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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATURE AND HUMAN PSYCHE IN *THE KITE RUNNER*

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Abstract:

In Khaled Hosseini's *the Kite Runner*, we as readers witness many stages of the Afghan history. Many socio-political events such as the fall of Afghan monarchy, the Soviet invasion, the Taliban's regime in Afghan history are given through the life story of Amir and Hassan, two Afghan boys. In the novel, the struggle for power (in politics and in daily life) and avarice of human beings (in every field of life) begin to destroy Amir and Hassan's lives as well as the environment. Eventually, everything begins to fall apart in Afghanistan. What is significant in the novel is that at the hands of the Afghan writer Khaled Hosseini, every single natural element (such as a tree, a flower or a drop of rain) may become a tool to reflect the psychology of the characters in *the Kite Runner*. Thus, the destruction of the nature with bombs or wars destroys not only the environment, but also the human nature/human psyche, which results in the loss of moral values as well. On the other hand, an awakening in the nature may also lead to a psychological awakening or to a realisation in the human beings. Therefore, in this paper, the relationship between nature and human psyche will be studied and will be illustrated with examples from Khaled Hosseini's novel, *the Kite Runner*.

Keywords: Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, Afghanistan, Nature, Human Psyche, Environmentalism.

Introduction

Emerson suggests that "[p]articular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts" and as in line with this idea "[n]ature is the symbol of spirit" (Holman, 1972: 521). Accordingly, "symbolism becomes a distinctive feature" (Holman, 1972: 521) of Khaled Hosseini's novel, *the Kite Runner*. The protagonist Amir, who is from a wealthy Pashtun family and Hassan, who is from a Hazara family and whose father, Ali works as a servant in Amir's house grow up together in Kabul and playing many games such as running kites in the sky in the old good days of Afghanistan. Even from the beginning of the novel, it can be observed that the title of the novel has natural connotations and running kites in the sky can easily be associated with the concepts of freedom and eternity. Sometimes, kites are even defined as paper birds (Hosseini, 2004: 321), which are symbols of freedom since they can fly all over the world. What is striking in the novel is that there is a kind of idyllic atmosphere and the playgrounds of Amir and Hassan are mostly green places¹ having willow trees, pomegranate trees and so on. To exemplify, they often visit a pomegranate tree, under whose shadow they read stories and play games. "One summer day, I used one of Ali's kitchen knives to carve our names on it: 'Amir and Hassan, the sultans of Kabul.' Those words made it formal: the tree was ours" says Amir in the novel and as their carved names on the tree grow, their friendship grow, as well. However, later on, through a letter written to Amir by Hassan, the reader is informed that "the tree hasn't borne fruit in years", which can be taken as the symbol of Amir's infertility problem in his adult years. Notice that the "pomegranate" tree symbolises "fertility" (Erol, 2002: Mythology Course Notes) not only in Greek culture and mythology, but also in Afghan culture, too. Moreover, they sit under the shadow of acacia tree and play games with watermelon seeds. Amir states that, "[w]hen I was very little, Baba took Hassan and me to Kunduz. I don't remember much about the trip, except sitting in the shade of an acacia tree with Baba and Hassan, taking turns sipping fresh watermelon juice from a clay pot and seeing who could spit the seeds farther" (Hosseini, 2004: 316). Besides, their childhood memories are full of natural images such as dried mulberries and walnuts. This is expressed in the following passage: "The park shimmered with snow so fresh, so dazzling white, it burned my eyes. It sprinkled soundlessly from the branches of white-clad trees. I smelled turnip *qurma* now. Dried mulberries. Sour oranges. Sawdust and walnuts. The muffled quiet, snow-quiet, was deafening" (Hosseini, 2004: 323).

The Worst is Yet to Come

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¹ There is a detailed description of the flora and fauna of their childhood habitat, "mulberry trees" (Hosseini, 2004: 53), "apple and persimmon trees" (Hosseini, 2004: 74). Moreover, Hassan "sang old Hazara songs about tulip fields" (Hosseini, 2004: 70), even his songs contain natural images.

