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The Kite Runner: In Search of “Missing Wombs”

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Afghanistan: a relic of wars, is a name that has only ‘acquired’ the potential of forming ripples of devastating images of crumbling human civilization, poverty, war, brutal spine chilling atrocities of ethnic cleansing, harrowing Islamic fundamentalism and shocking American interventionism. The womb of Afghanistan lost its power to protect its children from all these slaughtering hands of atrocities. Thus her children are forced to live a life devoid of love, care, and security. The warmth, protection, care, love, security, sustenance and nourishment that are essential for a child’s growth are ‘missing from her womb’. Her womb is rather full of ‘tombs’! But this country too had a history, a culture, a life and a “blameless blue” (53) horizon of expectations where kites flew high up in the air to celebrate life, freedom and in a way to celebrate union and re-union. Thus one of her child, Khaled Hosseini in his debutant novel *The Kite Runner* artistically uses this ‘kite’ and ‘kite flying tournament’--- an activity that enjoys the status of a national sport in Afghanistan --- to bind the entire text together into a harmonic whole. Since kite flying is traditionally taken to be a sport for the ‘males’, so in the horizon of *The Kite Runner* one does not find the presence of any dominant ‘female’ figure as such. The novel beautifully shows that may be because of that lack of a female figure in their lives --- specially that of a mother --- that the ‘kite’ becomes so important in the life of the protagonist, Amir, because when he flies the kite he could unleash all his grief, fear, insecurity and hollowness to the fluttering of that kite. And interestingly enough it is through the kite that he could finally establish the two most important relations of his life --- his relationship with his Baba and Sohrab. This paper therefore proposes to show how the kite along with its spool of threads acted as the umbilical cord to connect Amir with the ‘missing wombs’ of his life.

As a child Amir did not ever witness that sense of security and belonging that a child experiences in the presence of a mother because his mother “hemorrhaged to death” (6) immediately after giving birth to him. So it is from this sense of a ‘lack’ that Amir unconsciously started his search for a ‘womb’--- a source of security, protection, love and sustenance. In the absence of a mother, the only other option left who would fulfill all these ‘need’ was his father, ‘his Baba’. But not only did he grow up with this sense of a ‘missing womb’ in his life, he even suffered from a sense of guilt of killing his own mother and thereby earning for himself the hatred or halfhearted affection from his father:

[...] I always felt like Baba hated me a little. And why not?

After all, I *had* killed his beloved wife, his beautiful princess,
hadn’t I? (17)

So, in order to purge himself from this sense of guilt and also to compensate for the lack of motherly affection, that he really craved for his Baba’s undeviating attention. It is due to this childhood desire of completely winning his father’s love and appreciation that he readily sacrificed his innocence, his fidelity, his friendship, and his morals and in this process, lost his sleep and peace of mind because in order to relieve himself from the pangs of conscience for committing one sin, he continued the process in a vain desire to relieve himself from the throttling shackles of conscience. And it took him twenty six years to atone for that childhood

sin. Interestingly, he could atone for his sins only after the death of his father --- fifteen years after his father's death --- because by then that craze, that search for the 'missing womb' within the love of his father had subsided.

One just wonders that if Amir had a 'mother', would he have craved equally for that paternal attention? Perhaps not, because then there would not have been that cavern of lack or loneliness in his life, which he witnessed due to the complete lack of a mother figure in his life and also in his household. Amir recollects how in his childhood he yearned to sit with his Baba in his study --- "also known as the 'smoking room'" (4) --- listening to the conversation of Baba and his friends, and how his Baba would deny him that access:

Sometimes I asked Baba if I could sit with him then, but Baba would stand in the doorway. "Go on, now," he'd say. "This is grown-ups' time. Why don't you go read one of those books of yours?" He'd close the door, leave me to wonder why it was always grown-ups' time with him. (4)

