



## Memory between Nostalgia and Madness: the legacy of war in Yasmina Khadra's "the Swallows of Kabul"

ذاكرة بين الحنين والجنون : إرث الحرب في طيور السنونو في كابول

ليسمينة خضرة

### Mémoire entre nostalgie et folie: l'héritage de la guerre dans « Les hirondelles de Kaboul » de Yasmina Khadra

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#### ملخص

الهدف من هذا المقال هو إظهار كيف أصبحت الذاكرة والحنين إلى الماضي آليات مهمة يستخدمها أبطال رواية ياسمينه خضرة "سنونوات كابول" من أجل الهروب من بؤس ومصاعب الحاضر. غالبًا ما يكون الماضي الذي يتذكره غير قابل للوصول إليه أو يتميز بالحنين إلى عودة مستحيلة ولكنهم يتشبثون بهذه الذكريات حتى لا يفقدون عقولهم ويصابون بالجنون. وبالتالي ، فإن الهدف الرئيسي من هذا المقال هو تحليل نقدي للتأثير المميت لفترة حكم طالبان على السكان المدنيين في أفغانستان، وكيف تستخدم شخصيات الرواية الذاكرة "الانتقائية" لمحاولة تجاهل الأحداث التي سببت لهم الكثير من الأذى أو محوها من عقولهم ، في حين أن هذه الذكريات الحنينية يمكن أن توسع الفجوة بين ذكرياتهم الماضية وواقعهم الحالي وتثير الحزن والشعور بالخسارة التي تؤدي في بعض الأحيان إلى الجنون.

الكلماتالدةالحنين؛ الجنون؛ كابول؛ طالبان؛ ياسمينه خضرة.

#### Abstract

In this article, I intend to show how memory and nostalgia have become important mechanisms used by the protagonists in Yasmina Khadra's "The Swallows of Kabul" in order to escape the misery and hardships of the present. The characters feel a yearning for the past and its joys because their present life lacks happy memories. The time they remember is often unreachable or marked by the nostalgia of an impossible return. They cling to these memories so that they do not lose their minds and become mad. Thus, the main objective of this article is to critically analyze the deadly impact of the Taliban ruling period on the civilian population in Afghanistan and how the characters in the novel, in a desire to escape a present no longer bearable, turn to memories of a life that disappeared long ago. The article will also analyze the way these same characters use 'selective' memory to try to ignore or erase from their minds past events that caused them so much hurt. However, while these nostalgic memories can relieve, for a time, the characters, from their harsh present, the return to that ideal period of their

life can widen the gap between their past memories and their present reality and trigger sadness and a sense of loss that lead sometimes to madness.

**Keywords:** Nostalgia; Madness Kabul; Taliban; Yasmina Khadra.

### Résumé

L'objectif de cet article est de montrer la façon dont la mémoire et la nostalgie sont devenues des mécanismes importants utilisés par les protagonistes du roman de Yasmina Khadra "Les hirondelles de Kaboul" pour échapper à la misère et aux épreuves du présent. Les personnages ressentent une nostalgie pour le passé et ses joies car leur vie actuelle manque de souvenirs heureux. Ces souvenirs sont souvent inaccessible ou marqués par la nostalgie d'un retour impossible. Néanmoins, Ils s'accrochent à eux pour ne pas perdre la tête et devenir fous. Ainsi, l'objectif principal de cet article est d'analyser de manière critique l'impact meurtrier de l'accession des talibans au pouvoir et son impact sur la population civile en Afghanistan et comment les personnages du roman, dans un désir d'échapper à un présent qui n'est plus supportable, se tournent vers le passé avec ses souvenirs nostalgiques. L'article analysera la façon dont ces personnages utilisent une mémoire «sélective» pour essayer d'ignorer ou d'effacer de leur esprit les événements passés qui les ont tellement blessés. Cependant, alors que ces souvenirs nostalgiques peuvent soulager, pour un temps, les personnages, de leur dur présent, le retour à cette période idéale de leur vie peut élargir l'écart existant entre leurs passé et la réalité de leur présent et déclencher un sentiment de tristesse et de perte. qui mène parfois à la folie.

