

Exchange and Forgiveness in 'The Unconquered' and *The Kite Runner*

ZAHIDA SHARMIN

Apparently Somerset Maugham's 'The Unconquered' and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* have little in common. 'The Unconquered', set against the backdrop of the Second World War, is Annette Périer's grim tragedy: she has been raped by a German soldier who comes back to her life, asks her forgiveness, and even wants to marry her when he learns that she is carrying his child. Maugham's uncompromising French heroine refuses to forgive her perpetrator and punishes him by killing her son the day he is born. *The Kite Runner*, on the other hand, is Amir's tale of family, friendship, redemption and love, unfolded against Afghanistan's destructive history, from the fall of the monarchy to the terrifying oppression of the Taliban regime. Amir narrates the story of his friendship with Hasan, son of an ethnic Hazara servant named Ali in Baba's household and reminisces over how the two motherless boys form a bond of love and loyalty in their childhood. Then, during a kite-flying tournament that should have been the triumph of the protagonist's young life, Hasan is brutalized by some neighborhood teenaged bullies. Amir's failure to defend his friend will haunt him for the rest of his life. The remainder of the novel depicts Amir's constant battle to overcome his deep-rooted sense of guilt and the subsequent atonement for his childhood cruelty and cowardice through his rescue of Sohrab, the deceased Hasan's son from a war-torn Afghanistan. If analysed in the light of Claude Lévi-Strauss's observation of gift-exchange in *Tristes Tropiques* and Jacques Derrida's theory of forgiveness in *On Cosmopolitanism and*

Forgiveness, however, “The Unconquered” and *The Kite Runner* reveal some striking similarities. Both Maugham and Hosseini examine the motives behind mutual understanding and reconciliation between characters and portray how the economy of exchange defines human relationship not only among “savage” tribes, but also in “civilized” nations. In addition, the sociopolitical climate of these tales acquaints the reader with notions of reparation, amendment and reproach, and gives the concept of forgiveness a complex dimension at the interpersonal level.

In ‘The Unconquered’, the Périers are quite antagonistic towards Hans at the beginning, but once he starts bringing them the much needed groceries, newspapers and drinks, Annette’s parents gradually come to terms with the misfortunes that have befallen them. The war condition makes them accept everything Hans brings with gratitude. Considered from Derrida’s perspective, Hans’s offerings cannot be termed as ‘gift’ here because he was buying a ‘little human friendship’ from the Périers in exchange for those mundane necessities (315). In his text, *Given Time*, Derrida suggests that the notion of the gift contains an implicit demand that the genuine gift must reside outside of the oppositional demands of giving and taking, and beyond any mere self-interest or calculative reasoning, it should be beyond the economy of exchange (30). Hence, the exchange taking place between Hans and the Périers is more like the one that Levi-Strauss observes between the Nambikwara groups in the mid-’30s than the one Derrida devises in *Given Time*. In both instances i.e. the tribal groups and the Périers, the parties are initially antagonistic towards each other but soon ‘commercial exchanges’ re-define their relationship and ‘strife is replaced by barter’ (Levi-Strauss 302-303). In Maugham’s story, this bartering goes from one level to another when the stakes increase

for the concerned characters. Gradually the elderly Périers swallow their pride in their desire for a son-in-law who will give their yet-to-be-born-grandchild legitimacy and take over the supervision of their farm. Likewise, Hans is ready to settle down in France for the sake of his unborn child. However, in this exchange, the craving or desire that one feels for the other's produce is more noteworthy than the actual produces that are being exchanged. When Levi-Strauss says that 'the crafts and produce of each group are highly prized by the others', 'highly prized' becomes the key phrase in analyzing the relationship between the two parties in any sort of exchange (302). The whole business of reciprocity is based on the need and emotion of the concerned characters. Nevertheless, Maugham's characters differ from the tribal people Levi-Strauss talks about in an important way: the bartering between the Périers and Hans includes evaluation, argument and bargaining while the Nambikwara groups rely solely on the 'generosity' of the other side (Levi-Strauss 303). One of the first things that a war teaches people is how to compromise and bargain for the things they desire; actually during the Second World War, none could afford to be generous; consequently, there is no place for generosity in the world of Périers and Hans.

As the socio-political scenario dominates any exchange taking place between two parties, there are some obvious differences between the tribal people Levi-Strauss observed and the characters Maugham portrayed. For example, in the case of the Nambikwara tribe, the bartering begins after the conflict as part of a normalizing process. But in Maugham's story, everything happens too fast; the Périers and Hans rush through the process of forget-forgive-accept; hence, the bartering was too abortive to achieve true reconciliation. The victim-protagonist, moreover, refuses to accept the presents

Hans brings her, for on the superficial level, Annette has no use or desire for his offerings, and more importantly, she experiences a negative and finally vindictive attitude towards her wrongdoer. As a result, no bartering takes place between Annette and Hans.

