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Individual Desire and Existential Choices in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

Priyanka Chakraborty

M.Phil research scholar

Department of English

Auxilium College Autonomous,

Vellore.

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Abstract:

Human beings in today's world deeply suffer from what Sartre terms as man's desire to be God. Individuals within a society have a perpetual tendency to objectify themselves with desires which are closest to fulfilment. However desire is always a lack that aims for fullness and it turns into various denials within the individual until the individual becomes a perpetual negation [Kauffmann].

This paper is an attempt to look at the individual desire as presented by Hosseini in his book *The Kite Runner*. The individual desires of Hosseini's characters, which circles around the essence of life rather than the existence of being, is a microcosm of today's globalized society. These desires stimulate wrong choices of action and existence and gives rise to a deeper existential anguish instead of the freedom needed by the society. The paper illustrates some of those desires; the choice they led to; and a possible way of redemption.

Keywords: *en-soi*, *pour-soi*, self-deception, false-consciousness, existentialism and existential choices.

"I did that," says my memory. "I could not have done that," says my pride, and remains inexorable. Eventually – the memory yields" (Nietzsche 35).

INTRODUCTION

Nietzsche's description of memory and the overriding pride exemplifies Sartre's statement "Man is a useless passion" (Palmer 104). The chain of thoughts that leads to this conclusion begins with man's desire. "Fundamentally", Sartre states, "Man is a desire to be" (Palmer 102). His desire is "to achieve a state of being in which the *en-soi* and the *pour-soi* are synthesized" (Kauffmann 47). However this ideal state of being is possible only with God. Thus it signifies that human-beings fundamentally have the desire to be God. Human's desire to be God or God like; to be ever respected, cherished, loved and looked up to, creates the basic existential problem of humanity. Since humans have a perpetual tendency to identify themselves with desires that are closest to fulfilment, desire is a dangerous passion within the human race. Desire is always a lack "- an emptiness that hungers for fullness" (Palmer 102) and it turns man into what Kauffmann himself terms as a "perpetual negation" (300).

Khaled Hosseini's debut novel *The Kite Runner*, is a simple text with a deep-rooted philosophy. The story sketches an ideal picture of lives anguished by existential choices.

Hosseini's characters are exemplified in their choice of essence over existence. In Amir, Hosseini's protagonist, the attitude of perpetual negation as stated by Kauffman is portrayed through the young boys "self-deception" (Kauffmann 300). Amir's desire to be Baba's ideal son compels him to make choices which builds up his negative attitude with respect to himself. On the night Amir is faced with the first choice of his life—that of saving Hassan, he hides behind custom and opinion of tradition and society. He states,

I had one last chance to make a decision. One final opportunity to decide who I was going to be. I could step into that alley, stand up for Hassan—the way he'd stood up for me all those times in the past—and accept whatever would happen to me. Or I could run.
In the end, I ran. (Hosseini 72)

Amir makes a wrong choice of bad-faith to reach the goal of fulfilling his desires. He is right in his own character analysis; his every desire is aimed at comfort, love and acceptance without the struggle for pain; except that he does not realise he has chosen the way of bad faith that will ultimately take him away from his freedom. After leaving Hassan alone to get raped, Amir pacifies himself with the thought that Hassan after all belongs to the lower class. He is "...just a Hazara, wasn't he?" (Hosseini 73); Hassan is the price he had to pay to win Baba's heart. Amir tries to be happy by indulging himself in Baba's temporary affection. He works hard to create a false consciousness. To avoid the anguish that is turning him insomniac, Amir continuously reminds himself of his assumed helplessness at the face of the situation. However, this deception becomes impossible because according to the tenets of existential psychoanalysis, Amir's self-deception remains within the sphere of his translucent consciousness as the knowledge of the very fact that he tries to hide from himself.

In the present state of Amir's consciousness there is no mystery, rather there is a recognition and conceptualisation of the situation he is trying to hide. This knowledge within his consciousness confronts Amir with his freedom, and he realises that his freedom "does not look like the glorious liberty of the enlightenment; it is no longer the gift of God" (Kauffmann 47). Now he stands alone in the universe responsible for his own condition.