Yet, their happy childhood is about to be destroyed by another (half German, half Afghan) child called Assef, who is depicted as "a notoriously mean and violent older boy with sadistic tendencies, [and who] blames Amir for socializing with a Hazara... an inferior race..." ("*The Kite Runner*").

After Amir's victory in the kite running competition, Assef rapes Hassan in order to punish him and take revenge. Hassan does not give the kite to Assef and makes sure that Amir is the winner of the race. But he does it at the price of being sexually abused by Assef. The sacrifice of Hassan for Amir is foreshadowed earlier in the novel through the sacrifice of a sheep during *eid al-adha*/the feast of sacrifice. "I don't know why I watch this yearly ritual in our backyard; my nightmares persist long after the bloodstains on the grass have faded. But I always watch, I watch because of that look of acceptance in the animal's eyes. Absurdly, I imagine the animal understands. I imagine the animal sees that its imminent demise is for a higher purpose. This is the look..." (Hosseini, 2004: 67). Amir also remembers this scene, when he sees Hassan's son, Sohrab in Taliban's house, with the same acceptance and helplessness in his eyes. Thus, a parallel between the victimisation of the lamb and the victimisation of both Hassan and Sohrab by Assef is established in the novel. Notice that Amir also remembers the ritual of sacrifice, when he remains indifferent to the rape of Hassan. With regard to the victimisation of Hassan, Amir says:

I ran because I was a coward. I was afraid of Assef and what he would do to me. I was afraid of getting hurt. That's what I told myself as I turned back to the alley, to Hassan. That's what I made myself believe. I actually *aspired* to cowardice, because the alternative, the real reason I was running, was that Assef was right: Nothing was free in this world. Maybe Hassan was the price I had to pay, the lamb I had to slay, to win Baba. Was it a fair price? The answer floated to my conscious mind before I could thwart it: He was just a Hazara, wasn't he?" (Hosseini, 2004: 68)

The coming of this traumatic event is also foreshadowed through natural symbols in one of Hassan's dreams in the novel. Before the kite running race, unconsciously Hassan feels that something bad will happen and he says: "We were at Gharga Lake, you, me, Father... It was warm and sunny, and the lake was clear like a mirror. But no one was swimming because they said a monster had come to the lake. It was swimming at the bottom, waiting" (Hosseini, 2004: 52). The tranquility of the lake stands for the tranquility of their life, which will be disturbed by a monster. And this monster can either be Assef or the Taliban, who wait for the right time to attack. Amir says "But, always, my mind returned to the alley. To Hassan's Brown corduroy pants lying on the bricks. To the droplets of blood staining the snow dark red, almost black" (Hosseini 79). The white snow turns into dark, just like the flow of their life. In parallel with this, "I TURNED THIRTEEN that summer of 1976, Afghanistan's next to last summer of peace and anonymity" (Hosseini, 2004: 81) declares Amir in the novel. Themes such as the entrance to puberty, the loss of innocence and the fall of Afghan power in the region and its invasion by the Russians and the shift to Taliban regime are demonstrated through the change of the colour of the snow. On the whole, through the abuse of Hassan, the abuse of Afghan lands by Taliban and Russian soldiers is also underlined.

In *the Kite Runner*, "the usage of the flora and fauna" (Bozer, 2002: Multiculturalism MA Course Notes) is significant as well and in the following passage, upon Hassan's departure of home, Amir says, "I loved him in that moment, loved him more than I'd ever loved anyone, and I wanted to tell them all that I was the snake in the grass, the monster in the lake. I wasn't worthy of this sacrifice; I was a liar, a cheat, and a thief " (Hosseini, 2004: 92). The snake and monster imagery are used to give a voice to Amir's guilty conscious due to the fact that by remaining indifferent to the rape of Hassan, he destroys both Hassan's life and his own life, just like a monster would do.

