

Silence to Testimony: Narrative Ethics and Trauma in *The Kite Runner*

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Abstract:

The Academia has extensive research carried on *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini. Despite this, one of the under explored area is the role of silence in the literary work. The studies pertaining to the work densely focuses on the themes of guilt, redemption, friendship, ethnicity and trauma, while the calculated employment of silence and its usage as a tool for story telling is an underlying gem. The role of silence in manoeuvring the emotions through the narration and ethical dimensions of the novel is significant. This paper explores the effective functioning of silence as a narrative strategy to construct interpersonal relationships, while obscuring the inequalities of the society. This is attained by maintenance of existing political despotism and how it serves as a path for the transfer of cruelties that induce trauma over generation. The study incorporates trauma theory, postcolonial conceptualisations and the theories on narratology to argue that silence is not just lack of speech or expression in *The Kite Runner*. Rather, the very silence is used an impactful communication methodology that enable character development and encapsulating reader attention. The paper delves on the analysis of primary characters namely, Amir, Hassan, Baba, Ali, Rahim Khan and Sohrab to elucidate paradoxical impact of silence as a mechanism of oppression and as a light of redemption. The study also encompasses Hosseini's representation of silence as a tool to replicate the socio, political, economic and cultural references of Afghanistan.

Keywords: Silence, Narrative strategy, Trauma, Khaled Hossini, Oppression, *The Kite Runner*, Redemption.

Introduction

The Kite Runner (2003) written by Khaled Hosseini, is coming of age novel of the protagonist Amir, who is an immigrant from Afghan settled in the United States. The struggle

that of carrying the guilt which rose out the betrayal to his childhood friend Hassan is the prominent plot of the novel.

The novel is filled with silence scattered on many areas. The contentment of truth to oneself, lack of expressiveness pertaining to one's true emotions and the inability of individuals to voice out whenever there is an injustice are the key traits of characters employed in this work. Silence serves as the foundations upon which governments are built. This collective silence of the subjects of the states is attained by disabling the voice of the victims on their traumatic experiences.

It may be unfair, but what happens in a few days, sometimes even a single day, can change the course of a whole lifetime, (Hosseini 131).

Thus, the inability of expressing one's thought could not be limited to silence but as an instrument for the revelation of the underlying horrors and truth. Therefore, it is impending to treat silence as a strategy employed in the narration by the author as an attempt to address the perplexed nature of the psychological traits of the characters.

This paper concentrates on the employment of silence in the narrative structure of *The Kite Runner*. The study proposes four functions served by Silence:

1. Representation of Trauma
2. Instrument for social and ethnic oppression
3. A veil of morality
4. Catalyst of personal redemption.

Theoretical Framework

The forerunners of Trauma theory like Cathy Caruth advocates, "Silence is a response to traumatic experience that resists verbal articulation." (Caruth 4). Caruth claims silence as a resultant of the traumatic experience which are difficult to be represented by the victim or articulate verbally. The dominance of a Trauma gains prominence through silence, disintegrated forms of memory and description that are natured on indirect representation. The silence produced by the series of events in *The Kite Runner* often resulted in silence of the characters which brings us the limitation in expressing sufferings.

Narrative ethics a key concept in understanding the story of the character is an effective tool that can be used in the study of *The Kite Runner*. James Phelan suggests, "Narrative ethics examines how stories shape moral judgement and responsibility." (Phelan 12). Incorporation of silence in literature often enables the readers to add their perspectives to neglect and reveal truth. It enables ethical engagement of readers. Hence, silence is employed strategically to incorporate and question the perception of reader's guilt, their responsibility and forgiveness by Khaled Hosseini.

Postcolonial theory deals with the marginalised groups and how they are denied by the society to have a representation for themselves. The community of Hazara, in *The Kite*

Runner, is inflicted with two-fold oppression in terms of social isolations and narrative silencing. This marks the reflection of the power structures in Afghan society.

Silence- Representation of Trauma

One of the most significant features of the novel is the usage of silence as a symbolism of trauma. The incident encircling the rape of Hassan emerges as the traumatic event around which the narrative is set to move along the novel. Additionally, Hassan never discusses about the incident ever in an explicit manner. He even fails to address it to Amir despite knowing that Amir is aware of the incident. The silence of Hassan is a symbolism employed by Hosseini to reflect his psychological trauma of being a servant and social vulnerability of being a Hazara.