**Mots clés:** Nostalgie; folie; Kaboul;Talibans; Yasmina Khadra

### Introduction

Memory is generally defined as the fact of recalling people or events from the past without any filter or distinction between what brings joy and happiness and what brings anger and sadness. It does not focus only on pleasant events of bygone times. Nostalgia, on the other hand, is more selective and more appreciative. It is the bittersweet remembering of events or people from the past that are generally missed in the present. As an important aspect of the human condition, nostalgia has received attention from different disciplines since "the study of nostalgia does not belong to any specific discipline." (*The future of Nostalgia*, xvi)

The word Nostalgia has seen an evolution of its meaning from the late seventeenth century, when it was first used, to the present day. In 1688, Johannes Hofer, a Swiss physician, defined Nostalgia as a disorder of the imagination. He combined two words, Nostos, the act of returning to



one's native land, and *Algos*, the fact of suffering or grieving, to form the world 'Nostalgia' to mean the grief or suffering caused by one's living far from his native land and his desire to return to it. (Jackson, 1986)

The ones suffering from it "fantasized about home, leaving no psychological space for thoughts about the present world." (Jackson, 1986). There was a range of symptoms associated with nostalgia as a disease such as anxiety, sadness, and insomnia, loss of appetite, anorexia, melancholy, and weakness. Although the pathology was first limited to young people who lived in foreign lands and could not adjust to their new environment, the word extended later to include soldiers, seamen, and students. By the early nineteenth century, nostalgia was classified as a form of melancholia or depression, or even 'a mild type of insanity.' The word has widened today beyond its original denotation of 'homesickness' to "a yearning for an idealized version of the past, one to which the reality of the present moment can never match up" (*Music, Nostalgia and memory*, 30).

More than that, Wilson suggests that "Expressing and experiencing nostalgia require active reconstruction of the past—active selection of what to remember and how to remember it", (Hirsch, 25) contrary to the act of remembering or recollecting that are less selective. The nostalgic memories, however, although they seem to relieve, for a short period of time at least, the feeling of estrangement that individuals experience, they intensify dramatically the nostalgic people's feeling of alienation and despair as they find themselves struggling alone in their endeavor to escape the reality in which they live.

In this article, I intend to show how memory and nostalgia have become important mechanisms used by the protagonists in Yasmina Khadra's novel in order to revive emotions from the past and escape the misery and hardships of the present. In "*on longing: narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir*" (1985), Susan Stewart observes that, "The point of desire which the nostalgic seeks is in fact the absence—that is the very generating mechanism of desire" (22).

The characters feel a yearning for the past and its joys because their present life lacks happy memories. The time they remember is often unreachable or marked by the nostalgia of an impossible return. They cling to these memories so that they do not lose their minds and become mad. Thus, the main objective of this article is to critically analyze the deadly impact of the



Taliban ruling period on the civilian population in Afghanistan and how the characters in the novel, in a desire to escape a present no longer bearable, turn to memories of a life that disappeared long ago. The article will also analyze the way these same characters use 'selective' memory to try to ignore or erase from their minds past events that caused them so much hurt. However, while these nostalgic memories can relieve, for a time, the characters, from their harsh present, the return to that ideal period of their life can widen the gap between their past memories and their present reality and trigger sadness and a sense of loss that lead sometimes to madness.

### 1. Nostalgia for an older place

*For Kabul has a horror of memory. She has put her history to death in the public square, sacrificed the names of her streets in horrific bonfires, dynamited her monuments into smithereens, and canceled the oaths her founders signed in their enemies' blood. (The swallows, 105)*

Following the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban, the city underwent tremendous change. Kabul, which used to be alive, has become haunted by destruction, loss, and degeneration. The city's physical environment has become repulsive and decayed. The buildings that used to embellish the city were torn down by the different raids; the ones remaining were left creeping without restoration. The universities, schools, and hospitals ruined from the long war years were neither repaired nor rebuilt or reconstructed. "Kabul, or rather, what's left of it: a city in an advanced stage of decomposition". (The Swallows, 2)

The social space where people used to spend the biggest part of their days, the streets where they used to stroll, the cafés where they used to gather, the shops they used to admire all have become decayed. The city has been plunged into poverty and insecurity and its war-torn people disempowered, deprived of the least necessities of life like food, electricity and water. This has created a feeling of loss and alienation in the hearts of the city dwellers for "The ruin of the city walls has spread into people's souls. The dust has stunted their orchards, blinded their eyes, sealed up their hearts". (The swallows, 3) This has generated nostalgia or a desire for a fantasized past impossible to return to. Thus, it is through the language of loss and nostalgia that Kabul's dwellers describe their city.



