

RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE VOID OF THE HOMELESS GENERATION

Prabhjot Kaur

M.A English

NET Qualified

University of Delhi, India

Abstract

This paper primarily attempts to recontextualize the downtrodden condition of Afghani refugees in Pakistan, observed in Nemat Sadat's 'The Carpet Weaver'. Firstly, the paper analyzes the post-colonial conflicts of Afghanistan, Pakistan and America. It argues about the chaos of the 1970's political upheaval in Afghanistan. The rise of the Mujahideen and a smaller Maoist group against the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan as well as the soviet army resulting into millions of afghans fleeing to other nations like, United States, Pakistan and Iran to seek shelter and the grave destruction caused which is now known as the Soviet collapse. Secondly, the plight of Afghani families for their lands being confiscated, for jeopardizing their privacy and Kanishka's Baba being executed for participating in the insurgency to exterminate president Daoud. Thirdly, the details represented by Nemat Sadat about horrendous living condition of the refugee camps in Pakistan, involving human trafficking and exploitation on many different levels. The protagonist, Kanishka and his family with all the other refugees from being ill-treated, misused, oppressed,

enslaved and manipulated in torturous ways to Kanishka being molested for almost two years by an insatiable, salacious tyrant named Tor Gul. Finally, it discusses how the other developing nations failed to provide not only a shelter but also basic human amenities and human rights. How exploitation, manipulation, oppression and enslavement becomes a reality of refugee camps. It discusses about the people who escaped and migrated to somewhat better places but what remains is the incessant search for identity, sense of loss and nostalgia.

Keywords: refugee, migration, post-colonial, identity, diaspora, homosexuality.

Nemat Sadat, the author of 'The Carpet Weaver', is "one of the first Afghans to have openly come out as gay and to campaign for gender freedom and sexual liberty". He is an assistant professor of political science at the American University of Afghanistan, "during his employment at

RESEARCH ARTICLE

the university, he used social media to mobilize an underground movement to openly campaign for LGBTQIA+ rights in Afghanistan". He currently lives in New York city.

'The Carpet Weaver is a coming-of-age story of a Muslim boy Kanishka who falls in love with his best friend and struggles to fit in the conventional norms of the society. The novel starts at Kanishka's 16th birthday party, where we meet his best friends Faiz and Maihan. Kanishka explores his sexuality and falls in love with Maihan. His homosexual love for Maihan which is prohibited in Islam later becomes the root of most of his physical and psychological problems.

His Baba(father), a Maoist comrade try to build a close relationship with him and takes him to his political meeting which is still hidden from his Maadar(mother).in school Kanishka and Maihan are threatened regularly for being gay and one day they are "nearly raped" by their classmates. Amidst his personal problems there arises a political upheaval in which his father is executed for being a part of the insurgency to exterminate President Daoud.

In the moment of haste Kanishka and his family plan to leave for America in search of a secure life but unfortunately, they end up in Haftballa "a prison camp in the Baluchistan Mountains along Pakistan's tribal frontier" where they work an

insatiable ruthless tyrant Tor Gul. Along with the other refugees, now Kanishka, his Maadar and his sister Benafsha work for immeasurably long hours without sufficient food, water and other living amenities. But even in these grave circumstances Kanishka revives his long-lost dream of becoming a carpet weaver. His only strength to survive is a photograph of him kissing Maihan. Luckily, he meets one of his Baba's fellow comrade who is now working as a guard in Haftballa and then they make a plan to escape the prison camp. After many menacing events they finally reach America at ZakiJaan's (Faiz's Father) house. Kanishka finally meets the love of his life Maihan and is shattered to find out that he is leading a dual life, even after being in the liberated land of America Maihan is hiding his homosexuality and is engaged to his cousin Lamba. Faiz, who now has become an erotic dancer confesses that he was the one who got jealous of Kanishka and Maihan's close friendship and disclosed it to the other classmates which explains all the previous molestation and threat notes addressed to Kanishka and Maihan. Kanishka being sick and tired of the pretense everybody is carrying around leaves for New-York to supportLGBTQIA+ rights and to start a new life.