Hassan's silence in the novel is transferred as the burden of guilt to the readers and thus, the emotional impact of the incident is intensified by the author. Anne Whitehead says, "Traumatic memory is often fragmented and indirect rather than fully narrated." (Whitehead 8). The narrative technique employed by the author, when read through the lens of Whitehead elucidates that the silence of the victim here serves to be more powerful tool to convey the emotion rather than explicit dialogue or any other representation. The inability to present the bitter experience details the resistance enabled by trauma to language.

Silence, also plays a pivotal role when the incident is understood from the perspective of Amir. Amir despite witnessing the sexual violation on Hassan chose to remain silent rather than comforting or addressing it in any form to anyone. The choice made by Amir to suppress his guilt rather than confronting it also creates an impact in the life of Hassan. The characterisation of Amir can be understood as, "Testimony is shaped by crisis and difficulty of witness trauma." (Felman and Laub 15). This silence of Amir on this particular incident continues to affect him all through his life and is reflected in his atonement in later part of his life. The narrative of the novel contributes in the character arc of Amir, right from the beginning where Amir tries to console himself for his inability with something that could help him escape reality, "I actually aspired to cowardice, because the alternative, the real reason I was running, was that Assef was right: Nothing was free in the world." (Hosseini 73), Amir tries to justify his act of remaining silent. The character of Amir in the end where he decides to visit back to Afghanistan and this character development is indeed fuelled by his silence and impact it created in him. Thus, the narrative depicts how silence on a traumatic incident serve to affect the individual even years after the occurrence of the original event.

The character of Sohrab, son of Hassan, further reassures the entwinement of trauma and silence. Sohrab was inflicted to abuse and trauma all throughout his life. The baton of general oppression is transferred from Hassan to Sohrab, "Trauma is often transmitted across generations through memory." (Hirsch 6). This continuous exposure made his mind to refrain from communicating about the incidents to anyone. The silence of Sohrab is the

psychological representation caused by continuous violence and loss. Hosseini through the significant use of silence in *The Kite Runner* proclaims that some experiences when represented through a language doesn't provide justifiable depiction of the event and silence, on other hand, proves to much more powerful tool to express the suffering of the individual.

Silence- Instrument for social and ethnic oppression

Hosseini, in this work *The Kite Runner* has made use of silence as a mirror to reflect the existing social and ethnic hierarchies of the society. Hassan and his father Ali, belong to the minority community called Hazaras. The Hazara is a community that has been marginalised by the other communities for la longer duration in the Afghan society. Despite being the role of Hassan and Ali being prominent for the story, their voices have been limited in almost every instant of the novel.

The discrimination directed towards Hassan and Ali is challenged by none. The household of Baba has nothing to offer them against the social exploitation they are subjected. 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 73).

The silence of Hassan and Ali, who are victims can be understood from the psychological perspective but the silence of Amir and Baba is associated to the social stigma of Afghan society against the Hazara community. The irony that Baba has always wanted Amir to stand up for what he wanted in his life and face all the adversities. But in fact, Baba himself has failed and proved to be a hypocrite. This is depicted by the author as, "A boy who won't stand up of himself becomes a man who can't stand up to anything." (Hosseini 204). This silence of Amir and Baba cannot be accounted as their indifference towards Hassan or Ali. It is accounted on the structural limitations imposed by the society on marginalised individuals. Spivak in one of her essays opined, "The subaltern cannot speak in the dominant structure of power." (Spivak 308) to depict a vivid picture on the social structure that is designed to favour the oppressors. The power held by the society designates who can speak and who should remain silent.

Hassan could be also seen as the childhood reflection of Ali. The characterisation of Ali being a person who endures all the prejudices without protest can be connoted to the continuous subjugation he might face for being a Hazara from his young age. Ali might have experienced some or other form of oppression from his young age as that of Hassan. This resulted in the normalisation of discrimination in Afghanistan. The historical notion of oppression has been explained by Barfield as "Afghanistan's political and social history is marked by ethnic hierarchy and exclusion." (Barfield 88). Hosseini brings out the usage of silence to depict how a society uses oppression through both physical violence and enforced muteness.

