

## Mapping the Entangled and Intricate Memories of Diasporic Lives; Revisiting the Mnemonic Spaces in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

Poulami Saha

MA in English, University of Gour Banga, Malda. West Bengal, India.

Mail Id: poulamisahamd19@gmail.com | ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7890-5198>

### Abstract

Memory Studies is a progressive academic field which resorts to the aid of memory to delve deep into the enigmatic field of human psyche by remembering the past. Memory shapes-reshapes, constructs-deconstructs, moulds-remoulds individuals as well as collective identity. For the diasporic people who have left their homeland either willingly or in compulsion, their memories about past life act as repository of various kinds of experiences which come and go like flashbulbs in the conscious and subconscious minds of people. The act of forgetting as well as filling the missing links with imaginations are not ontologically different from the act of remembering, rather they are cognitive components and through this dual process, identities are formed and nurtured. Memory Studies frequently challenges the privileged memories and tries to trace the marginalised abundant voices which are less known by digging up the mini narratives, largely repressed under the pressure of privileged grand narratives. Khaled Hosseini, the writer of the novel *The Kite Runner*, is one of those diasporic migrants who either willingly or unwillingly migrated to different socio-cultural spaces from their homelands and always felt haunted by their memories which construct, deconstruct and reconstruct their identities. And so, his fictional characters are. His characters by carrying double consciousness tried to raise their voices to reassert their dignity and importance by writing back to the centre. *The Kite Runner* initially describes the past happy state of Afghanistan only to contrast it with the devastated state of the nation as a result of the Russian invasion and Taliban aggression. The text shows how different memories and nostalgic longings about the past shape and reshape the identities of individuals, communities as well as of an entire nation.

**Keywords:** Memory, Diaspora, Migration, Identity, Double Consciousness.

Memory studies is an emerging and all engrossing interdisciplinary academic field which has close kinship with social sciences, humanities, arts and neurosciences. In spite of all researches, human brain still remains as a nebulous complex entity and Memory Studies tries to delve deep into the labyrinth of the enigmatic and chaotic field of memories. Though past and history are often used synonymously, there is a wide difference between them as past is every single event happened prior to

this moment but history, as the name suggests is a story about past, a certain perspective towards past. History is largely about the reinterpretation and recordings of certain older facts which have meanings and utility for present and the whole act of historiography is highly charged with political ideologies and privileges.

Through every act of retelling the past, something is left out and some new things are conjoined. The entire idea of memory and process of consumption of history has a very textual process. Texts are always dealing with the politics of representation which strategically include and exclude certain things and thus it can be said forgetting is not an innocent activity at all. Every nation's history has some parts which must be forgotten as a result of certain politics of representation. Some things are always dying out. As a politically invested technique, forgetting must be produced on both individual and collective level. Forgetting is an agentic ability; an ability which either deliberately or non-deliberately dismembers things. The act of remembering and the act of forgetting are not ontologically different but rather they are cognitive components, entangled activities and connected elements which perform conjointly. According to theorists, every act of remembering is not an act of recollection but reconstruction through a process of deconstruction. Certain imaginations fill the gaps in the narratives; the missing links which are forgotten. Recollection is an act of wish fulfilment which entangles information with imagination. As human brain is a politically biased machine, certain biases which are embedded in our neural system colour our acts of recollections and as a result when our neural system encodes some information, excludes some other things. That's why our hegemonic version of memory suppresses several marginalised voices and thus celebrates the hegemonic grand narratives over the lesser known mini narratives which are mainly staying in individual or marginalised collective memories.

If we speak broadly, memory has three phases and they are 1. Encoding, 2. Solidification and 3. Retrieval. Through the process of consolidation, the short-term memories get consolidated and turn into long term memories. Though individuals choose to dismember things, nothing is entirely forgotten rather everything stays in slumber, as says Neuro science. The real exchanging of information is taking place in synapses which are actually places between neurons where some synaptic transactions become memories and some transactions are left as traces which can resurface at any moment. So, in other words nothing is entirely forgotten, but stays in the depth of our subconscious. Memory Studies is constantly trying to resurrect the forgotten narratives through an act of deconstruction of the centre.