If this process of exchange is viewed from Derrida's perspective, the Périers act as 'a third party' when they try to persuade their daughter to accept her situation; this intervention alone omits the question of pure forgiveness and 'aims at producing a reconciliation favorable to a normalisation', as Derrida suggests in his essay (OCF 31). In modern international politics, the motive behind such reconciliation is 'political therapy', required to establish peace in the long run (OCF 45). But even at the interpersonal level, such therapy can achieve a certain peace of mind. However, Annette has lost interest in resuming a normal life; she views any sort of 'negotiations' or 'calculated transactions' with contempt and considers them too demeaning (OCF 39).

When Annette's father tells her that he has 'forgotten' the incident, Annette mocks his 'truly Christian' spirit (328). Forgiveness remains an ambivalent and contradictory issue in Christianity. Karen D. Hoffman concludes that the same tradition that leads us to believe that apology and repentance render forgiveness morally appropriate also leads us to believe that forgiveness should be granted, even in the absence of these conditions (16). Jesus' famous words from the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" imply unconditional forgiveness only in the context of the sinner's ignorance. On the contrary, the first words attributed to Jesus in the oldest Gospel are, "The time has arrived; the kingdom of God is upon you." The next sentence is, "Repent, and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:14). While interpreting the principles of Christian forgiveness, Harvard professor Harvey Cox points out in his essay

"Best of Intentions: the ethics of forgiveness" that repentance involves three elements: genuine regret for one's misdeeds, sorrow and remorse for the injury they have caused others, and a deeply felt desire to avoid repeating the offense. All three of these requirements are ruled out in Derrida's definition of forgiveness; he argues that the perpetrator's repentance and remorse transform him and the reformed character is not the guilty one who committed the crime. Derrida also implies the obliteration of the transgression from memory to make forgiveness pure. Annette, like the Algerian-French philosopher, questions the kind of forgiveness that forces her father to forget the injury Hans caused them; she is well aware that it is not simply from goodwill that Périet 'reduces forgiveness to amnesty or to amnesia' (Derrida OCF 45).

Though Hans asks forgiveness, he does not exactly repent what he has done; the reason he goes back to see Annette and takes her a pair of silk stockings is 'to show there was no ill-feeling', as if he is the one who has been wronged (311). He is too arrogant to believe that he has done her 'much harm' (312). Considered from this standpoint, Hans remains guilty to the end and according to Derrida's philosophy, he becomes the unforgivable, an ideal subject for 'pure forgiveness' (OCF 49). Annette does not 'prize' any of the things that Hans offers her, neither does she believe in 'conditional forgiveness' (Derrida OCF 34). Consequently, she does not compromise with the circumstances and resorts to the other extreme: punishment.

Annette's inability to either forget or forgive gives her the strength to kill her own baby. Unfortunately this act of revenge does not console her at all; instead it probably breaks her spirit for good. If she were able to forgive Hans, that would have been 'a gracious gift', 'pure and unconditional' and then she could have performed

'the impossible' (Derrida OCF 44-45). Derrida calls this sort of impossibility 'a madness', something beyond the limit of human possibility. Ironically, Maugham's protagonist has already lost her sanity and the crime has destroyed her moral agency. She finds herself incapable of overcoming her resentment towards her violator because she has been deprived of certain aspects of her humanity. She has been made into something which she would never choose to be: a filicide. It is not the crime of rape but this dehumanization that makes Hans a "compelling candidate for the unforgivable" and gives Annette the demonic power to bring about a different sort of impossibility (Hoffman 20). Thus Annette is transformed by 'absolute victimization'; Hans, on the other hand, remains the same; there is no perceptible change in him (OCF 59).

Like Maugham, Hosseini also develops his characters through an economy of exchange in *The Kite Runner*. But here the reciprocity of gift-exchange is often not revealed till much later in the novel. As a result, the bartering taking place is more subtle and sometimes imperceptible. Instances like Baba getting a surgeon to fix Hasan's harelip as a birthday gift turn out to be atonement for his past sin. In the light of Baba's transgression against Ali and Hasan, the magnanimity of such gestures is only a façade. It is also obvious that Amir and Baba maintain a hierarchy in their relationship to Hasan and Ali who have always been, on the surface, the gift-takers. They feel indebted to Baba till Amir's betrayal of them. Amir's superiority complex is going to be one of the main factors in the subsequent tragedy in the novel. However, Amir gains an insight into this exchange at the age of twelve and realizes that '[n]othing was free in this world' (68). He knows he has to win the kite flying tournament to earn Baba's affection; the latter, on the other hand, will gain the glory and satisfaction of fathering the champion at the tournament.