But where would Amir, as a child, go to relieve himself from that cacophony of silence and convulsions of loneliness? Thus, from the other side of the closed door, he would listen to the voice, the laughter and thereby try to make up for the love and attention that he so earnestly craved for but didn't receive:

I'd sit by the door, knees drawn to my chest. Sometimes I sat there for an hour, sometimes two, listening to their laughter, their chatter. (4 to 5)

He sits with his "knees drawn to (his) chest" --- the foetal posture --- a posture indicative of his sense of insecurity and loneliness and an unconscious desire to have that sense of security and warmth that one enjoys within a mother's womb. At such moments of life, if he had a mother figure in his life, this sense of void would not have pressurized him to search for every little opportunity that would serve as a key for his entry to his Baba's heart. Who knows if Amir would have at all cared to wait outside his Baba's study, if he had a mother to turn to and share his time with?

But sadly enough, for Amir, his mother existed only on that photograph of his parent's wedding night: "Baba dashing in his black suit and my mother a smiling young princess in white" (5). And sometimes when he read his "mother's old history books" (8) in his Baba's study he was only reminded of the 'fact' that he was reading his mother's book. Neither the photo of his dead mother, nor her books affect Amir the way Baba's presence does, because he never tasted the bliss of motherly affection and cares either physically or through the figments of his imagination. None was there to help him in his imagination to build up an idea of his mother. Whenever he asked Baba about his mother, Baba would always describe her "in broad strokes, like, "She was a great woman." (219), thereby giving him little scope to feel what her mother was like. But what he had "always thirsted for were the details: the way her hair glinted in the sunlight, her favorite ice cream flavor, the songs she liked to hum, did she bite her nails?" (219). Perhaps these are the details that only the mind of a child could think of --- because maybe ice cream is something that most children likes to rate as their favorite food, and children often croons song while they play, so maybe he just wanted to see if the choice of his matches with that of his mother and 'biting nails' is one of the bad habits for which the children gets scolded, so maybe Amir as a child had that bad habit and so he wanted to check out if his mother too had the habit of biting nails or not! All these enquires therefore suggests how Amir as a child wanted to connect with his mother but could not, because his father was never there to help him conceive his mother. Thus, when years after he re-visits Kabul in search of Sohrab, and on his way to the orphanage he meets an old beggar --- who turns out to be his mother's colleague in the university, and he tells Amir, how his mother on a rainy day, while sharing with him (Dr Rasul, the old beggar)

a “marvellous slice of almond cake” “with hot tea and honey” had revealed her feelings of happiness mixed with fear during that period of her pregnancy: “I am afraid. [...] Because I’m so profoundly happy, Dr Rasul. Happiness like this is frightening” (219) --- Amir confesses:

“I had just learned more about my mother from this old man on the street than I ever did from Baba.” (219)

Therefore, since Amir, as a child was denied every access to know how his mother was like, he naturally did not have any strong sense of affinity for his mother though sometimes he “(did) ache for the mother (he) never met”. (6)

Not only was Amir a ‘motherless child’, even Hassan --- their servant Ali’s son (though later to be discovered that he was Amir’s half-brother: an issue of ‘his Baba’ and Sanaubar), and also Amir’s best friend and perhaps the most faithful person he ever met in his life --- was not blessed to be reared with the love and care of both his parents:

As confided to a neighbor’s servant by the garrulous midwife, who had then in turn told anyone who would listen, Sanaubar had taken one glance at the baby in Ali’s arms, seen the cleft lip, and barked a bitter laughter.

