

THE QUESTION OF CULTURE AND DISPLACEMENT: AN ANALYSIS OF QAIS AKBAR OMAR'S *A FORT OF NINE TOWERS*

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Abstract

This paper presents the lives of Nomadic ethnic groups of Afghanistan called Kuchis who forms a shadow like in the novel *A Fort of Nine Towers*. Their culture and practice, the hazards that they come across in their day to day life and the tribalness of the ethnic groups are likely to be focused in the paper. Moreover the paper tries to look into the displacement caused by the war and the views of the narrator Qais Akbar Omar. The novel has been presented to almost perfection. The impacts of the post-war in the lives of Nomads are discussed in the article.

Keywords:- Culture, Displacement, Kuchis.

Qais Akbar Omar's *A Fort of Nine Towers* is his depute war memoir of his own in which he chronicles the past events that had occurred to him and his family in the course of the internal and regional conflict in Afghanistan. He also presents the many things that had happened to his family and to him. Though written in the aftermath of the war, the novel speaks of the strains left in the hearts of every people who suffered the trauma of the war.

A memoir narrates the experiences of a person as a first hand narrative and war memoir is typically, with a supposed authenticity in its record of incidents and events. War memoir is one type in which the trauma of the war is shared with large public audience who are not aware and the reality of war is shared and to reveal the changes that war actually brought in to the innocent lives. These war memoirs also offer the glimpses of History, Culture, and Personal struggle. The novel *A Fort of Nine Towers*, though a War memoir quite interestingly embeds certain culture. The novel speaks of the Nomads of who call themselves as Kuchi, who take their cattle from one place to another pasture. This Nomadic Kuchis are the largest populations of Afghanistan and for centuries have been migrating semi-annually.

The Kuchis preserve their own culture and practice marrying their girls off into their own blood relatives in order to increase their communal strength and to avoid cultural loss. Moreover they do not feel any disparity and have the benefit of joint herding the cattle. There are many such ethnic groups even in India, who are identified by their own culture and way of living. Such tribal living was practiced by their ancestors ages back and has been passed down over generations to generation. It has been followed. The manner in which they speak, work, keep

themselves merry, have feast united cannot be said in a single statement. This of course needs elaboration.

Today in India, we cannot for sure say how many tribal communities are there exactly despite the fact that we have a tribal ministry to look over them. Surprisingly a lot of tribal communities have disappeared and only a few remain. These tribal's have their own indigenous language which cannot be understood by a average person rather fascinate themselves watching how they twist their tongue and facial expressions to deliver word.

The nomads of Afghan, especially the Kuchis spoke Pashto. Their culture does not insist upon education for boys and girls, for it is taken for granted that have enough practical knowledge and their lives themselves cater or supplement the formal education that anyone else might acquire thereby leading them to their right destiny of making the right decision in times of necessity. At crucial instances of physical sufferings for a lay man, it seems too impossible to watch his own blood bleeding; he runs here and there, takes bandage or any sort of first aid to stop the blood bleeding and in the mean while complicates his own same thing. But it is not so in the case of a nomad. The nomads keep cool, plucks some tender leaves and just squeeze it on the bleedings like a miracle, the bleeding stops. We cannot also say that these ethnic groups do really know about the plants, but they use for once to know their benefit and start using it.

Most likely education has only brought the change in culture and these Kuchis never stay in a place to give their children a lesson rather they make themselves busy in finding pasture for their cattle, travelling from place to place and seldom do they know how to write their names even. Qais points out the conversation with Omar Khan which shows how education was lacking to the children of Kuchi family.

He started making letters in the sand with his shepherd stick. After a few moments, I could read "Omar Khan." "Who is Omar Khan?" I asked. "It is my name," he said. Can you read and write?" "Of course I can," I said, Surprised by his question. "I know how to write my name only," Omar khan said. "Can you teach me how to read and write?" (200, *A Fort of Nine Towers*)

It is clearly understood that education is denied in the name of culture and similar to that we also find many ethnic groups in India that haven't even understood what formal education is all about. Some ethnic groups do not even have a written language as such. Lack of formal schooling and education arrests the progress of the tribal communities which actually if well-exposed to would enable them to lead a more refined life. Instead, the scenario described in the book portrays a casual rural life unmindful of indifferent to a cultured and class set-up.

The tents were surrounded by children, goats, sheep, and camels, along with some donkeys and horses. The children and the baby goats were running in and out between the legs of camels as if they were pillars carved from stone. (201, *A Fort of Nine Towers*)

Culture alone allows them to be with their closely related ones as mentioned above and nowhere in the above passage could we find the equipments related to education.

One thing worthy of appreciation is that they live together as kith and kin. Everyday seems to be a new day of feast. They lead a happy life and which in fact is satisfactory to them and even some time they adjust with the things that they have. An avaricious expectation is not in their agenda.

Kuchis are really fond of meat. Qais in his narration recalls of a proverb that Amir Khan said. I.e. "Even burnt meat is better than vegetables." They prepare food items like Kebab, or rice with lamb. They do not mind whether the vessel is cleansed or not. Qais remembers his

father's comment "The sand and pebbles are cooked well, but why there so much rice mixed in?" the men laughed and boasted, "Kuchis' stomach can digest even iron."