*In the old days—that is, several light-years ago—he [Mohsen] loved to take an evening stroll along the boulevards of Kabul. Back then, the windows of the bigger stores didn't have very much to offer, but no one came up to you and struck you in the face with a whip. People went about their business with enough motivation to envision, in accesses of enthusiasm, fabulous projects. The smaller shops were filled to bursting; a hubbub of voices poured out from them and spilled onto the sidewalks like a flood of friendliness and goodwill. Settled into wicker chairs, their fans laid carelessly across their bellies, old men smoked their water pipes, occasionally squinting at a sunbeam. And the women, despite wearing long veils and peering through netting, pirouetted in their perfumes like gusts of warm air..... How far off those days seem. Could they be nothing but pure fabrications? These days, the boulevards of Kabul are no longer amusing.*

*The skeletal facades that by some miracle are still standing attest to the fact that the cafés, the eating places, the houses, and the buildings have all gone up in smoke. The formerly black-topped streets are now only beaten tracks scraped by clogs and sandals all day long. The shopkeepers have put their smiles in the storeroom. The chilam smokers have vanished into thin air. The men of Kabul have taken cover behind shadow puppets, and the women, mummified in shrouds the color of fever or fear, are utterly anonymous (The Swallows, 10-11)*

The long years of war and conflict have eroded the Kablouti people's desire to fight back a government they could not identify with. Since no space has been left for them to exercise agency, they have passively accepted the reality of their new lives under the Taliban. According to Sultan Barakat and Gareth Waddell, Kabul, more than any other city in Afghanistan was destroyed because it was considered by the Taliban as "the origin of all the country's evils and misfortune." It was considered also as the centre "of 'sin' and 'vice' "as it had chosen to adopt the way of life of the 'invaders'. More than that, they considered that "the population of Kabul, which had been by far the most prosperous and secure city during the communist era, was now being 'punished' for its tacit collaboration with the occupation and for the 'immoral values' espoused by the communist regime." (Exploited by whom?, p.913).

As a way of retaliation, the Taliban started exercising dominance over them by supervising their everyday life, regulating their social and gender



relations, and persecuting them if they did not obey their rules. Thus, in addition to the destruction of the city and all its infrastructures like mosques, hospitals, and schools, the Taliban imposed restrictive policies on its people. Any violation of the new code of conduct imposed by them was met with beating, lashing, stoning, or other forms of inhuman and degrading punishment by the Taliban guards in public places.

In the novel, the characters become plagued with insecurities and doubts. Years of repression, deprivation, and fear have severely affected their mental well-being. The coercive measures adopted by the Taliban to enforce fear have rendered them vulnerable and helpless. They do not know what to expect. The slightest and most banal act, like going out for a short walk, becomes a question of life or death. The arbitrary reprisals administered by the Taliban at any time and in any place for any supposed violation of the imposed laws or rules have discouraged them from going outside or socializing. They are afraid to be approached by Taliban agents for 'sins' or 'crimes' they are not aware of committing. Accordingly, the only place where people gather in big numbers is Kabul Stadium, where 'sinners' are watched being executed or punished for acts of disobedience or insubordination.

*Each Friday, orgiastic spectacles of punishments are meted out in ceremonies before a packed stadium of 30,000 in Kabul, where morning mosque prayers are now followed by weekly beheadings, floggings, amputations, and other forms of punishment. That these punishments are turned into spectacles reminiscent of ancient Rome underscore the Taliban's desire to propagate terror to as broad an audience as possible. (The darkest of ages, p.238)*

Anyone who does not comply with the Taliban's code of conduct is accused of deviant behavior and is exposed to the harsh punishment of his fellowmen and women in public places such as the Kabul Stadium. In such a place, the Taliban become role models for men, women, and children to use violence and commit aggressive acts against their fellow people as is the case with Mohsen who tries to relieve the pressure within him by hurting others.