[...] she had refused to even hold Hassan, and just days later, she was gone. (9)

Therefore neither Hassan nor Amir had a mother. But Hassan’s life did not reverberate with the lack of a mother; his life was not governed by a search for ‘missing wombs’, because his father Ali, was always there for him --- Ali was there to hear to his story, to pull him close and clutch him with tenderness when he cried, and tried to protect him from every evil whenever it was possible. These emotional support Amir always wanted from his Baba but rarely witnessed and thereby amplified his sense of vacuity by comparison and contrast:

Hassan was crying. Ali pulled him close, clutched him with tenderness. Later, I would tell myself I hadn’t felt envious of Hassan. Not at all. (31)

That was a conscious reminder on part of Amir, to suppress his unconscious envy because whenever he cried, he did not find signs of affection on his Baba’s face, but rather there were signs of disgust. He recalls:

I remember one time Baba took me to the yearly *Buzkashi* tournament, [...] I watched with horror as one of the *chapandaz* fell off his saddle and was trampled under a score of hooves. His body was tossed and hurled in the stampede like a rag doll [...] He twitched once and lay motionless, [...] a pool of his blood soaking through the sand.

I began to cry.

I cried all the way back home [...] I will never forget Baba’s valiant efforts to conceal the disgusted look on his face as he drove in silence.

(18 to 19)

Thus, Amir was a sensitive child in want of love, care and affection, a child who wanted a warm parental hug, an arm to hold him around where he could shed his tears, “to be someone who was looked at, not seen, listened to, not heard” (57).

So when on one wintry night of 1975 (just four days before the grand kite tournament at Wazir Akbar Khan) his Baba, casually said “I think maybe you’ll win the tournament this year. What do you think?” (49), Amir felt his Baba “just slipped (him) a key”: to win the kite tournament and

[...] show him once and for all that his son was worthy. Then maybe (Amir’s) life as a ghost in this house would finally be over. [...] And maybe, just maybe, (Amir) would finally be pardoned for killing (his)

mother. (49)

It was during this winter time in Kabul, when the “trees froze and ice sheathed the roads, the chill between Baba and (Amir) thawed a little. And the reason for that was the kites” (43). Amir himself discloses:

Baba and I lived in the same house, but in different spheres of existence. Kites were the one paper-thin slice of intersection between those spheres. (43)

And it was from this point of intersection that Amir had to move towards the center of Baba’s sphere and thereby merge these two “different spheres” into ‘one united complete whole’. Perhaps this convergence was possible, Amir thought, if only he would win the kite tournament:

I didn’t know what the other guy was playing for, maybe just bragging rights. But this was my one chance to become someone who was looked at, not seen, listened to, not heard. If there was a God, He’d guide the winds, let them blow for me so that, with a tug of my string, I’d cut loose my pain, my longing. I’d endured too much, come too far. (57)

Truly, he went ‘too far’ to win his Baba’s admiration and care. Such was the desperation that he could consciously and silently witness Hassan being raped by Aseef without any protest or endeavour to save Hassan, though he knew it was for him that Hassan is enduring such pain. Hassan would have avoided this fate, only if he had given away that “blue kite” which he had ran for ‘his Amir agha’ after Amir won the Wazir Akbar Khan tournament. But such was Hassan’s devotion that he would let himself bleed, rather than break his promise. Thus, when Aseef defiled him, “Hassan didn’t struggle. Didn’t even whimper” (66). There was a resignation in his face. “It was the look of a lamb” (66). Amir himself admits:

Nothing was free in this world. Maybe Hassan was the price I had to pay, the lamb I had to slay, to win Baba. (68)

Apparently, this sacrifice was not futile. Baba and Amir were “finally friends [...] Except now that (he) had it, (he) felt [...] empty” (74), he “became an insomniac” (75). In his frenzy to win over the love and attention of his father, he ‘murdered sleep’ but could not smoke out the memories out of his life. Throughout the rest of his life, he kept on smouldering in this fire of sacrifice, memory and sin.

