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Connotations of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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Even as I read the Afghan-American writer Khaled Hosseini's debut novel *The Kite Runner* I just couldn't ignore the so many ways in which Hosseini's text draws upon Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. At the very outset, it is interesting to note that Rushdie published his book not very long after India's Emergency Period and Hosseini published his not long after 9/11. As such they hold within their pages the pain and the poison produced by the churning of their nations (with no mythical god now able to curtail its ill-effects and effect rescue). Well it's true that Rushdie's novel changed the imagination of the world and any writer would want to create an effect of that scale. But that is not what Hosseini's intention seems to be; at least not just that. The parallels are too many. Far too many to just let be. In this paper I seek to identify the parallels between the two texts and explore how these parallels enhance the intensity of Khaled's extraordinary work.

Let's begin at the beginning. *Midnight's Children*, first published in 1981 not is the of Saleem and Shiva born in Bombay exactly at the stroke of midnight on 15 August 1947, the hour of India's Independence. Nine hundred and ninety nine other children are also born within the same hour, India's first hour of Independence. Symbolically, all these one thousand and one children are born into free India.

Saleem Sinai, the narrator of *Midnight's Children* narrates his personal history more like an autobiography, in the first person, constantly drawing parallels between his own history and the history of his nation. In the bargain Saleem creates his version of sub-continental history as perceived by him as he/his family moved between Kashmir, Delhi, Bombay, The Sunderbans, Dhaka, and Karachi. In 1975, the then Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, having been accused of electoral malpractices, declared a state of National Emergency. All civil liberties were suspended. The press was censored. All executive powers rested with the Prime Minister alone. Most of those who dared oppose the move were imprisoned. The proxy-dictatorship lasted almost two years. *Midnight's Children* satirizes Mrs. Gandhi's regime by celebrating fragmentation, pluralism, multilingualism and so on represented by the narrator Saleem who contains within him the identities of all the 600 million people of his nation. As one critic aptly puts it, "The voices of the midnight's children are the voices that the Emergency is trying to silence." (Todd 182)

Both Saleem and Shiva, and nine hundred and ninety nine other children are born into free India but the India they experience is quite the opposite. The reversals begin from the very moment of birth. The children are secretly swapped at birth by the maid Mary Pereira hoping to reverse their destinies. Saleem is not Muslim. And Shiva is not a Hindu. Born to a poor street singer Wee Willie Winkie and his wife Vanita, but actually fathered by a departing Englishman Methwold, Saleem is part Indian, part English, part Hindu, part Christian. Shiva is born into an affluent Muslim family. In effect in narrating his family history Saleem is actually narrating Shiva's family history. Thus both Saleem and Shiva

experience double parentage. By extension Saleem and Shiva are meant by Rushdie to be regarded as brothers.

Amir and Hassan in *The Kite Runner* experience more or less similar fates. Amir, the first person narrator of *The Kite Runner* is born in the year 1963 into an affluent Muslim family. Just as Saleem's biological mother Vanita in *Midnight's Children* dies during childbirth; Amir's mother too dies giving birth to him. (In fact this becomes one of the causes for Baba's unrestrained anger towards Amir.) Hassan is born in the servant quarters of the same house a year later to the ugly polio-struck Ali and the very young and beautiful Sanaubar, both hazaras, but again like Saleem fathered by a different man, Amir's Baba. It's important here to understand who the Hazaras are. They are Mogul descendents and look much like the Chinese people. For centuries the Hazaras have been "persecuted and oppressed" by the Pashtuns. The men were killed or driven away from their lands, their homes were burnt and their women were sold. It is quite common for the Hazaras to be called *mice-eating, flat-nosed, load-carrying donkeys*. There is one more difference between the Pashtuns and the Hazaras that's very important: Pashtuns are Sunni Muslims while the Hazaras are Shi'a.