In *the Kite Runner*, the rain "is [also] invested with meaning... through the handling of [natural] materials in the novel... rain, which is merely a physical [natural] fact in the [beginning], is converted into a symbol of [sadness and departures] through the uses to which it is put in the book" (Holman, 1972: 520, see also Özdağ's *Toprak Etiği*). In the scene of the departure of Hassan and Ali from their house, Amir is unable to drop tears, but, instead there are raindrops outside:

But it rained the afternoon Baba took Ali and Hassan to the bus station. Thunderheads rolled in, painted the sky iron gray. Within minutes, sheets of rain were sweeping in, the steady hiss of falling water swelling in my ears ... I *was* sorry, but I didn't cry and I didn't chase the car. I watched Baba's car pull away from the curb, taking with it the person whose first spoken word had been my name. (Hosseini, 2004: 94)

With regard to the "[f]alling raindrops, [they] are often depicted in popular culture as "teardrop-shaped" - round at the bottom and narrowing towards the top ("Rain") and through the falling raindrops, sorrow of Amir is expressed in *the Kite Runner*.

A few years later, Amir and his father, Baba have to leave their home because of the Soviet invasion and become refugees in USA, "I remember Baba climbed halfway up the ladder, hopped back down and

fished the snuffbox from his pocket. He emptied the box and picked up a handful of dirt from the middle of the unpaved road. He kissed the dirt. Poured it into the box. Stowed the box in his breast pocket, next to his heart" (Hosseini, 2004: 105) states Amir. Here, the word dirt refers to the soil or mud. Relying on the story of the creation of man in the holy books, mostly it is stated that Adam is created from mud. Most probably, as an extension of this creation myth, the soil of one's land is accepted as something holy and in the passage above, Baba's act of putting some soil in a snuffbox and placing the box into his breast pocket above his heart is very meaningful and symbolic. By showing respect to it and by putting it on his heart, his love of his nation and his homeland is illustrated. What is more, the following sentence, which states that "[Baba] He missed the sugarcane fields of Jalalabad and the gardens of Paghman" (Hosseini, 2004: 112) reflects Baba's psychological mood very clearly. Related to Amir's father, here it should be underlined that in the novel, he dies of cancer, a disease which is mostly seen as a result of the environmental pollution and also after having been exposed to harsh life conditions both in Afghanistan and America. Just like Taliban soldiers, whose number increases day by day and invade Afghan lands, cancer cells multiply everyday and take the control of Baba's body and make him powerless eventually.

Thus, it can be suggested that most of the natural symbols are used as tools to reflect the psychological moods of the characters. For instance, in the novel, it is expressed that Amir's nephew, Sohrab commits suicide and may die in the hospital and this is also reflected in the description of the environment: "A STARLESS, BLACK NIGHT falls over Islamabad" (Hosseini, 2004: 302). Amir states:

I picture Sohrab's face, the pointed meaty chin, his small seashell ears, his slanting bamboo-leaf eyes so much like his father's. A sorrow as black as the night outside invades me, and I feel my throat clamping. I need air" (Hosseini 302)... But I can't ... focus on anything. So... I... go back to staring at zigzagging pattern of the cracks on the cement floor, at the cobwebs on the ceiling where the walls meet, at the dead flies littering the windowsill. (Hosseini, 2004: 303)

Notice, dead flies, dead grass, starless dark night, all of which can be associated with death. However, the sun rises and Sohrab begins to recover (Hosseini, 2004: 304) and the readers become witnesses to the awakening of hope in Amir's heart and mind.

In *the Kite Runner*, there is another hospital scene, in which Amir has a symbolic dream, as well. After fighting with Assef and rescuing Sohrab from the sexual abuse, Amir sees his father in his dream, when he is wrestling a bear: "They role over a patch of grass, man and beast... they fall to the ground with a loud thud and Baba is sitting on the bear's chest, his fingers digging in its snout. He looks up at me, and I see. He's me. I am wrestling the bear" (Hosseini, 2004: xx). In this scene, the bear stands for all the evil things in the world and finally Amir finds the courage to try for preventing them. He tries to make up for his mistakes in the past. As mentioned before, he remains silent to the abuse of Hassan, but he can no longer endure to these kinds of abuses and he rescues Sohrab from the hands of Assef. Thus, at the end, he becomes courageous like his father. Notice that a natural element or an animal like a bear comes to represent evil things in his dream.