Though originally connected with the Jewish people's migration to all over the world in ancient times, the term 'Diaspora' is used for all kinds of people who migrated from their homelands to new socio-cultural and political spaces either willingly for better life goals or in compulsion. In their adopted countries they constantly try to acculturate and assimilate with the new socio-cultural settings. In these growing processes they constantly feel haunted by the past memories and though chronological time passes with its relentless march, the old memories come and go like flashbacks in their psyches and they often venture the mnemonic spaces through a symbolic time travel.

Often the happy memories of homeland provide solace and refuge from the new found alien world where the migrants are considered as 'Other'. But on the other side, the harrowing and mind shattering past events create traumatic memories and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. Some

traumatic cultural and political events leave on an individual both personal and cultural trauma which work in two folded ways. As the diasporic people have different social, cultural and religious heritages from the host lands, they try to formulate a group with people from their ancient land and conjecture that they are not heartily welcome in the alien space which is not baseless at all. All these lead to alienation, chaotic confusion, depression, desolation, personal and individual trauma, racial segregation, cultural discrimination and double consciousness and thus identity crisis. Though the first-generation migrants always want to go back to their home which remains as an experiential idea in their memory, they never can return there as even if they go back, they feel the lack of belongingness in their so called 'home'. Home now turns into an illusion and thus entirely unattainable.

Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan-American novelist whose debut novel *The Kite Runner* tells the eternal saga of friendship, betrayal, love, hatred, sin and redemption and tries to find the "way to be good again" ([Hosseini](#) 1). The multi layered narrative digs deep into the memories of the protagonist Amir, an Afghan boy born to an extremely affluent family which later moved to USA as one of the lakhs of homeless migrants to find a refuge from the war-trodden Afghanistan. Along with exploring the friendship between Amir and Hassan and many other related repressed memories, the narrative gives a kaleidoscopic view of contemporary socio-cultural, economic, religious and political situation between 1933 to 2002 of Afghanistan through the protagonist's eyes. Like Amir, Hosseini's family also sought political asylum in United States and his double consciousness as a migrant, colours the fictional character Amir's experiences in an alien space. Amir's life story shows how being a silent eye-witness of a traumatic event like a brutal rape leaves an indelible mark on an individual and how memories haunt throughout the life even though one tries so earnestly to put them down in the deepest depth of subconscious. Hosseini shows how an ethnic community (Pashtun) dominates and represses another marginalised ethnic community (Hazara) since time immemorial by deliberately putting their collective memories into oblivion. The narrative relentlessly draws the true colours of the Russian invaders and Taliban autocrats through the reminiscences of the protagonist.

Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* deals with a land in turmoil and shows how a previously peace-loving liberal nation has changed into a theocratic orthodox nation, how the marginalised ethnic community of Hazaras are looted down upon, segregated, mutilated and humiliated and thus traumatised. Hosseini here employs the strategy of showing a grave and menacing political scenario through a popular culture of novel writing. The narrative as a popular fiction is important simply not because the culture and political scenario of Afghanistan come into the forefront but presenting the scenario as a populist appeal is something worthy of interest. Afghanistan is something which was never presented before in a mode of popular culture. The mass exodus of Afghans to Pakistan and United States which is actually a transnational activity is associated with the plight of refugees, exile, alienation, isolation, double consciousness, severe attempts to acculturate and assimilate, nostalgic longings for home, both happy and sad memories which haunt the migrants like spectres. As a result of it, cultural dislocation takes place and hybridised identities emerge. Foreshadows and flashbacks are essential tools to reconstruct memories of the past in the text. The protagonist Amir takes a trip down memory lane and through his detailed and varied memories a kaleidoscopic vignette of Afghanistan is reconstructed and through journeys towards different individual memories recreate and revisit the mnemonic spaces though chronological time marches on.