Amir is a Pashtun, a Sunni and Hassan is a Hazara, a Shi'a. But it is interesting to note that Amir's Baba had them fed by the same nursing woman, a Hazara woman. Amir and Hassan come to share a kinship, a brotherhood that was going to last for a lifetime: The first word uttered by Amir is "Baba" and that by Hassan is "Amir." That says it all about their bonding. But Amir knows that, "History isn't easy to overcome. Neither is religion. In the end, I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara, I was Sunni and he was Shi'a, and nothing was ever going to change that. Nothing." (Hosseini 22) In reality Hassan is Amir's step-brother. But the secret is not revealed to Amir, not before he is thirty-eight, married and settled in America, and much after both Baba as well as Hassan are dead and gone.

Saleem's most glaring physical feature is his gigantic nose (with canine abilities) and that of Hassan is his cleft lip. At the same time like the knock-kneed Shiva, Hassan is physically strong and protects the meek hearted Amir from being bullied by the violent Assef and his gang, the more affluent lads in the street. Hassan, the best kite runner in all of Kabul ran kites for Amir. "For you, a thousand times over," he would say to Amir (Hosseini 1). (Kite runners compete to collect the last kite that has been cut.) Baba himself, "a force of nature, a towering Pashtun specimen," and famously nicknamed *Toophan agha*, "Mr Hurricane" for having once wrestled a bear, secretly takes pride in Hassan. This begins to trouble young Amir and he pledges to win the admiration of his father by bringing home the last kite at the next kite flying event. Hassan runs the kite for his young master but before he can bring it home he must allow Assef and his friends to sodomize him, just so he can keep the kite, which he does. This is Hassan's ultimate sacrifice for his master. Amir silently bears witness to the entire episode from the end of the alley: At the moment he prized the kite, his "key to Baba's heart" more than anything else in the world.

The friction between Pashtuns and Hazaras in Afghanistan is clearly reflected in Assef's assertion, "Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns. It always has been, always will be. We are true Afghans, the pure Afghans.... Afghanistan for Pashtuns, I say. That's my vision." (Hosseini 35) This very kind of hostility is the cause for friction between Hindus and Muslims, between Shivas and Saleems in post-partition India that Rushdie so painfully highlights in his book. I'm specially reminded of the instance where Saleem's father Adam

Aziz gives a Hindu name to his cycle shop but even that doesn't help save his shop from being gutted during one of the communal riots.

Like Saleem, Amir bears the burden of history: the history of his nation as well as his own personal history. With the Russian invasion life in Afghanistan is thrown out of gear. Baba and Amir are forced to leave home. They manage to sneak into Pakistan from where they further travel to the US and seek political asylum. They settle down in Fremont, California and eek out a living by selling second hand goods in the flea markets, like many other Afghans who had fled home and come to America. Amir grows up in America and graduates in Creative Writing. He marries the daughter of a former Afghan military General, Soraya. His books begin to get noticed. Meanwhile he loses Baba to cancer.

There is also a lot in common between Saleem and Amir. Saleem is a writer; so is Amir. Even as a young lad Amir is drawn to books and reads to the illiterate Hassan again and again Hassan's favourite story *Rostam and Sohrab*. Saleem is impotent, thanks to Sanjay Gandhi's nationwide sterilization campaign. Amir is unable to father a child. Towards the end of *Midnight's Children* we see Saleem adopt Shiva's son Ganesh. In *The Kite Runner* Amir adopts Hassan's son Sohrab. Ganesh is born in 1975, on the day the Emergency is clamped by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Ganesh does not utter a single word till the age of two, symbolically until the Emergency is lifted and the freedom of speech restored. Sohrab too, for some time, loses his ability to speak and begins to recover only after the Taliban regime has ended.