Moving to America, with his Baba, after the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, he embraced America as “a place to bury (his) memories” (112). For him:

America was different. America was a river, roaring along, unmindful of the past. (He) could wade into this river, let (his) sins drown to the bottom, let the waters carry (himself) someplace far. Someplace with no ghosts, no memories, and no sins.” (119)

In America, the father-son duo did start a new life, as the sole companion to each other. Now Amir’s Baba was ‘only his Baba’ and there was no sense of insecurity or regret for that paternal affection and attention. That childhood sense of ‘lack’ was over and out! Thus after graduation, he decides to do his major in English and be a writer, even though his father objected to this idea of his. Baba’s love and companion, through all these years in America, have cured Amir of that malady of insecurity and indecision that he was affected with in his childhood. Once it was for Baba’s love and admiration that he sacrificed one of the most beautiful, pure relations of life --- his relationship with Hassan. But now that he has that secure sense of love and care, he is not ready to compromise with his dream, even if it be at the expense of his Baba’s ill health:

My cheeks burned and guilt coursed through me, the guilt of

indulging myself at the expense of his ulcer, his black fingernails and aching wrists. But I would stand my ground, I decided. I didn't want to sacrifice for Baba anymore. The last time I had done that, I had dammed myself. (117)

A grown up young man, Amir, fell in love with Soraya Taheri --- "The morning sun to (his) *yelda*" (126), --- married her and for the first time discovered the tenderness of a woman. Amir happily recollects:

"All my life, I'd been around men. That night, I discovered the tenderness of a woman" (150).

But such was the decree of destiny, that though Amir for the first time was blessed to witness feminine tenderness, he was not blessed enough to witness the tenderness of a mother, even in the form of his wife being the mother to their children. Soraya could not conceive;

And (Amir) could almost feel the emptiness in Soraya's womb, like it was a living, breathing, thing. It had seeped into (their) marriage, that emptiness, into (their) laughs, and (their) love-making. And late at night, in the darkness of (their) room, (he) would feel it rising from Soraya and settling between (them). Sleeping between (them). Like a newborn child. (165)

So, now, a "newborn" "emptiness", a "newborn" 'lack', started spreading its tentacles to slowly engulf Amir and his life. But, before Amir would once again become a potent host for this 'parasitic emptiness' --- his wife's 'missing womb' --- he met Sohrab: Hassan's son, Amir's half-brother's son (a truth which floated to the surface after thirty-eight years of his existence and along with it surfacing "disoriented" (196) his entire surrounding and life. It shook the entire foundation of his life). Unknowingly, this vital truth of his life brought along with it, the therapeutic effect to submerge that "newborn" 'parasitic' "emptiness" which was slowly having its sway over their conjugal life. Amir as a child immunized himself against the malignant sense of 'lack' --- the lack of paternal affection in complete absence of a mother --- by winning his father's love and admiration for himself. And now after the death of his father, as a grown up young man when he again faces this 'well-known stranger' --- "emptiness" and lack --- with a different name --- this time in the guise of "childlessness", Sohrab comes to his rescue.

After learning from Rahim Khan the truth that Hassan was his half-brother, and that Hassan has a son called Sohrab, who is made orphan by the Taliban regime, he decides to go in search of Sohrab, so that he could partially atone for his childhood sin --- the sin of sacrificing Hassan's loyalty to win Baba. Amir and Sohrab had a miraculous escape from the Afghani Taliban and it is only after landing in Pakistan, that Amir, while slowly started recovering from his multiple injuries and fractures incurred upon him by the bloody fight with the Taliban monster, Aseef, that he realizes what Rahim Khan actually meant by "there is a way to be good again". During this period of physical healing, another truth sipped in his life --- the truth that Sohrab was the cure for that newborn malady of "emptiness" that was slowly overcasting the horizon of their marital life. He realized that Sohrab would give a sense of fulfillment to Soraya's life of "missing womb". Amir then from Islamabad rang Soraya in California and narrated everything to her, and she unhesitatingly replied:

[...] I know this much: You have to bring him home.

I want you to. (284)

After this telephonic conversation, Amir became more sure of his intention and desire. With this new ray of hope dawning on the horizon of their conjugal life, the couple actively took every step to legally adopt Sohrab as their child and thereby nullify each other's lack --- Sohrab fulfilling their lack of a child and Amir and Soraya together fulfilling Sohrab's need for parents.