Amir 'prizes' his father's admiration so much that he sacrifices Hasan 'to win Baba' (68). It would be unfair to blame them because the civilized world stands on such give-and-take policy. One way of understanding such exchange could be to view it through the prism of Levi-Strauss' structural anthropology. He has pointed out in *Tristes Tropiques* that the 'savages', at least, do not exchange goods at the expense of their fellow beings. Their craving for the opposition's possessions does not blind them to the extent where they would give up their integrity. In contrast to the affluent Baba and Amir, the Nambikwara people are less selfish and more generous.

Another significant instance of exchange occurs in the novel when the narrator receives hospitality at a poor Afghan's home in his rescue mission of Sohrab. On his way to Kabul, Amir stays overnight at Wahid's place. He generously parts with his long-cherished digital wrist watch and gives it as a gift to the host's sons, believing they would love to possess it. Later he discovers that he has been served the boys' food and the children would have appreciated a frugal meal more than the hi-tech wristwatch. Despite Amir and his host's best of intentions, their acts of generosity fail to overcome a misunderstanding in a manner reminiscent of the tribal people Levi-Strauss observes in the Latin American jungle. The 'savages' do not quibble over goods exchanged and go away with whatever their opposition gives them. But the dissatisfaction created in the process leads to a misunderstanding and resentment. Fortunately for Amir, he realizes his mistake in time and tries to make amends by leaving a wad of dollars under his host's mattress; contrarily, the absence of dialogues makes it impossible for the Nambikwara tribes to heal the unintended wound they inflict on each other.

The crime of rape is at the core of *The Kite Runner* as it is in 'The Unconquered', but unlike the short story, there is more than one crime, guilt and victim in Amir's narrative. In defining the categories of guilt in his book *The Question of German Guilt*, Karl Jaspers states: "There exists a solidarity among men as human beings that makes each co-responsible for every wrong and every injustice in the world, especially for crimes committed in his presence or with his knowledge. If I fail to do whatever I can to prevent them, I too am guilty." So watching a wrong being done is equivalent to committing, endorsing, and participating in wrongdoing ourselves; thereby the witness to the rape, in addition to the rapist, becomes the perpetrator to some extent. Amir's status is unique in the sense that he performs a dual role: he is the accuser and the accused. He commits a crime against Hasan by remaining silent and passive at the time of the rape. More importantly, he betrays the goodness in his own soul when he betrays Hasan. That way, on a spiritual level, Amir is the perpetrator as well as the victim. It is not enough for Amir that Hasan forgive him; he needs to be forgiven by himself. He remains unforgivable in his own eyes until he rescues Sohrab, Hasan's son. Besides, Rahim Khan, his family friend, steps in as the 'third party', and urges him 'to be good again'. Finally, when he is able to forgive himself, he is no longer the Amir who committed the crime in his adolescence; he is forgiving a more matured Amir who has repented and atoned for his guilt; this Amir is a transformed person, not the guilty one. Thus, according to the Derridean model of forgiveness, the transformation of the perpetrator and the conditions attached to forgiveness make it a part of a calculated transaction, not absolute forgiveness.

When it comes to Amir's crime against Hasan, it should be noted that the guilty does not seek the victim's forgiveness; neither does

he take any initiative to redeem himself. Hasan exercises pure forgiveness without any condition and gains 'a sense of self-assuredness, of ease' in his adulthood out of this impossibility (189). Simultaneously, it should be remembered that Hasan never knew the truth of his birth; throughout the novel he remains unaware that Amir is actually his half-brother. His forgiveness arises out of ignorance and a deliberate erasure of the crime from his memory. If Hasan does not consider Amir or Baba's betrayal as 'unforgivable evil', the question of forgiveness will not rise at all. In that case, the aporia of pure forgiveness is in question again at an interpersonal level.

In pointing out the limitations of Derridean forgiveness in his essay titled "Derrida and the Impossibility of Forgiveness", Ernesto Verdeja draws an intriguing comparison between Derrida's theory of gift-giving and forgiveness:

Forgiveness differs from gift-giving in one important sense: it has a unique structural limitation not found in gift-giving. . . . The perpetrator and the victim have, after all, entered into a relationship with already fixed identities: one through his actions, the other as the victim of those actions. There is no place for an infinite economy of exchange to take place precisely because the perpetrator cannot forgive the victim. It is a unidirectional relationship (29-30).

