

Diaspora, Globalization, and Homecoming in *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi

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Abstract

The Kite Runner and *Persepolis* are two very important (and under-represented) texts in diasporic literature. While one is a fiction novel, the other is a memoir presented in a graphic novel format. However, themes of diaspora, transnationalism, and loss and gain of a personal and cultural identity are common to both. Other than that, both texts are relatively contemporary, not only in their publication but also in the stories they tell. Therefore, they reflect quite accurately, the state of the diaspora in an era of globalization. This paper mainly aims to explore the ever-changing concept of "homecoming", i.e. when the displaced return to their homeland, in the aforementioned novels. Questions such as, "Is it possible to fully reclaim the previous (original) identity if the displaced revisit their homeland or does the space change as much as a person?", "Is the act of leaving one's homeland and/or returning to it, influenced in any way, by globalization?" and "How are factors such as 'nostalgia', 'redemption' and 'a search for meaning', often found in diasporic literature, related to 'homecoming'?" are central to this paper. In a time when several refugee crises are taking place all over the world, it is important to treat Diasporic literature as something more than simply stories, for they offer new perspectives into understanding human behaviour itself.

Keywords: The Kite Runner, Persepolis, Diaspora, Homecoming

“Home is not where you are born; home is where all your attempts to escape cease.”

-Naguib Mahfouz

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as of 2017, there are 65.6 million forcibly displaced people, worldwide. Out of which, 22.5 million are classified as refugees. Breaking it down further, 28,300 people were forced to flee their homes per day due to conflict and persecution. This comes to around 20 people displaced per minute. These figures are important. They show us the magnitude of the problem around the world. UNHCR claims that we are now witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record and clearly, the numbers reflect that. However, what is ignored among the statistics

and the data are the personal histories, the stories and the experiences of those witnessing and participating in this phenomenon. Every single individual, even indirectly affected by this catastrophe, has a story to tell. And when a group of such individuals carry these stories with them, across the border, to other countries, they become a part of the collective consciousness. Such a group, also known as the Diaspora, eventually form a new culture based on these stories and these experiences, accepting them as a part of themselves, and over the course of generations, the stories and the experiences become deeply ingrained as a part of their identity.

The importance of stories forms the basis of this research. Data and stats give an overall idea of the event, a very general sense of the ongoing phenomenon. Stories and individual experiences, on the other hand, bring us closer to the reality of the phenomenon. The research focuses on two such stories. Stories rooted in non-fictional events and characters based on real experiences. Through them, we aim to understand three concepts: Diaspora, Globalization, and most importantly, 'Homecoming'. All three of the concepts are interlinked with each other and cannot be understood in a vacuum. Therefore, the research moves through them, not individually, but collectively.

This library research aims to analyze two great works of literature through the three concepts which form a part of the greater Diaspora studies. The concept of focus here is that of 'homecoming', which remains an under-studied feature of Diaspora studies as of now. In this paper, we will try to define what 'homecoming' means as a concept of Diaspora studies and how and why it appears in many Diasporic works of fiction. The research will aim to answer deeply philosophical and complicated questions such as, "Is it possible to fully reclaim the previous (original) identity if the displaced revisit their homeland or does the space change as much as a person?", and "How are factors such as nostalgia, redemption and a search for meaning, often found in Diasporic literature related to 'homecoming'?".

Discussion

As we begin, there is yet one more piece of data that is central to the understanding of our research. According to the UNHCR, 552,200 refugees returned to their homeland in 2016. The number is almost double than it was in 2015, which shows a trend of more and more displaced people returning to their country of origin. However, this part of the global phenomenon of human displacement is widely ignored. Most people believe that the journey of an immigrant or a refugee is finished when they arrive and settle in a new country. However, Head of Communications and Chief Spokesperson for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Melissa Fleming (2017), says she never met a single refugee who does not want to go back:

All refugees want to go home someday. Some of them may never go home and live there again... they were forced to flee. It's one of the worst things that can happen to you, everything that you treasure and it's not just things, it's community, it's friends, it's atmosphere, it's the type of food, it's memories, it's all been forcibly left behind.

This is neither a surprising nor a recent phenomenon. Returning back home has been something that immigrants have done throughout history. According to Donna Przecha (n.d.), who writes on history and genealogy, says:

...trips home for immigrants became more common after the late 19th century when ship travel was quicker, safer and cheaper. However, returning to the home country has been part of the pattern from the very beginning. A list of passengers on the Mayflower reveals that three passengers out of 100 -- Bartholomew Allerton, Desire Minter and Gilbert Winslow -- returned to England... Of the 112 individuals who made up Georgia's first forty families in 1733, 7 of them are noted as having returned to England. Of course, until 1776, America was part of England but a move to America from England in those days had to have about the same impact as a move from Germany to America in 1890. It was a massive decision involving a difficult trip and learning to live in a very different environment.