Sohrab gave Soraya an opportunity to be a mother --- though a foster mother, but still... a mother! And all her arrangements for Sohrab proved how earnestly she had wanted to be a mother all these years. So now when given a chance she was not ready to miss a single taste of motherhood and therefore she takes care of every minute detail to enjoy this new phase of her life:

Soraya had turned the study upstairs into a bedroom for Sohrab.
She led him in and he sat on the edge of the bed. The sheets showed
brightly coloured kites flying in indigo blue skies. She had made
inscriptions on the wall by the closet, feet and inches to measure
a child's growing height. At the foot of the bed, (there was) a wicker
basket stuffed with books, a locomotive, a water colour set. (312)

Nature did not give Soraya a chance to feel within her the growth of a baby, the growth of a foetus, but now that she has Sohrab in her life --- her new child --- she wants to regularly check his height and see him grow, see him bloom every day. But Sohrab as a child had already lost too much --- he had seen his parents get killed by the Taliban because they were Hazara, then he lost his home, his childhood and was even robbed off his chastity, his human dignity --- and thus he cocooned himself up in silence. He did not feel like communicating with the world which had been so harsh with him. Thus he did not show any signs of acceptance of his new foster parents. But Soraya and Amir waited "for a green light from Sohrab" (320) so that they all get respite from the deafening silence of "emptiness". And thankfully that green signal came through a 'kite' in March 2002, on the Afghan New Year's Day: the *Sawl-e-Nau*. It has been more than a year that Sohrab has come to America: his new home, but he did not do away with the silence and passivity. He did not play with the children or talked with anyone and thus with time "No one seemed to notice" (320) him except Soraya and Amir. On the New Year day "a small wondrous thing happened" (317): at the suggestion of Soraya, Amir bought a "yellow *seh-parcha*" (320) and "a wooden spool of glass *tar*" (320) from the kite seller and took it to Sohrab. Amir asked Sohrab whether he liked the kite or not and does he want to fly it high? Sohrab did not answer. But Amir had a faint hope: Sohrab was a child and that too an Afghani child, so surely he will respond to this game of kite. And Amir was proved right. Sohrab held the string once, while Amir flew the kite for him and when Amir snapped the rival's 'green kite', he saw

[...] Sohrab. One corner of his mouth had curled up just so.
A smile.
Lopsided.
Hardly there.
But there. (323)

Though it was only a smile and nothing more and though it didn't make everything all right, in fact it didn't make anything all right but still Amir took it with open arms because he believed:

[...] when spring comes, it melts the snow one flake at a time
and maybe (he) just witnessed the first flake melting. (324)

And with positive hope in mind he ran for the green kite to have it for Sohrab, because Sohrab's wish to have the green kite was the first green signal which both Amir and Soraya ardently waited for so long. Sohrab's smile or a nod actually means the beginning of a new life for Amir and Soraya, a life where they will no more be haunted by the emptiness of a 'womb'.

Khaled Hosseini therefore beautifully presents the psychic cartography of his protagonist, Amir, through the contours of his emotional experiences both as child and as an adult. Amir's entire life has been a journey in search of "missing wombs" --- as a motherless child he was in search of security, love and care that one enjoys within a mother's womb, and

as an adult he was in search of recognition of parenthood from Sohrab, their foster child, so that they can forget the pain of being childless; so that Soraya can forget the pain of having an “empty” womb. Thus, both the journeys that Amir undertook in his endeavor to connect with the “missing wombs” of his life seems to end in a fruitful note but Hosseini’s story leaves its reader to wonder about the fate of that land from where Amir began his search. How long will be Afghanistan’s journey as a nation in search of her “missing womb”? When will her children have her as their ‘nourishing’ mother? : As a mother whose womb will be replete will love, care, affection, security, equality, freedom and progress so that all her children --- both born and unborn --- will never be reminded again of a mother with a “missing womb”. Her journey has begun, what awaits, is the result.

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