Because it is defined by loss and fragmentation, Kabul has become the symbol of nostalgic desire impossible to fulfill. The characters in the novel are unable to confront the new world in which the Taliban have put them so they become tied up to lost places and dream of a city that is no longer



there. Since they are unable to find a safe place in their physical world, they travel in their minds to a sanctuary of peace that used to exist a long time ago and that still exists now but only in their minds.

## 2. Nostalgia for an older time

But Kabul as a remembered city does not stand only for the physical environment it represents but it also stands for the time when the place was safer and the people happier. Boym (2001) states in this context that, "At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition." (*The future of Nostalgia*, xv) In the novel, the characters are aware that "*Nothing will ever be the same again.*" (p.13)

Their insistence on remembering certain times from their past indicates the resistance their minds have toward accepting the changes that are occurring around them. The hardships they experience every day trigger nostalgic feelings of a bygone past that was happier and relatively safer. Thus, they recur to memories of their childhood whenever they feel unable to cope with the situation they are experiencing in the present. It is for them an escape to a time of innocence and worryless when "[Their] happiness was complete, that no one challenged [their] outbursts of laughter." (p.12)

In his article, "Resort to Nostalgia: Mountains, Memories and Myths of Time," Andrew Wernick, states that nostalgia has been extended from longing for a place to longing for time, "as if time and place were interchangeable, and time itself a succession of irrecoverable homes." (*Resort to Nostalgia*, 219) Mohsen who has witnessed the death of his parents and the destruction of his house, like a lot of other people in Kabul, is unable to face his present situation. Living in a shabby house with his wife as his only friend and companion, he cannot rely upon his social relations and the support of family and friends to better his situation. The community support mechanisms, that would have helped him cope with his new situation and endure the hardships imposed upon him, have been disrupted



by the war years and the advent of the Taliban. His only solace is in the memories he has of his life as a child under the protection of his parents.

When coming to power, the Taliban introduced their own system of governance. They elaborated a code of conduct in which they outlined the movement's organizational structure, its key objectives and tactics. Restrictive policies were applied in the country. Anyone who failed to follow them was accused of being "the enemy of Islam" (Clark, 2011) and became their target. They used intimidation, threats of killing, beating, lashing, and imprisonment to enforce their model of law and order and oblige people to comply with their code of conduct. People who dared to challenge them or oppose their ideology and military tactics were abducted or eliminated. In his article "Taking "Civilian Criminals" as Hostages: Civilian Victims of Abductions by the Afghan Taliban", V. Badalič, reports that,

*Based on available data, there were two motives for such abductions. The first motive was to intimidate and, consequently, "re-educate" civilians perceived to behave in an "immoral" way. In May 2016, for example, members of an insurgent group abducted a 14-year-old boy in Darah Suf-e-Payin district, Samangan province, after being accused of "immoral behavior...The boy appeared in a video of a wedding posted on social media dancing in a manner that the insurgents deemed "immoral"... In another incident, the Taliban used an abduction to enforce their strict dress code on women.(Taking "civilian criminals" as hostages, pp. 265-266)*

In the novel, the characters are under strict control of the Taliban who enact many banning and restriction rules to establish and maintain their authority. In case of disobedience, they become subjects to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. This has made of them exiles within their own country and even within their families and small communities.

For fear of persecution by the Taliban, people, in the novel, experience isolation and social exclusion. They do not dare speak about their worries or doubts to anyone since that could be used against them. They have lost confidence even in the nearest people to them. Tensions between friends and members of the same family have deepened. Fear and violence have extended beyond the city into their everyday life. Thus, they become stuck in their own selves, unable to express their distress or feeling of loss and alienation to anyone. They all seem victims of trauma and depression.





They feel nostalgic for a time when they were carefree and confident in the people around them.