We have more statistics relating to the huge migrations of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Although statistics on departing passengers were not kept until 1908, figures that have been developed by scholars reveal some interesting patterns. Several believe that, overall, as many as one in three American immigrants returned to their home country. In some years there was one departure for every two arrivals. (However, as stated above this does not mean the person was leaving permanently or that he had not made other trips.) During the depression of the 1930s, there were actually more people leaving the US than entering.

Przecha also lists a few historical reasons that might contribute to the returning of immigrants back to their native land:

Birds of Passage. Some returned in what they considered triumph whereas others went home in defeat. Some never intended to stay in America permanently. We may think that "guest workers" who come for temporary work are recent phenomena but they are not.

Retirement. Even those who stayed in America many years may have retired to the homeland. With small savings they could live well and be looked upon with respect by the villagers since they had lived in America.

The Marriage Market. Since the dowry was very much alive in many parts of Europe and emigration had reduced the number of eligible males, many women came to the United States to earn some money to improve their position in the marriage market.

Nostalgia. For some, the American dream just didn't work out. They got discouraged and went back. However, many of these people found that their memories of home had been viewed through rose-coloured glasses and they were equally unhappy with their old problems. They had become more American than they realized and found there was a lot of good to be said of their new country. Some of these people eventually immigrated to America a second time.

Economic Depression and Family Obligation. A countrywide economic depression also caused many to return. Problems with the family left behind was also another reason for returning, but this would probably only be temporary.

Diversity or Chaos. Some found America too diverse. They liked the familiar rules and setting where people spoke the same language, attended the same church and conformed to the same standards. They also hated seeing their children growing up as foreigners to them. However, trying to return these children to the old customs was usually a losing battle. As with those whose return was driven by nostalgia, these people also often found there was much to admire about the new world with its energy and freedom.

Unwilling Participants. These were people, who were both forcibly and physically deported from their countries or, due to any reason, had to leave their country. These people were most likely to return.

No Pioneering Spirit. Some immigrants just did not have the personality required to uproot their lives and settle in an entirely new, and sometimes hostile, environment. It wouldn't have mattered where they went. They were simply unhappy outside of their familiar setting.

From these many reasons, three of them stand out the most. They are "Nostalgia", "Diversity and Chaos", and "Unwilling Participants". The reason why they stand out is because, in today's global immigration crisis, these three are the top reasons why immigrants choose or at least want, to return to their native lands. As we shall see, in our chosen texts, these reasons figure prominently, and eventually, we shall find that while the reasons for immigration keep changing from generation to generation, the reasons for heading home stay more or less the same.

Literature Review

The novels we are researching are *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi. It is easy to grasp the commonalities between the two novels. The theme of leaving one's country after a loss, staying for a number of years in a different country, adopting a new cultural identity and then, importantly, returning to the country of origin in search for meaning, in various senses, dictate much of the story in these two novels. Why this is important to notice is because it encapsulates much of the modern Diasporic phenomenon in the age of Globalization. For the longest time, the focus of Diasporic literature studies has been on the formation and destruction of different identities. However, in today's age, in the age of transnationalism and globalization, the event of returning home, and the reasons for returning home, have become more common and yet much of it has largely been ignored. Therefore, we shall analyze further, through the novels, the experience of 'homecoming'.

Theory and Analysis

In *The Kite Runner*, we see that Amir is forced to leave Afghanistan with his father in the event of war that is slowly consuming his country. Amir's sense of loss is quite physical, in the sense that he and his father have to abandon their home and wealth, making them really poor by the time they reach the US. However, Amir's reasons to return home are more metaphysical. It is his desire for redemption for betraying his friend, which drives him home. Finding and saving Sohrab is a way for Amir to cleanse himself and his departed father of sins that have always stayed with him. As seen before, nostalgia was one of the reasons why immigrants choose to return home. While nostalgia is signified by a longing for the "good, old days", "regret" is another emotion, on the other side of the spectrum, which can also serve as a driving force. Regret is

signified by a desire to rectify the past, and much like nostalgia, it is very potent. What Amir feels upon seeing Hassan get raped, what he feels upon accusing Hassan of theft, what he feels on leaving for the US, and what he feels hearing the tragedy of Hassan and Sohrab, is regret and that is what makes him want to return to his country of origin.