The narrative techniques employed in the novel is itself is questionable about representation. The narrator of the novel is Amir. Hence the readers are provided with the information about Hassan only from the perspective of Amir. This may lead to selective expression of information as opined by James Phelan, “The voice of the narrator shapes what is revealed an what remains hidden.” (Phelan 31). Thus, the opinions of Hassan remain incomplete and compromised. This is evident to understand the silencing of marginalised communities who are often denied to tell their stories. The stories about them that is told to the world is the version that is comfortable to the dominant groups.

Silence- A veil of morality

Hosseini in this particular work make use of silence as a instrument to cover and hide the truth. The Kite Runner is filled with episodes that is entirely constructed upon prolonged silence. One of the most prominent uses of silence in this respect is the secret involving Baba and Hassan, and the relationship between them. Baba covered the fact that Hassan was his biological son and remained silent for a long time.

How could he have lied to me all those years? To Hassan? He had sat me on his lap when I was little, looked me straight in the eyes, and said, There is only one sin. And that is theft... When you tell a lie, you steal someone’s right to the truth. Hadn’t he said those words to me? (Hosseini 208)

This silence of Baba in the matter of Hassan has largely impacted life of others in significant manner. Supposedly, had Baba revealed the truth and not remained silent, the relationship between Amir and Hassan would be different, transforming either of their lives.

The silence of Baba illustrates how silence accounts for moral and ethical failure of individuals not only through actions but also through the omissions. The inability of Baba to reveal the truth is a reflection of personal shame and anxiety constructed by the social structure. The silence of Baba has largely impacted the lives and identity of Amir and Hassan. The role of Rahim Khan, a friend of Baba in concealing the truth about the relationship between Baba and Hassan is also important. Even though, it is through him that Amir learns about the truth later in his life, the silence of Rahim Khan proves how ethical responsibilities affects and influence crucial affairs of life. By being silent, despite knowing the truth to safeguard the secret of Baba, Rahim Khan unknowingly contributed for he suffering of Hassan and Ali.

Thus, Hosseini put forth silence being characterised by the aspect of vagueness. Silence might be used as a veil to cover the truth in order to protect someone for a shot term but the prolongment of silence often leads to consequences that are difficult to set right.

Silence- Catalyst of personal redemption

Despite silence negatively functioning throughout The Kite Runner, Hosseini never failed to treat the same silence as the tool to atone redemption.

The journey of Amir to Afghanistan could be considered as the journey of redemption. This journey begins as a result of the prolonging silence coming to a halt when Amir learns the truth about Hassan. The journey is a representation of movement from silence to acknowledgement. Amir transforms his silence into confession by accepting the responsibility for his past actions. "There is a way to be good again." (Hosseini 2).

Amir's act of saving Sohrab is an act of reparation for the damage caused by the years of silence. The tendency of Amir to come in terms with the bitter truth promulgates his personal and moral enrichment.

Hosseini's treatment towards silence does not change at the end of novel where things get back to normal. The impact of silence is still maintained through the character of Sohrab who is not excited by the new place and largely remains silent from his trauma of the past. The smile of Sohrab could be associated as the beginning of process of healing and not as a complete recovery. It is also to be noted that the silence remains in the end of novel, but the role of silence here is not attributed to the withdrawal of trauma but to the hope with a caution.

This extensive writing details that some horrors of life cannot be completely eradicated and they remain to stay with the individual till the end as a silent suffering. It is very challenging to get rid of the memories as "Memory and history are inseparable from acts of forgetting." (Ricoeur 22). Redemption of an individual is not attained by eliminating silence altogether which is not possible instead one should learn to live along the silence while breaking the silent into minute particles to overcome a greater part of their trauma.

Conclusion

One of the most striking features of *The Kite Runner* is the employment of silence as one of the narrative techniques. Hosseini ventures trauma, societal stigma, moral and ethical responsibility of individuals and redemptions with the help of silence. The communication between the characters is weaved by giving equal importance to both what is spoken and what is left unspoken. The silence of Hassan depicts sufferings; the silence of Amir represents guilt; the silence of Baba portrays moral failure and silence of Sohrab reflects trauma.

Hosseini skilfully made use of silence as a competent tool of communication by treat it equivalent to what is being articulated. The present study presents that silence can never take the place of neutrality and on contrary it can denote protection, oppression, concealment and healing. The novel *The Kite Runner* is a depiction of silence as perplexed phenomena that can alter the life of individuals and collective history of a larger populace. Hosseini capitalises the usage of silence to enhance the emotional depth and significance of ethics in the novel. Thus, making silence as a prominent literary device that can be employed in storytelling.

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