The violence and bloodshed perpetrated by the Taliban have left Afghanistan a perpetually wounded nation. During the Taliban regime girls were not allowed to go to school. Women were not allowed to work. Women who had no male members in the family were of course allowed to beg! Men who dared shave their beards were shot dead for disrespecting the word/will of God. No television. No Radio. No music. No freedom of speech. Anyone who dared rebel would be shot dead right on the street or hanged in front of his house. The body would be left there to rot and serve as a warning to others. The Taliban treated the Hazaras like dogs. There would be days when the Taliban soldiers would go on a killing spree of Hazara men right before the eyes of their wives and children, village after village after village. They would break for lunch and again resume work! Not much of this is new to us Indians. We have experienced the very same torture and brutality during the Emergency. But of course men were not killed, only castrated by the millions. I have a feeling Hosseini is drawing a parallel between the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the two-year State of Emergency in India in the 1970s. Let us not make the mistake of thinking things like this can't happen in today's India. Thanks to the saffron brigade we have our own indigenous Saffron Terrorism taking shape and we already have our own proxy-Taliban in place. Young girls shall be stripped, beaten and kicked if they dare wear western clothes or go to pubs. Shops that sell Valentine Cards shall be wrecked. No beauty pageants. No rose days. No friendship days. It's simply not *our* culture!

Aren't Bihari migrant workers in Maharashtra subjected to the same degree of xenophobia, racial discrimination, prejudice and violence as the Hazaras in Afghanistan? Not a very long time ago the late Shiv Sena leader Balasaheb Thackeray described Biharis in the Shiv Sena newspaper *Saamna* in the following way: "*Ek Bihari, Sau Bimari. Do Bihari Ladai ki taiyari. Teen Bihari train hamari aur paanch Bihari to sarkar hamari.*" (Editorial, *Saamna*) The text suggests that Biharis bring disease, violence, job insecurity and

domination wherever they go. More than 200 people, mostly Biharis, have died in anti-Bihari violence in Maharashtra over the last 10 years and nearly 70,000 internal refugees have been created. Hosseini seems to be saying, “Mr Rushdie, the history of your nation is different from the history of my nation, but the ramifications are the same. The chaos, misery, devastation and pain are just the same.”

Born at the exact moment of Independence, Saleem is inevitably “handcuffed to history.” He comes to bear the burden of his nation’s history. Saleem narrates his story, his history to be precise, and the history of his nation from the vantage point of thirty-one years: “There are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumours, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane! I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you’ll have to swallow the lot as well. Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me....” (*Midnight’s Children* 1) It is these stories that lend the book its epic dimension. The personal histories of Saleem and Shiva help hold together the histories of six hundred million people (the population of India at the time).

In *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini is breaking new ground. He is not just alluding to *Midnight’s Children* but rather making his book an extension of it. A sequel so to say extending the scope of *Midnight’s Children* to regions beyond the Indian subcontinent: to his own country Afghanistan, yes, and by implication to Iran, Iraq, Srilanka, Israel, Palestine, in other words the whole of the third-world terrain. As one critic points out, “The fissures and contradictions of India that Rushdie so brilliantly portrays in the *Midnight’s Children* are also in a way representative of the third-world terrain.” (Khanna 21)

Midnight’s Children changed forever not just the direction but also the fate of Anglo-Indian writing. I can see *The Kite Runner* beginning to do similar things to Anglo-Afghan writing, in fact beginning to create a canon called Afghan American writing. The freshness of Rushdie’s prose style and the boldness in his voice can be matched by no other writer in the world. Having grown up in the West there is a sense of freedom with which Rushdie writes about the religion into which he was born – Islam. “I’m not a Muslim. I’m not a Muslim,” I heard him emphasize in an interview to NDTV. Hosseini, having grown up in the US, seems to share Rushdie’s perspective (though he never actually said so) but cannot take on religious fundamentalists in the manner in which Rushdie does. Instead, he chutnifies the histories of Saleem, Shiva, Ganesh, Amir, Hassan, and Sohrab into one another symbolically borrowing Rushdie’s voice to tell the story of his country. This reminds me of a puzzle from my childhood. A straight line would be drawn on a piece of paper and the challenge was to make it bigger without actually extending the line! The key to this was simply to draw a smaller line beside it. This is exactly what *The Kite Runner* has done to *Midnight’s Children*. Made it Bigger!

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