*The Kite Runner* as a diasporic narrative is different from other diasporic tales as it presents traumatic memories of home far more menacing and mind shattering than the adopted country. Through different dimensions of Amir and Hassan's friendship, some grim glimpses from the war ravaged, broken country come to us. L. P. Hartley's statement about past as a foreign country has been inverted by Salman Rushdie; according to him for a writer of diaspora "it's my past that is a foreign country, and that past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mist of lost time" ([Rushdie](#) 9). Rushdie marks the three important characteristics of diaspora – past, time and home. *The Kite Runner* is also started with these three major elements. The narrative opens with a telephone call; a symbolic call from past which has almost faded and dying. "One day last summer, my friend Rahim Khan called from Pakistan. He asked me to come see him. Standing in the kitchen with the receiver to my ear, I knew it wasn't just Rahim Khan on the line. It was my past of unatoned sins" ([Hosseini](#) 1). The telephone call symbolically suggests a certain connectivity between past and present but the dying friend from home namely, Rahim Khan symbolises a fading and almost dying past. But as no memory is entirely forgotten, the dying past is always trying to find a path to knock at the door of the present.

Diasporic people always cherish the dream of going back to the home in both conscious and subconscious level but as home is an experiential idea, they never can find the belongingness even if they go back to the home due to the physical changes of home and mental alienation of the diaspora. Amir looks at San Francisco as the "city which I now call home" ([Hosseini](#) 1) instead of simply calling it as home. This registers the diasporic dilemma of lacking the belongingness of home even if they have got a physical home. The harder Amir tries to repress the memories of previous guilts in the deepest deep of his subconscious, the stronger their overwhelming power outwits him by making him baffled, frustrated as well as puzzled. Through the symbolic telephonic call, he revisits the mnemonic spaces – "I looked at those twine kites. I thought about Hassan. Thought about Baba. Ali. Kabul. I thought of the life I had lived until the winter of 1975" ([Hosseini](#) 2). Past always remains in chaotic fragmentation, broken images, symbols and memories, not as an organic whole. When people try to remember past, they actually reconstruct it through a process of deconstruction. They tend to fill the missing links with probabilities or with imaginations. Amir too through the aid of his memories, revisits, reinterprets and reconstructs past. As Rushdie comments "it was precisely the partial nature of these memories, their fragmentation, that made them so evocative for me. The shreds of memories acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were remains; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and mundane acquires numinous qualities" ([Rushdie](#) 12).

The novel starts with two kites flying in the sky which suggests the tangled and mangled relationships of people. Kite festival is a part of Afghan cultural memory but the Taliban dictators outlawed the practice and thus forcefully tried to wipe out the collective cultural memory. They deliberately put into oblivion the memories of the happy and calm state of the nation. Banning the kite fighting means banning the livelihood of the fun-loving people and thus making them as lifeless lives. At the triumphant day when Amir wins the kite fighting match, he sacrifices his friend Hassan at the hands of Assef in his eternal quest of finding Baba's love. He lets Hassan get raped brutally by Assef and thus gains Baba's love and attention. Hassan turns into an all sacrificing Christ figure who even after this heinous event tries to keep rapport with Amir and ends his life in his attempt to secure Amir's ancestral house. Though Amir tried hard to erase the memories about his past guilts, they haunt him like a "spectre" meaning ghost of the past in diasporic terminology. Amir also suffers from a survivor's

guilt as he migrated to a safer space by living behind Hassan in the war-trodden Afghanistan.

Hosseini here subtly brings out the controversial matter of male rape in this context. The sexual exploitation of men instead of women never comes into the forefront and their stories about violation remains unheard and forcefully dismembered as it questions the masculinity of men by portraying the men as victims, not as violators. People culturally constructs women as victims but here the author shows the victimization of a male by other males and poses question towards the authenticity of cultural memory.