Amir's actions become a reflection of his father. Baba tries his best to remain in good-faith, but his ignorance and lack of sincerity, like Amir's, becomes his negation. Baba dwells in the bad-faith of his secrets; he never openly takes the responsibility of Hassan. His acknowledgement of Hassan though fatherly is always obscure. In some way Baba always views Hassan's birth as a result of his illegitimate desire; his wrong choice in life. Baba's useless passion to remain respectful in the eyes of the Afghan community makes him to die anguishing for his illegitimate son. Hosseini is clear in his portrayal of the similarities in the choices made by both Amir and Baba, a reason for which Amir later states, "As it turned out, Baba and I were more alike than I'd ever known" (Hosseini 209). Like Amir, Baba too abandons Hassan for his lower status. It is not farfetched to think that had Hassan been born as an illegitimate Pastun, he would have received equal shares of identity like Amir, but Hassan is a Hazara; he is a son of the house servant; thus he always remains in the shadow both abandoned by his biological father and his half-brother. However Baba is different from Amir in a single existential manner. Unlike Amir, Baba never tries to hide behind the mask of self-deception; he never tries to forget the memory of Hassan or to start with a new beginning. His flight from Afghanistan is not an escape from his deeds as it is for Amir. America, for Baba, becomes a place to mourn his memory. Even later, with time, Baba could not bury his past. On the night of Amir's graduation he suddenly utters, "I wish Hassan had been with us today" (Hosseini 124). In this respect Baba's anguishes are far lesser than those

of Amir's but it is not altogether void. Earlier at the onset of the book, Baba tries his best to teach Amir not to repeat the former's mistakes. With Amir on his lap, he has a man to man conversation where he tattoos on Amir's mind the limitless misery of being a liar, he says:

Now no matter what the mullah teaches, there is only one sin, only one. And that is theft. Every other sin is a variation of theft. Do you understand that? . . . When you kill a man, you steal a life. . . . you steal his wife's right to a husband, rob his children of a father. When you tell a lie, you steal someone's right to the truth. When you cheat you steal the right to fairness. Do you see?"(Hosseini 17)

Baba hates lies but ironically he turns out to be the biggest liar in the book. He steals from Amir his right to know his brother. He steals from Hassan his identity and from Ali his honour. However Baba is not proud of his actions. His actions prompted by the ideology of the society makes him hate himself. He hates himself more for accepting the law of the society. There is no doubt that when he tells Amir, "A man who takes, what's not his to take, be it a life or a loaf of *naan* . . . I spit on such a man." (Hosseini 18) he partly refers to his own self. Baba's psychological knowledge is clear. He gratefully recognises the knowledge as well as the consequences of his action. His consciousness is never blurred or masked. Baba's only fault in his existential realisation is his secrecy. To save his honour, his name and his respect in the face of the society and before his son he takes flight from reality and hides his life in an armour of secrecy as a person with a ". . . tragic world view without however, being pessimistic" (Kauffmann 47).

Amir, however is different from Baba. He is frightened of the enormity of his freedom, its openness and its changing face; and being afraid he once again makes a wrong choice and finally abdicates his humanity by blaming Hassan for a fake theft that drives him out of the house. Amir acts out of prejudice and deceives himself by stating, ". . . life would move on. I wanted that, . . . to forget, to start with a clean slate" (Hosseini 98).

"Sartre writes that self-deception is possible only because sincerity is conscious of missing its goal inevitably, due to its very nature" (Kauffmann 323). The goal of sincerity is to support truth and to confess what one really is so that the individual may finally coincide with his being-in-itself. However the fact of individuals confronted with their real being-in-itself is frightening because it might show the individuals a picture of themselves that, either they never want to see or never want the world to see. In Amir's case his sincerity would reveal his cowardice, his instinct to escape pain at the cost of others and would make him seem an unworthy son to his father. Thus he chooses to opt for the alternative of sincerity. To escape his anguish he tries to mould his consciousness into seeing himself as he would like others to see him. He tries to replace his being-for-itself with his being-for-others, and in doing so he chooses bad-faith. His false consciousness thus ruptures every time he hears Hassan's name and his treachery toward Hassan remains as fresh as ever and as a recognised knowledge in his true consciousness.

When Amir and Baba reach the shores of America, the former is happy that in this new country he can finally bury his past. Amir says, "For me America was a place to bury my memories" (Hosseini 120). What Amir does not realise is that, it is not the past that is tearing away his sleep or sitting as a heavy burden inside his heart. "Being-for-itself is separated from its past by a nothingness" (Palmer 61). The past has nothing to do with Amir's present anguish; it is rather the choices he makes for an uncertain future that is responsible for his continuous existential despair. "Decision or choice is to embrace one's existence as a constitutive movement in the face of nothing" (Sandowsky 598). Moreover choice is not

simply a decision at a certain point of time that can be isolated at any moment. It is an extending process. Amir's choices seen in this light would reveal the cause of his present anguish. The past that he wants to bury cannot be forgotten because his choices were not focused on the past or the present but some uncertain and ambiguous future fulfilment.

