendors shouting coarse, pedestrians, the bells of rickshaws, the jingling sounds of horses drawn carts. Amir could relate to all those “Rich scents, both pleasant and not so pleasant, drifted to” him “through the passenger window, the spicy aroma of pakora and the nihari Baba loved so much.” (Hosseini, 181). It was a different kind of home coming for Amir. Though it was forced, yet Amir got a chance to understand the status and the happenings of Kabul, almost first hand, after a very long gap of time. Even though Peshawar was different from Kabul, yet every sight and smell, nook and corner reminded Amir of so many long forgotten events that he had enjoyed with his father and Hassan.

After Rahim Khan informs Amir about the secrecy surrounding Hassan's birth, Amir is shell shocked. He just couldn't digest what he had heard and what it could have meant to Hassan. Amir feels completely drained and walks out of apartment. The sun had set casting long shadows on the busy streets. The street happens to be “a noisy lane in a maze of alleyways choked with pedestrians, bicycles and rickshaws.” (Hosseini, 207). That is a clear reflection of Amir's state of mind-numbed by the revelation, by those thought as to what scope of life it must have offered to a young man who knew nothing but only suffering throughout his life, shocked by the layers of truth and choked by his own blunders. Amir felt “like a man who awakens in his own house and finds all the furniture rearranged, so that every familiar nook and cranny looks foreign now.” Furthermore he had to “re evaluate his surroundings, reorient himself” (Hosseini, 207)

Amir decides to go in search of Sohrab, inspite of being aware of the dangers involved and Rahim arranges Farid, a driver to take him to Afghanistan. As they approach Afghanistan, the sun drenched dry peaks and barren cliffs give way to a much greener and vibrant landscape. The tree studded pathway, even if the number of trees was less, rejuvenates Amir after the day long dry run through the Khyber Pass. He was relieved to “see trees again after the arduous drive through the Khyber Pass” (Hosseini, 214). The dilapidated condition of the houses and the trees reminded Amir of the fruits and the warm climate which the place was famous for, for “In the old days, the winds swept through the irrigated plains around Jalalabad where farmers grew sugarcane, and impregnated the city's air with a sweet scent.” (Hosseini, 216). Though Amir tried hard to search for the sweetness in the air, he doesn't succeed. Even though Amir lands in Afghanistan after a long time and finds a lot of changes, yet he feels one with the land. Old memories of time spent with near ones resurface leaving him surprised. Standing out in the cool night near Wahid's house, Amir feels a strange but familiar feeling of kinship grow in him. “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.” (Hosseini, 222)

Amir was surprised how old memories came up with such haste at the very sight of buildings and smell of the places. It has been a long time since Amir left Afghanistan and he thought that he had forgotten many details. But Amir was surprised to find he hadn't forgotten his land after all. He realized his mistake as he thought he had “forgotten about this land. But I hadn't and under the bony glow of a halfmoon, I sensed Afghanistan humming under my feet. Maybe Afghanistan hadn't forgotten me either.” (Hosseini, 222)

Inspite of Farid's warning that Kabul had completely changed on its head, Amir was repelled by the sight that Kabul presented to him, because “when Kabul finally did unroll before us, I was certain, absolutely certain, that he had taken a wrong turn somewhere.” (Hosseini, 225). All that Amir could see was rubbles and beggars. What he saw- pictures of destruction, ruin, shades of poverty- made him all the more sad for how things had turned out finally. Amir could sense a strong shade of sadness welling up in him. To him returning to Kabul was “like running into an old forgotten friend and seeing that life hadn't been good

to him, that he'd become homeless and destitute.” (Hosseini, 227).

As Amir moves into Wazir Akbar Kahn district, he finds the condition to be much better-less strewn by rubble than what he had seen earlier. Standing before Baba's house, the only pink coloured house in the entire stretch, Amir was filled with strong emotions as he stood outside the gates of his father's house, and felt like a stranger. Standing before the gates, Amir faces an avalanche of all the times he had spent in the house in the company of Hassan. The drive way, the gates, the high walls, the windows which bore signs of neglect and misuse filled him with deep pain. He took time to take in the different look everything seemed to possess. The house itself seemed smaller, less in magnitude and splendor. So much so, that Amir felt “Like so much else in Kabul, my father's house was the picture of fallen splendor.” (Hosseini, 241).

The sight of the windows of Amir's bedroom brings back the most painful of all memories. Amir remembers standing there, twenty five years earlier, watching Hassan and his father leave the house in pouring rain as a result of his blunder, an unforgivable but selfish act of his. Climbing up the hill, north of Baba's house, Amir reaches the old pomegranate tree on which he had spent memorable times with Hassan. As pointed by Hassan in his letter, the tree had dried up. But Amir finds what he had been searching for-the letters “Amir and Hassan The Sultans of Kabul” (Hosseini, 243) in the trunk of the tree. He sits there tracing the curves of the letters on the trunk and thinking of the time spent with Hassan there. Standing on the hill top Amir tries to recreate the place of his childhood, with deep pain throbbing in his heart. “I sat cross-legged at the foot of the tree and looked south on the city of my childhood.” (Hosseini, 243). Briefly Amir creates a mental image of the city of his childhood days inspired by the trees, the dilapidated, but painfully familiar buildings and the landscape. He knows fully well that his creation has the life of a bubble but he lives in it, for whatever brief time, with agony at heart.

As Tjebbe van Tijen rightly points out Psycho-geography “is the art that tries to record and understand the influence of the outer environment on the human mind and vice versa.” (Tjebbe van Tijen). It shows how the landscape and its various elements have sway on man and his moods. At times it also mirrors how man's feelings and emotions get projected on to the environment. Khaled Hosseini in his 'The Kite Runner' pictures the effect the mountains, hills, boulders, the trees, the ruins of Afghanistan have on Amir in his search for a boy as he moves from America to Pakistan and finally to Afghanistan.

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