The story begins in August 1997 with the discussion of Maoism being outlawed in Afghanistan in 1969. Kanishka's Baba being a Maoist comrade

RESEARCH ARTICLE

contribute in blossoming the RGPA or Revolution Group of the peoples of Afghanistan. Sadat calls Baba's involvement in the Maoist party "part sentimental, part ideological". Baba also tries to impose his political beliefs on Kanishka by taking him to "communal bath or private chamber" (procommunist meeting place) for discussing the future Maoist vision. Sadat makes sure for the reader to sense the teenage boy Kanishka's disinterestedness in these political battles and is actually against putting any stamp on himself belonging to a particular political party. Sadat represents the orthodox and conservative religious rules that later on in the novel create havoc. The religious and secular tension of the nation is shown in the attacks by true blue conformists in the shameful act of abducting university students for merely questioning the existence of God which later results into outlawing of the Muslin Youth Organization. There are also severely disturbing instances of acid attacks on women for wearing mini-skirts, rape threats given to Kanishka and Maihan for their homosexual love.

Sadat depicts the instability and the ruthless attitude of the government officials in 1970's Soviet-Afghan War by showing the dissatisfaction in the hearts of almost all the character that are moving in the novel. Everybody except Baba and Maadar dreams about going to America which is seen as a land of liberation especially to a person

belonging to the LGBTQIA community. Baba tells Kanishka "empires can divide and conquer the universe, but they can't subdue the Afghans or Chinese. It's a simple lesson that the obtuse white race is reluctant to accept", here the author is trying to show Baba's inner complexes and prejudices, he is also commenting on the elitism that white people carry but only in an undertone. The assassination of Mir Akbar Khyber the chief editor of Parcham Magazine changes the mood, pace and tone of the novel completely. The assassination ignites the fire of revolt which results the Maoist Comrades to join forces with Parchamiya and Khalqiya. For Baba being even a little inclined towards America or American life style and beliefs was being a traitor to once own country. Baba being a Maoist and Maihan the love of his life being a CIA spy proves to be the biggest struggle in the initial parts of the novel. Kanishka's strife to choose a side is shows his dilemma, he says, "Maihan could jeopardize my loyalty to family, nation and Allah Subanallah" which show his inner conflict between being an obedient son and being a passionate lover.

Baba and other communists saw Anti- American, anti-Iranian slogans while marching through the U.S embassy, baba was now assured that the CIA, Iran's SAVak and the afghan government was responsible for the murder of Mir akbar. But the real despair and panic came later when the tanks entered Arg compound everybody

RESEARCH ARTICLE

was asked to hide inside their houses, children in schools panicked and hid under the table. Under these grave circumstances everybody gathered in ZakiJaan's house and that conversation disclosed everybody's political leanings. ZakiJaan being a "capitalist and Royalist" preferred moving to America, Baba being a "communist and radical at heart" was stern on living in Afghanistan even in lethal circumstances. And Rahim Jaan, Maihan father was already a CIA spy.

One year after the Saur revolution, Baba revolted against putting the idol of Khalqi leader Nur MuhommadTaraki on his store's window calling him a "tyrant". Baba Gets arrested for participating and even helping in planning the "insurrection against the government of Afghanistan at the citadel of Bala Hisar in Kabul" Baba says ". Baba gets executed and Kanishka and his family shatters in that every moment. Sadat comments that "they preach about equality and justice, yet they have killed indiscriminately while still pretending to be a democracy".

In a haste of moment Kanishka, his Maadar and Benafsha had to leave for America but a fraud smuggler Toofan khan leave all the migrants in "a prison camp in the Baluchistan mountains along Pakistan's tribal frontier", where the real struggle of Kanishka'a life starts. The torments, persecution and maltreatment happening in

Haftballa was excruciating. They all worked diligently, the polluted air choked their throat, were provided with bare minimum food, they were not allowed to drink water in their working hours, they were overworked and sleep deprived. Their physiological condition was deteriorating day by day, their hair got frizzy, brittle and frayed, their skin bloodied with scab, it was "furred with grime every inch of body itched from bacteria and lice, but the scratching made it worse", Benafsha suffered from a severe case of acne, their bodies weak and mind numb. But ironically, that place replenished Kanishka's long lost childhood dream of becoming a carpet weaver, the prison camp labored people to make carpets Kanishka while recollecting his memory says "although the painful irony of pursuing my mad passion under the most horrendous situation imaginable was not lost on me". The only ray of hope left for Kanishka was Maihan's photograph, which he carried along with him, he stitched a little secret pocket inside his kurta to hide it and to always keep it close to himself.