We can compare and contrast Amir's experience with Marjane's experience in *Persepolis*. When Marjane leaves Iran to move to Vienna, her reason is more metaphysical. She feels her identity cannot be contained in the strict social norms of Iran. Her strong ideas of what freedom should mean for an individual are constrained by the society of Iran. In hopes of a place where she can exercise her freedom, she is forced to leave for Vienna. Vienna is quite opposite to Iran and is quite a progressive place where someone like Marjane can feel at home. However, while Vienna does give her liberty, it is not what she thought it would be. Even though the society there is modern compared to Iranian standards, it lacks, for Marjane, a sense of identity and meaning. All the relationships she forms in Vienna seem empty, and all her actions, of taking drugs and desiring physical intimacy, seem hollow. Despite what some people may believe, The West does not have all the answers and modernity may not hold the key to everyone's salvation. And finally, her reasons for returning home are in a sense more physical. She needs a place to stay, and not just that, but the comfort of a home that can be provided by family and friends.

Therefore we see how various physical and metaphysical factors play a role in driving an individual back to their own country. In the broadest terms, the metaphysical factors can be classified under "a need for meaning/identity", or "a lack of meaning/identity". It is my opinion that all metaphysical drives/motivation for returning to the country of origin can be determined under these terms. As seen in *The Kite Runner*, the driving force for action was regret and redemption, a need for rectifying the past, which creates a desire for meaning. In *Persepolis*, the supposedly modern Vienna does not offer Marjane the liberation she seeks, which, for her, creates a lack of meaning, which is what drives her to return.

This brings us to one of the biggest philosophical question, "What constitutes identity?" Identity, and what it means, has long been debated and it always keeps changing through the ages. Therefore, we will briefly examine what identity means for the protagonists of our novels, in the modern era. Keeping in mind the phenomenon of homecoming, identity in *The Kite Runner* and *Persepolis* can be divided into two: The identity held by the protagonist before he/she left the country of origin, and the identity created upon revisiting the country of origin.

Fredric Jameson (1986) argues for the trope of the "national allegory" in "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," asserting that "the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society." (p. 69) Third world individual identity in literature in the modern age, therefore, according to Jameson, is always an allegory for the larger cultural and social stimulus happening in the individual's country. This can be observed in *The Kite Runner* when Amir and his father betray their best friends, which can be seen as the Taliban, who fought for Afghanistan against the Russians, betray their own people by taking over the country for themselves.

Similarly, in *Persepolis*, Marjane's inner turmoil is reflected by the turmoil Iran is going through. Since both texts deal with the political consequences of revolutions and participate in the building of a new nation, critics such as Jameson contend that these works can only be read politically. Regardless of whether such a notion is helpful or limiting when reading modern literature, his notion of "national allegory" helps in explaining a national identity. This is also the identity held by the protagonists before they leave the country of origin.

Tanja Stampfl (2014) in *Imagined Identities: Identity Formation in the Age of Globalization* speaks about *The Kite Runner*:

Upon returning to Kabul, Amir realizes that his Afghan identity cannot be taken for granted. He relates his estrangement from the country while being driven from Peshawar to Kabul. "I feel like a tourist in my own country, I said," he informs the reader. The driver, a local man named Farid, can only answer with sarcasm, "You still think of this place as your country?" Farid sees Amir as a foreign visitor now, and even denies that Amir ever was a true Afghan... In redeeming himself and his father by taking care of Sohrab, Amir thus not only wants to right personal wrongs but also to prove that he *belongs*. In other words, in order to prove that he is truly Afghan, he needs to share in the country's history. Amir becomes Afghan by assuming his (former) privileged status and by coming to terms with two opposing faces of Afghanistan: Hassan and Assef. (p.41)

While the identity held by the protagonist before he/she left the country of origin, was about confirmation, the identity created upon revisiting the country of origin is about reconfirmation. When Amir returns to Afghanistan, he seeks neither to destroy his American identity nor to establish his old Afghan identity which was centred around wealth and cowardice. Instead, he chooses to take responsibility as an Afghan towards his war-torn country. He seeks to help rebuild in whatever way he can, his country, and thus also help himself rebuild his Afghan identity. Likewise, in *Persepolis*, Marjane returns to Iran after finding that her ideals about the modern society are not the keys to her personal freedom. However, she does not proceed with the lifestyle she had in Vienna and neither with the one she had before she left Iran. But neither does she abandon them. She manages to create a new identity for herself that was based more on having a personal responsibility towards her own self and others.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we see how deeply complex both the novels are while dealing with issues about Diaspora and Identity in the modern age. As we see, the issue of changing identities is not limited only to the before/after leaving one's country, but there exists a new identity created upon returning to the space of beginning, and that identity exists beyond the before/after. This identity is built neither by discarding the before/after identities, but rather on top of them, as something beyond them. With this research, I hope to draw attention to the phenomenon of homecoming, as I believe that it has not received enough attention from an academic point of view. As mentioned before, it is important to treat Diasporic literature as something more than simply stories, for they offer new perspectives into understanding human behaviour itself.

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