*In the shops, in the market, in the square, wherever he ventured, the immense weariness that he drags around like a convict's ball and chain caught up with him immediately. His only friend and confidant died of dysentery last year, and Mohsen's had a hard time finding anyone to take his place. It's difficult for a person to live with his own shadow. Fear has become the most effective form of vigilance. These days, everyone's touchier than ever before, a remark made in confidence can easily be misinterpreted, and the Taliban are indisposed to pardon careless tongues. Since people have nothing but misfortunes to share, everyone prefers to nibble at his disappointments in his own corner and thus avoid burdening himself with other people's problems. In Kabul, where pleasure has been ranked among the deadly sins, seeking any sort of solace from anyone not closely connected to you has become an exercise in futility. What lasting solace could one hope to obtain in a chaotic world bled white by a series of uncommonly violent wars, deserted by its patron saints, and given over to the executioners and the crows, in a world the most fervent prayers cannot bring to its senses? pp.31-32*

Wilson states that, "What we are nostalgic for reveals what we value, what we deem worthwhile and important. Through our nostalgia, we are recreating happy memories, pursuing happiness in the past. We may face constraints in the present, but in the past there are no constraints" (26)

Whenever the characters in the novel feel unhappy, lonely, or frustrated, they recur to memories of a happier past. Because they cannot cope any more with their present situation, they yearn for previous times and become stuck in a past-oriented way of thinking about an idealized past impossible to recover. In his book, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, Fred Davis defines nostalgia as "a positively toned evocation of a lived past, a belief that things were better...*then* than *now*)(*Yearning for yesterday*, p.18).

Laughing is a symbol of happiness, it is natural and contagious, and it helps people forget, at least for a very short period of time their worries and problems. The novel under study lacks these moments of carefree and insouciance. Because they are unhappy with their lives, they are unable to laugh, or worse they are forbidden from laughing, especially in public as is



the case with Mohsen and his wife who are beaten because they dared to share a very short moment of intimacy outside their home.

When coming to power, the Taliban regime imposed major restrictions on women's participation at all levels of Afghan society. They drastically curtailed their access to education and work. Zunaira, who was a lawyer at that time, found herself restricted from carrying on her work or even going out without being accompanied by her husband. Thus in order to get rid of her feeling of helplessness and frustration at her current situation, Zunaira escapes through her memories of a happier time in the past before the advent of the Taliban. In the absence of something positive in her life, nostalgia becomes the only solace to her woes.

*I'm me, Zunaira, Mohsen Ramat's wife, age thirty-two, former magistrate, dismissed by obscurantist's without a hearing and without compensation..... That's too hard to deal with. Especially for someone who was a lawyer, who worked for women's rights.(pp.77-78)*

Zunaira's angry recollections of her life before the advent of the Taliban regime is a way of evaluating her present that is in stark contrast with her past. It is her own way to preserve a little dignity and her own sense of identity and convince herself and her husband that she still has agency and will not give up so easily to despair.

*Witnessing executions, fleeing religious police with whips who search for women and girls diverging from dress codes or other edicts, having a family member jailed or beaten, such experiences traumatize and retraumatize Afghan women, who have already experienced the horrors of war, rocketing, ever-present land mines and unexploded ordnance, and the loss of friends and immediate family. (PHR, 1998) in Afghan women under the Taliban, p.250*

This temporal escape is entangled with the playing and singing of children, a symbol of carelessness and innocence. Harper (1966) describes nostalgia as natural: "Nostalgia is the natural way in adversity that man has to feel his own permanence and stability, and through himself the delight in reality as a whole." (*Nostalgia: an existential exploration*, p.120)

*Zunaira didn't sleep a wink, either. Curled up on her mat, she sought refuge in memories of long ago, of the days when children sang in public squares now besmirched by dirt and disfigured by gallows. Not every day was a*



*holiday, but there were no fanatics shouting "Sacrilege!" when kites fluttered in the air. p.72*

These memories of childhood are often associated with music, songs, kite flying and children's laughter. All these remembered activities, including many others were forbidden by the Taliban under the pretext that they were a source of corruption and that they distracted people from worshipping god in the right way <sup>1</sup>

Music is very important for the characters in the novel because it allows them to imagine or remember themselves in another time or place impossible to reach or experience again in the present time .These memories that are stirred by music are often associated with bittersweet feelings of nostalgia and longing for a lifestyle that has become forbidden to them. Music, in fact, helps them evoke key life events in an extremely emotional way. According to Barrett et al, music is one of the most powerful triggers of nostalgia (Barrett et al., 2010). In fact, it has been found that nostalgia is triggered more often by music than other stimuli (Juslin, Liliestrom, Västfjäll, Barradas, & Silva, 2008).