Though they initially share a loving bond but the connection got severed “Because history is not easy to overcome. Neither is religion. In the end I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara, I was a Sunni and he was a Shi’a and nothing was ever going to change that” ([Hosseini](#) 24). The loss of harmony between them symbolises the ultimate disharmony between the two communities; the cruel massacre of the Hazaras by the Taliban troops who mainly belong to Pashtun community. The Pashtuns deliberately tries to erase the Hazara community from the collective consciousness as Hassan rightly points out about the relentless quelling of the Hazara rebellion by Pashtun tyrants. The Hazaras are actually immigrants in the land of Afghanistan but the narrator reveals “Never mind that to me the face of Afghanistan is that of a boy with thin-boned frame, a shaved head, and low set ears, a boy with Chinese doll face perpetually lit by a harelipped smile” ([Hosseini](#) 24). He makes the face of Hassan the metaphorical face for the entire nation of Afghanistan where the Hazaras are alienated and marginalised as ‘Other’. Thus, the narrative becomes many-folded and many colored in nature.

When his Baba utters his wish of Hassan’s presence in their American life, the narrator laments “Long before the Roussi army marched into Afghanistan ... Kabul had become a city of ghosts for me. A city of thousand hare lipped ghosts” ([Hosseini](#) 126). The living memory of Hassan though Amir tried to repress them, transcends the spectre of a person into the ghost of an entire nation.

The story is largely about friendship and betrayal, sin and redemption. When Rahim Khan calls Amir to save Sohrab from the clutches of Taliban autocrats though he initially reluctantly agrees, later he stakes his life to save his nephew. The mortal injuries he got in that event serve as a panacea to all his previous guilts. Through this act of redemption, he shakes off all his previous sins along with his memory of his father’s sins. When he knew about the sexual violation of Sohrab by the same violator Assef, he gets traumatised it is as if his past guilts come to the forefront and confront him. Amir cherishes and respects his wife’s capability of outspokenness and he places himself in high contrast with her as he has never been able to tell her about his previous memories of guilt.

Though Sofia Akrami is long dead, she has an ever-lasting presence in Baba’s life. The repressed memories of sexual encounter with Sanoubar and having an illegitimate child always haunt him. He also betrayed Ali’s friendship and the betrayal presents himself as an alter ego to Amir as he too betrayed Hassan. This is how history repeats itself. When Amir always tried to escape from his memories about homeland, Baba used to lament for them in an alien space – “For me America was a place to bury my memories. For Baba, a place to mourn his” ([Hosseini](#) 120). Using their nostalgic longings for home as a tool, the Afghan diaspora creates an Afghanistan of their own in a different socio-cultural space. The occidental memories about their roots is in stark contrast with American

cosmopolitanism as America appears as a black hole where the memories sink into oblivion. The trauma of displacement and cultural dislocation find their resonance in Baba's self, much more than the narrator's psyche.

It is often said that if a body gets violated or abused or mutilated, it remembers. Though it is said differently but in a broader sense, this can be applied in the case of Sanoubar. The brutal scars on her previously beautiful face bears the traces of physical as well as psychological abuses and tortures. The scars talked about some hidden memories of repression, oppression and violation as she is unable to put lights on them. The scars can be treated as the traumatic memories of tortures which women suffer in a patriarchal society since time immemorial. The narrative is largely concerned about men and thus segregates the collective memories of women from public memory. General Taheri, Soraya's father is obsessed with the nostalgic memories of his previous position in Afghan elitist society which constantly haunts his comparatively poor lifestyle in United States. General Taheri's memories about past grandeur is in sharp contrast with his dilapidated current state in the cosmopolitan America. As he was a rigid patriarch in his homeland who used to rule with iron fist, he wanted to remain so in the new cultural space but Soraya, his daughter with her new found freedom often disrupts his patriarchal complacency.