After regaining his health in the hospital, Sohrab expresses that he wants his old life back, which reminds us the garden of heaven: "I want Father and Mother jan... I want to play with Rahim Khan sahib in the garden. I want to live in our house again... I want my old life back" (Hosseini, 2004: 309) declares he. This scene is reminiscent of the fall of Adam and Eve from the garden of heaven and their hope of regaining the paradise. Upon this demand, Amir expresses that

Your old life, I thought. My old life too. I played in the same yard, Sohrab. I lived in the same house. But the grass is dead and a strangers' jeep is parked in the driveway of our house, pissing oil all over the asphalt. Our old life is gone, Sohrab, and everyone in it is either dead or dying. It's just you and me now. Just you and me. (Hosseini, 2004: 309)

The emphasis on the dead grass, which is the result of industrialisation (and this is shown through the jeep, which is the product of automotive industry) and the use of chemical weapons and bombs in Afghanistan. Notice that the use of oil and chemical weapons and industrialisation are important factors in increasing environmental and air pollution.

Later on, Amir takes Sohrab to home with himself and begins to take care of him. Yet, Sohrab retires into his shell and speaks neither with Amir nor with his wife, Soraya. Therefore, they begin to wait patiently for the day, when Sohrab might show a sign of interest in communication with his environment, again.

Interestingly enough, in *the Kite Runner*, the beginning of Spring becomes the beginning of other good things such as the reopening of a hospital (Hosseini, 2004: 317) and the re-establishment of the relationship between Amir and Sohrab. When Sohrab begins to speak with Amir, this happiness is described with the help of natural images, as well:

It was only a smile, nothing more. It didn't make everything all right. It didn't make *anything* all right. Only a smile. A tiny thing. A leaf in the woods, shaking in the wake of a startled bird's flight.

But I will take it. With open arms. Because when spring comes, it melts the snow one flake at a time, and maybe I just witnessed the first flake melting.

I ran. A grown man running with a swarm of screaming children. But I didn't care. I ran with the wind blowing in my face, and a smile as wide as the Valley of Panjsher on my lips. (Hosseini, 2004: 324)

This scene becomes an ice-breaker between Amir and Sohrab and we, as readers, relying on the symbol of the first flake melting, feel that there is still a chance for redemption and hope for the future. In regard to this, a critic suggests that, "[w]ritten against a history that has not been told in fiction before, *The Kite Runner* describes the rich culture and beauty of a land in the process of being destroyed. But with the devastation, Khaled Hosseini also gives us hope: through the novel's faith ... in the possibilities he shows for redemption" ("*The Kite Runner*"). Hence, as it is also expressed many times in the novel "there is a way to be good again" not only towards the people, but also towards the nature and the environment since the destruction of the nature with bombs or wars destroys both the environment and the human nature/human psyche, which results in the loss of moral values and this is illustrated in the case of Assef and his followers, his Talibans. On the other hand, as shown through Amir and Sohrab in the novel, an awakening in the nature or the preservation of natural environment may also lead to psychological awakenings among the people, too.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Khaled Hosseini makes use of every single natural element such as a tree, a flower or a drop of rain in order to reflect the psychology of the characters in his novel. Like the Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka does in his works, Hosseini further suggests that the destruction of the nature results in the loss of moral values as well. Hence, as human beings, we should not miss the opportunity "to be good again" and to raise consciousness about the environmental problems all over the world. Thus, literary works or literature is one of the best ways of raising public consciousness about environmentalism (see also Özdağ's "The Importance of Literature in Ecology-Education") as it is effectively done by Khalid Hosseini in *the Kite Runner*.

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