Verdeja claims that the lack of conditionality in Derridean model of forgiveness means there is no theoretical protection against the development of resentment. This argument, in fact, justifies Amir's act of second betrayal i.e. his ploy of theft against Hasan. In the aftermath of the crime scene, we see that Hasan is unaware of Amir's betrayal and the former treats him as before, with love and

kindness. But Amir is no longer able to return such feelings and this creates a sense of resentment, frustration and impotence in him; his higher status is now lost forever. Previously Amir was the giver and Hasan the receiver; after Amir's betrayal, it is Hasan who occupies a morally higher position. On top of that, Hasan grants Amir pure forgiveness, 'a gracious gift, without exchange and without condition' (Derrida OCF 44). Amir's position now does not allow him to reciprocate such a magnificent gift. Consequently, a "status differentiation" undermines their relationship and annuls the transcending quality of Derridean forgiveness (Verdeja 29).

Amir's allusion to the prophet Ibrahim's sacrifice of his own son to justify his passivity during the scene of crime makes the issue of forgiveness more complicated. In her analysis of gift-exchange and forgiveness, Maria Margaroni refers to another of Derrida's texts, *The Gift of Death* where God is termed as the Absolute Other and Abraham's community as All Others. She sums up that Abraham is responsible towards the Absolute Other that has ordered the sacrifice, only if he appears irresponsible in the eyes of his family and community. Viewed from that perspective, Amir is caught up between two singularities, Hasan and Baba (the Absolute Other). As Derrida argues, 'the absolutes of duty and of responsibility presume that one denounce, refute, and transcend, at the same time, all duty, all responsibility, and every human law', Amir carries out his duty towards his father and is not answerable to anybody i.e. Hasan (GD 66). In the discussion of Abraham's sacrifice, the motive behind Abraham's action and the Absolute Other's order has been much pondered, but the one who is being sacrificed is somehow always ignored. Yet the sacrificed one proves his loyalty to Abraham as well; hence, the 'look of acceptance' in Hasan's eyes is imprinted in Amir's memory (67). Both Amir and Hasan are aware that the

sacrifice is 'for a higher purpose' (67). However, it should be noted that Amir's sacrifice is not an individual offence against another. The ethnic divisions and tensions which characterize the Muslim world are at the root of his sacrifice. Abraham sacrifices his beloved son; Amir, on the other hand, sacrifices his servant, a Hazara. In his subconscious mind, he shares Assef's racist views: "Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns" (35); no matter how much Baba tries to treat Hasan as he treats his legal son, Hasan's Mongol look and Shiite faith drives a wedge between Amir and Hasan. Professor Kurth's summary of the situation in "Ignoring History: U.S. Democratization in the Muslim World" is apt:

In appearance and by definition, a common faith in Islam unites Muslim countries; the ideal of Islam is that the Muslim world forms one great Islamic community or nation (the *umma*). In reality, however, this appearance of Islamic unity lies atop a myriad of ethnic or tribal divisions . . . one might interpret the Islamic world's intense proclamation of unity as rhetorical compensation for persistent conflict among a multitude of ethnic communities or tribes (319).

Amir and Assef's crime is not only against Hasan, but against a minority, an ethnic community. Will this community ever forgive the Pashtuns, or the Taliban regime, particularly after the Hazara massacre at Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998? Hosseini does not explore this aspect of communal peace in his novel; however, Derrida would say no: there is the possibility of amnesty or reconciliation between the Shiite-Sunni communities to ease the strained socio-political atmosphere in Afghanistan but it will be a 'finalised' forgiveness (OCF 50). Therefore, pure forgiveness might be possible at the

interpersonal level but it remains an impossibility in geo-political sphere.

It can be concluded from the comparison of “The Unconquered” and *The Kite Runner* that exchange and forgiveness are still unresolved, multi-dimensional factors in human relations. That is why Maugham and Hosseini, writing almost half a century and world apart, unconsciously employed the same concepts formulated in structural anthropology and deconstructivist criticism in the development of their fictional works and characters. While the anthropologist, observing the behaviour of the native tribes in Latin America, paves the way to exploration of the idea of reciprocity in human relationship for authors like Maugham and Hosseini, Derrida, the philosopher, focuses on the aporia of forgiveness in reference to the Holocaust and the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa. However, their ideas can be interpreted, not only at international but at interpersonal level, as seen in “The Unconquerable” and *The Kite Runner*. In fact, Levi-Strauss and Derrida’s respective ideas of exchange and forgiveness possess a universal, timeless quality in them and are certainly multi-disciplinary; hence, they can be applied to a varied number of literary works and socio-political situations. Thus these two texts are examples of the kind of springboard where these critics’ theories can be examined and analysed.

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