Tor gul, the tyrant of the prison camp was the most threatening and dangerous person. He persecuted and killed people who were not being useful for him and he forcefully used to ask people to "Demonstrate their faith". If anyone was caught ill, or planning to flee he slaughtered them, then and there in front of the other refugees. In these constraining

RESEARCH ARTICLE

circumstances Kanishka has to control his nonconformist and rebellious attitude. Sadat has brilliantly depicted the frustration of a growing boy who feels helpless to see families being slaughtered, children training to become terrorists and the feeling of bitterness taking over all the other emotions.

After a year at Haftballa, after a year full of brutality, misery, barbarity and hardships Kanishka “would lick the dyed thread” to escape the misery and lets the sensation overpower him. Kanishka suffers from kidney stones and his sister Benafsha caught typhoid fever and Kanishka is unable to work anymore, the guards take him to Tor gul where he is actually taken to be punished or rather killed but Kanishka shows the American client his special poetically illustrated carpet which proves to be the most profitable deal for Tor Gul. One day Tor gul finds the picture of Maihan which was mistakenly fallen down while He was working. Kanishka fears that today he is going to get killed for being a “Kuni” but finds that Tor Gul himself is interested in him and later he molests Kanishka for the rest of time he spends in Haftballa.

Rustom, Baba’s fellow comrade is also stuck as a guard in the prison camp and he makes a plan with other three guards to escape this hell of a place. while discussing the harms and dangers, Rustom says that ISI is the largest spy organization and world’s biggest manipulator and their ruthlessness

outdoes the CIA and the KGB”. The fear pervades everybody’s heart Kanishka thinks “where will this madness lead-and when does it end?” but the hope for a better life overcomes his fear and he says “there’s got to be more to life than this”. A year passes since he had started to perform sexual favors for Tor Gul besides making full proof plan to escape the prison camp with Rustom. Their plan involves violence, betrayal and bloodshed, Kanishka recollecting his memory thinks “I didn’t want to be killer, but I Knew I had to save the lives of many more innocents”.

They finally reach America, the land of their dreams, the land of liberation. But a sense of loss, alienation and despair surrounds Kanishka. He sees that his best friend Faiz is living a fake life, his beloved Maihan is engaged to his cousin Lamba and has accepted to live a dual life to fit in the conventional and orthodox society. He even misses Tor Gul and feels miserable for betraying him. He says “I felt disgusted that I was yearning for a barbarian and my rapist and not my first love: Maihan”. An uncomfortable feeling that it’s been much more difficult for him to reach America than his friends make him estranged from his friends. Even after surviving in the prison camp, even after making it to America didn’t give him any satisfaction. Sadat tries to explain the dichotomy and Dilemma from which Kanishka is suffering in this frustration to go New York to find a new

RESEARCH ARTICLE

home and a free life. The devastating experience of the prison camp only imply about the refugee and migration system and laws in the entire world. The insecurity, alienation and helplessness of being homeless destroys a person from the inside.

Sadat also question the role of developing nations like Pakistan, America and Iran. He uncovers the pretense of every nation that seems to have open arms for refugees. Hannah Arendt in “We Refugee” states “in the first place, we do not like to be called ‘refugees’. We ourselves call each other ‘new comers’ or immigrants. Our newspaper is paper for ‘American of German Language’ and as far as I know, there is not and never was any club founder by Hitler-persecuted people whose name indicated that its members were refugees. A refugee person used to be a person driven to seen refugee because of some act committed not acts and most of us never dreamt of having any radical opinion. With us the meaning of the term ‘refugee’ has changed. Now ‘refugees’ are those of us who have been so unfortunate as to arrive in a new country without means and have to be helped by refugee communities.” Sadat criticizes the condition in which refugees are living even today, the reality of the refugee camps and the tyrannical persecution of

people dwelling in refugee camps. At the end of the novel, we the readers are left with an eerie feeling, so many questions arise about the state and condition of the cruelty of places like Haftballa.

Summing up, one may start thinking about the ways in which we can make this world a better place for people who do not have homes anywhere. The ways in which one can make refugees feel welcomed and feel at home. Torturing other human being only says things about us. Giving Refugees and immigrants equal rights, humanitarian rights and at least providing them with basin amenities. “The Carpet Weaver” question even notion of human barbarity, and gives the world a chance to think and make living conditions better.

References:

- Sadat, Nemat. “The Carpet Weaver” Penguin Viking, 2020
- Arendt, Hannah. “We Refugees.” *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile*, edited by Marc Robinson. Faber, 1994
- Rangnehar, Sharif D. “Nemat Sadat: Gay, Muslim, Afghan, immigrant”- *The Hindu*, retrieved 25 October 2020