Kuchis live in camps and are always overwhelmed by the strong smell of animals, which haunt all over the place. They are adapted to the smell of the animals and they do not bother much about that. The behaviors of Kuchi seem to be abnormal to many others but it's their natural behavior that they have inherited especially when they speak. The manner in which they speak seems to be as though they were shouting at each other instead of speaking. The Kuchis spoke Pashto very loudly as if they were all deaf. They feel pleased to see others who speak in the same accent. The Kuchis have a different ability to use proverbs every time they speak.

They live in hundreds and they always make their tents near water resource area. As a tradition of the Islamic Kuchi, the young girls were not allowed to wander like boys do. And boys were not supposed to look at girls; but the colourful dresses of the girls in bright red, blue, and green provokes the boys to take a peep at them.

On a special reference to the Kuchi men, they work, eat, and enjoy themselves. They are tall and muscular, with dark eyes, thick eyebrows, and long hair. They dress themselves in a Khaki-colored Shalwar Kamiz. All of them wore turbans or hats. Some have long daggers hanging from their waists that looked like swords. The children wore ragged and dirty clothes. They look like as if they haven't washed it for more than months.

Two men play drums, the deep sounding dol, and other men formed a circle and danced the attan. Slowly at first, they raised one foot and spun around, then faster, and faster as the dol was beaten faster. They spend the entire nights sometimes singing and dancing. Women shared their duties with each other and they Cook food late night whenever they please. They live a care-free life, which sustains them and they are aware of that. They find easy ways to live and they have mastered the art of survival at any cost.

Their tents were made from black goat hair or of other animal skin that had been pounded into long, wide strips of felt and stretched across a wooden framework that could be taken down easily, folded, and carried on the backs of camels. A single tent could hold a big family and during the day they use it for shades and in the night to have a safe sleep from the cold winter and wind. The life of the Kuchis were measured by their herds of camels, sheep, and goats, and in the passage of seasons and the years as they moved their herds from one grazing place to another, from one end of Afghanistan to the other.

The nomadic life teaches courage as they have different problems in different area. Their life is filled with adventure and hardships to which they are accustomed. They walk for endless kilometers but they never go tired. Their ways of living may be simple but not poorly. We can also imagine of our own nomadic tribes (Narikuravaas, Indian age old ethnic groups who live in forest). A good similarity exists between them.

The Kuchis' have different techniques and they seem to be simple in trick. For example, catching fish they electrocute, they don't go search for net or a fishing hook to spend much time on it. They also use grenade or when sometime if it is not available they fill caustic soda in an empty bottle and throw them into the river. They explode as they touch the river like bomb. They have only simple tricks which we can't even think of.

The culture of the Kuchis quite intrigues and raises the questions - where have they all gone? Where do we find their culture now? Where are the herds, men and the grazing places? Have the grazing fields and herds and nomads vanished? Who displaced them? Yes the cultures of Nomads are in question.

The Post-war period in Afghanistan had a great impact on the nomads. Due to ceasefire, road blockage by different fractions, grazing fields turned into mines and these nomads especially the Kuchis got settled in one place and could not raise their anymore herds. The impact of war against the Soviet Union also led Kuchis to get down dramatically less. They could not go with their herds and family for semi-annual grazing. Either the women are taken away or some herds are taken away by the soldiers to feed their soldiers. The other reasons that endangered the tradition of the Kuchis are the continuous bombing of Soviet Union and the Air raids and the drought that set in. Moreover the unexploded bombs, landmines and many others have still not been removed. And this reduces the grazing area of the cattle to its least minimum.

The population of the Kuchis has fallen down to 40% compared to the period between 1960's to 1980's and today many of the Kuchis' live as refugees in some nearby countries or work as paid laborers. They are nostalgic as they want to go back for their normal life and they want to raise their herd as before. But it seemed to be impossible for them because the lands which had been used initially as their grazing land is turned into farm lands by the locals. Due to the war, the culture of many has been displaced and has led them to suffer. They fear for their families, for their herds and are terrified by the obstacles that they face. During the time of war, the Kuchis were also one of the groups of people who suffered.

The embassy of Afghanistan in Tokyo says that the drought from 1998 to 2002 also had drastically reduced the number of Kuchi nomads. The war has left their culture into vacuum leaving a great depletion in the lives of the Kuchi nomads.

Qais brought the account of the lives of Kuchis to the general public. Through his narrative in *A Fort of Nine Towers*, the glimpses of Kuchi nomads were brought into light. Their sufferings are recorded as a testimonial and he is acted as a historian by giving brief account of Kuchis Displacement. And by the way from the narrators point of view and looking at the general history of Afghanistan, the trauma of the people are still reverberating not only in theirs but ours too. Such wars only bring traumatizing wounds rather bring a mutual relation. To recapitulate, the word "displacement" has its own intensity and power not only to shake the culture of an ethnic group but also to bring much more disorder. To conclude, the novel *A Fort of Nine Towers* justifies the cultural loss to recon the internal war.

Reference

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