Music's power to evoke memories may come largely from the way music expresses emotion. In their article "Music, Nostalgia and Memory: Historical and Psychological Perspectives", Sandra Garrido & Jane W. Davidson write that, "music in the modern world is playing an increasingly important role in our inner lives as individuals. We use it on a daily basis to create atmosphere, shape our moods, to aid us in the fulfillment of personal goals, to express personal values and emotions, and to delineate personal and cultural boundaries." (*Music, Nostalgia and Memory*, p.3)The characters in the novel feel a strong sense of alienation and disconnection from the world around them. Listening to music, becomes, thus, for them an occasion for a pleasant nostalgic remembering, an escape from the present, and a cathalistic release that makes them feel better.

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<sup>1</sup>In the name of Islam, the Taliban list of what was forbidden included music, movies, parties, phones, audio and video equipment, and electric razors, along with any form of entertainment, even including kite flying. Also banned are toys, dolls, card and board games, cameras, photographs or pictures of humans or animals, cigarettes, alcohol, magazines, newspapers, and most books (Goodwin, 1998)



Nazeesh, on the other hand feels psychologically distressed. His excessive nostalgia with the past makes him unable to move forward and adjust himself with his present life, resulting in an increased feeling of alienation and isolation.

*Atiq extends his hand. Nazeesh seizes it eagerly and holds on to it for a long time. Without letting go, he looks all around to be sure it's safe for him to speak. Then he clears his throat, but his emotion is so great that his voice comes out in an almost inaudible quaver: "Do you think we'll ever be able to hear music in Kabul one day?"*

*"Who knows?"*

*The old man strengthens his grip, extending his skinny neck as he prolongs his lamentations. "I'd like to hear a song. You can't imagine how much I'd like to hear a song. A song with instrumental accompaniment, sung in a voice that shakes you from head to foot. Do you think one day— or one night—we'll be able to turn on the radio and listen to the bands getting together again and playing until they pass out?"*

*"God alone is omniscient."*

*A momentary confusion clouds the old man's eyes; then they begin to glitter with an aching brightness that seems to rise up from the center of his being. "Music is the true breath of life. We eat so we won't starve to death. We sing so we can hear ourselves live. Do you understand, Atiq?"*

*"I've got a lot on my mind at the moment."*

*"When I was a child, it often happened that I didn't get enough to eat. It didn't matter, though. All I had to do was climb a tree, sit on a branch, and play my flute, and that drowned out my growling stomach. And when I sang—you don't have to believe me, but when I sang, I stopped feeling hungry." pp.83-84*

Nazeesh inability to communicate in words his feelings of despair and grief for the old times has been the central cause of his feelings of isolation or self-loss. Music thus becomes the only source from which he can derive solace and comfort. And since it is forbidden, he can but wish that a very soon day will come when all the restrictions will be concealed and music will be heard again in the streets of Kabul. His discontent with the present leads him to view everything around him with nostalgia and longing.



According to Aden (1995), “nostalgia indicates individuals’ desire to regain some control over their lives in an uncertain time.” (Nostalgic communication as temporal escape, p.21) Nazees has sociates music with emotionally heightened memories of his childhood when he used to play the flute. The pleasure derived from the sound of the instrument made him forget even his basic needs such as hunger, thirst, or fatigue.