Characteristically Amir is unaware of the goal of his anguish; he is ignorant and frightened of the freedom that lies beyond his anguish. Amir looks into the wrong places to annihilate his pain. In choosing bad-faith, Amir turns into the man of irony that Sartre describes— a person who “. . . annihilates what he posits within one and the same act; he leads us to believe in order not to be believed; he affirms to deny and denies to affirm; he creates a positive object but it has no being other than his nothingness” (Kauffmann 300). Amir's continuous trial of flight from his pain is ironical since it is met with the memory of Hassan at every milestone of the former's life. It is also ironical that Amir could never have children, because precisely the moment when he shifts to his pretty Victorian house thinking his life to be almost normal, he learns about the existence of his orphan nephew, whose father, Hassan, he had betrayed twenty six years ago. Amir's wrong choice, his bad-faith, leads him to an anguish that turns his adult life into an irony of lies.

Nietzsche states that the value of human life does not lay in its usefulness for the value will continue to exist even if there was nobody to whom the human could be useful. To most readers it would seem that Hassan's fate is written as a resignation caused by the socio-political situation of Afghanistan. However the anguish that Hassan silently suffers through most part of the story is an agony caused not by the society but by his own choice. Hassan's anguish arises from the foundation of his values. Starting right from the first word he utters, Hassan values himself as a fiercely loyal servant to Amir. His loyalty or the usefulness he thinks he owes to Amir as the latter's lowly servant is stretched to such a Frankenstein extent that he chooses to get raped for his master rather than give away the coveted kite that he has claimed for Amir. As Sartre states “All the values that guide my life exist only insofar as I have freely chosen them” (Palmer 76), Hassan freely chooses the value of loyalty and discards the choice of independence that came collaterally with it. When he proves his loyalty through the words, “for you a thousand times over” (Hosseini 63), Hassan like Amir abdicates his chances of freedom and independence.

Hassan desires to be a loyal companion and loyalty becomes his “original intention” (Kauffmann 302). However unlike Amir, desire turns Hassan to be monstrously humanitarian. He loses himself in the act of self-negation and tries to be oblivious of his pain by acting normal. He refuses to accept the sudden shocking knowledge of reality present in his conscious mind. Amir never dictates to Hassan but by accepting Amir's ethical superiority over himself, Hassan authorizes Amir to command over his life and thus propagate anguish in it. Hassan hardly utters more than a few lines in the entire narration. In most of these lines Hassan tries as much to be cheerful as much as Amir tries to be explicit about his problems. Hassan cheerfully accepts his fate at the cost of his individual freedom, and his self-decisive oblivion compels him to make wrong choices in his life. Hassan makes his first wrong choice by remaining silent about his rape. However he creates a bigger disaster for himself when he chooses to remain silent to protect Amir from Baba's wrath.

On the day Ali resigns from serving Baba, both he and Hassan make the mistake of not revealing the true incident behind Amir's changed behaviour. Hassan accepts the charge of theft laid upon him as his last act of self-sacrifice for his master. He remains silent and accepts Amir's treachery. Ironically, however on the last day of his life when Hassan

ultimately breaks his silence it is once again to prove his loyalty for an absent master. Hassan is undone by his loyalty. His despair arises from the irresponsible choices he makes based upon loyalty. Throughout his life Hassan remains in 'bad-faith' and at the end he dies an anguished death waiting for a never returning master.

Among all the other characters that appear in the story there is none without anguish or bad faith. Every character makes wrong choices. Ali, like Baba and Hassan remains with the wrong choice of secrecy and serves a master who has dishonoured him ". . . in the single worst way an Afghan man can be dishonoured . . ." (Hosseini 208). Rahim Khan shares with Baba's wrong choices and thus becomes privy to his anguishes. Assef derives for himself the values of evils and is guided by them, his freedom is wronged at being the false foundation of his values; Soraya makes wrong choice of an Afghan-American boyfriend; General Taheri makes a wrong choice of being over ambitious, and Soraya's mother is anguished by her timid all accepting nature .

CONCLUSION:

The choices made by Amir, Hassan, Baba and other characters are pointers of their individual identity. The choices that they make are responsible for the predominant emotions in their lives. Amir lives with the feeling of guilt and cowardice as the ultimate result of his wrong choice. For Baba, his prolonged mourning in America is also the fruit of his choice. Choice, as the characters fail to recognise, adheres to the future of an individual rather than the past. Wrong choice leads to the anguish and guilt. However on a positive note anguish if properly recognised can lead a human being to its freedom, which is the main goal of existential living. As Sandowsky, a modern day existential psychoanalytic critic, states, that choice perhaps is not an act that is made and retained as a decision; it is rather to some extent, contemporary to the present and the future and human beings lives in the choice they make. Therefore redemption rests only on the choice that is smade henceforth. Amir attains his redemption and his freedom but only after he recognises and selects the right choice.

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