Rahim Khan feels nostalgic when he revisits the nostalgic happy memories of his Hazara beloved. Though for his family's stern views, the Hazara lady and her family were put to exile, Rahim Khan never took a wife. The happy memories of his love help him to bear a long lonely life. The mind shattering experiences of Russian invasion and Taliban totalitarian regime leave a long-lasting traumatic impact on him. The big mansion of Baba in Wazir Akbar Khan district serves as the symbol for distant, decaying almost forgotten injured past. Just like the nation, the house displays a wounded psyche; an injured memory. The house turns into a microcosm for the bigger macrocosm of the war-ravaged country.

Hassan's child Sohrab, though he was initially a jolly fellow, he was later over burdened with the traumatic memories of the merciless and brutal death of his parents. The tyrant Assef sexually exploited the boy in the same way, once he had done with Sohrab's father Hassan. The traumatic memories of broken childhood haunt him even in his new dwelling place of America where he is treated compassionately like a family member both by Amir and his wife Soraya. The mind shattering experience as a sex slave in Taliban regime haunts him so much that when he gets to know that he is expected to live in an orphanage for a month or two to facilitate the immigration process, he attempted suicide though in vain. Only the flying kites makes him happy which actually evokes in his mind his happy nostalgic memories of Afghanistan with his father. Though at the time of his parent's merciless killing, he could do nothing but when Assef mortally wounds Amir he injures the tyrant with his slingshot. This event triggers the memory of Hassan both in Amir and the reader's mind. The cultural memory of being a Hazara and physical disabilities of Ali, make him doubly marginalised in his so-called homely space. He remains as a victim of the society for his entire life. He turns into a living emblem of all the lived suppression faced by a disabled persona.

Memory Studies is an emerging field which uses the tool of memory to delve deep into the labyrinth of human psyche and as literature is a fictional representation of life and reality, Memory

Studies has lot to do with literature. Life is all about creating and recollecting memories. The memories usually tend to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct individual as well as collective identities. Often mind shattering memories hang heavy upon the individuals and groups, and until the concerned people are not able to transcend the traumatic memories into narrative memories, the past experiences haunt the people like spectre. The entire process of construction and consumption of memories and history has a very textual process as the privileged memories are archived and popularised for the current and future generations due certain politics of representation. The mechanism of neural system is very biased so, it excludes and includes memories strategically. As the process of historiography is predominantly political and deals with certain perspective towards past so, every nation excludes some memories which are against of their interest like the colonisers never wrote in their national histories about their brutality and inhumanity on the vanquished people and celebrate a singular approach towards history. According to New Historicism, history and the process of historiography must always be questioned and challenged as history is exclusivist and monolithic and sanctions a certain approach towards past. Memory Studies, being a postcolonial venture always seeks to resurrect the pluralistic mini narratives which were long forgotten due to the celebration of monolithic grand narrative. The study of memories always try to reread, remap and reconstruct the unheard stories remaining in individual and marginalised collective memories as well as in many unknown artefacts. As the act of forgetting is cognitive component with the act of remembering, the perception about infallible memory is nothing but a mythical construction. There is no memory which represents the apt and objective reality about the past as the act of remembering fills up the missing links with probabilities or with imagination.

The confessional narrative, namely Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* inquiries into the individual, collective and national memories and explores the perspectives of the marginalised, dominated and migrated selves and remaps the past memories and through revisiting the mnemonic spaces in psychological time, the tale tells hegemonic different stories of peripheries which were long suppressed under the dominating grand narratives.

Through Hosseini's protagonist Amir's memories in *The Kite Runner*, the eternal conflict of sin and redemption finds a new dimension. The characters' individual and collective memories serve as tools to show Afghanistan in its true colours. The narrative in unflinching terms reveals the actual brutality of ethnic cleansing of Hazaras, Russian invasion which in the name of Communism, massacred the innocent Afghan people and totalitarian aggression of autocratic Taliban regime.

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**Author bio:** The author is an MA in English. Her areas of research interest are Postcolonialism, Memory Studies, Trauma Studies, Gender Studies etc. Her current paper “Mapping the Entangled and Intricate Memories of Diasporic Lives; Revising the Mnemonic Spaces in Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*” deals with the subtleties of diasporic memories.