More than a precise time in the past, the characters of the novelty, through their nostalgic memories to recapture the mood of that time. According to the Mood management theory, people choose music that either improves their mood or helps them to sustain a previously good mood (Knobloch & Zillmann, 2002). In fact, " music provides a unique way to explore the non-linguistic aspects of emotional expression, above and beyond the words of a written text. Indeed, music can lend *expression* to a written text, conveying emotions where none seem to be apparent in the text itself. (Ibid, p.14)

Linda Hutcheon (2000) states that: “[t]ime, unlike space, cannot be returned to—ever; time is irreversible. Nostalgia becomes the reaction to that sad fact.” (“Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern,”) Although the characters are aware of this, they dream of a time in the future that would resemble their past. Nasheez desire to leave his actual home and go somewhere else rises from his inability to cope with his present. He longs for his way of life before everything was altered and destroyed. He wants to find a place that would make him feel the sensations of the past. He wants to go to a place where he would feel at home. Svetlana Boym (2001) describes this experience as,

*To feel at home is to know that things are in their places and so are you; it is a state of mind that doesn't depend on an actual location. The object of longing, then, is not really a place called home but this sense of intimacy with the world; it is not the past in general, but that imaginary moment when we had time and didn't know the temptation of nostalgia. (p.251)*

Ironically, even the Taliban who have been the cause of so much loss and despair, delve too in the memories of their past years of fighting against the Russians as a means of escape from the reality of their present. They depend on selective memory in order to survive and cope with the present. They fantasize and romanticize their past to be able to endure the reality of their new condition of crippled individuals depending on the charity of



others to survive. They spend their days narrating their past feats and glorifying them. Roger Aden (1995), states that nostalgic communication help in escaping from "contemporary conditions that are perceived to be inhospitable." This escape, then, provides individuals with a "secure place of resistance." (Nostalgic communication as temporal escape, p.22)By the end of the novel, the characters sadly acknowledge that this is almost impossible. The emptiness that they live leads to madness.

### 3. The place/time of no return

Madness plays a very important role in the life of the different characters in the novel. It is present everywhere around them like an infectious and deadly disease spreading and contaminating everyone and everything on its way. Kabul, the city where the characters live is described as the "city of madmen" (98) where "men have gone mad" (9) and where the "raging madmen are strutting around, " (82 ) Mohsen is sure that he has gone mad(28), Atiq wonders if [he] is going stark raving mad," (31) while Nasheez thinks that he "sometimes loses his head too" (45). Cut off from familiar surroundings and isolated from family and friends, Mohsen, Nasheez, and Atiq start feeling psychological disorder. The different restrictions and frustrations they experience all day long have had an impact on them causing personality changes and affecting their state of mind, leading at the end to insanity.

In *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, Rubin (2002) states that, "The whole population suffered from trauma and depression. Every norm of family life had been destroyed by the war." Most of the characters in the novel have known no other society than their traumatized and fragmented society that is in a state of severe dislocation. Unable to cope with the reality of their present or to find solace in the memories of their past, many of them are threatened of madness or turn mad. The brutalities of the war and the harsh treatment of the Taliban are driving them to insanity, "Zunaira, in the novel, is seized by a mad desire to lift the cloth that covers her face in the street.(62)

She cannot bear the cloth that is imposed on women to cover their faces with when they go out nor the treatment of the Taliban to her and her husband. Once she arrives home, she shuts herself and "starts howling like a mad woman." (76) while her husband Mohsen is pushed by "a mad desire to grab an iron bar and destroy everything insight"(76)because of the



humiliating remarks and the physical threat she experienced while he was walking out with his wife. Atiq's unhappiness on the other hand "is driving him mad." (100)

Madness seems contagious and deadly. The Taliban become the role models for Kabluti men and women to use violence and commit aggressive acts against their fellow citizens without even thinking about the reason of their aggressive acts. Mohsen is panic stricken and helpless after his experience in the stadium. He thinks that because people act in a certain way, he can no more discern what is right and what is not.

*I must have gone mad, Zunaira. How could I dare do such a thing? All my life, I've thought of myself as a conscientious objector. Some people made threats and other people made promises, but none of them ever persuaded me to pick up a weapon and kill another person. I agreed to have enemies, but I couldn't bear being the enemy of anyone else, no matter who. And this morning, Zunaira, just because the crowd was shouting, I shouted with it, and just because it demanded blood, I called out for blood, too. Since then, I can't stop looking at my hands, and I don't recognize them anymore.* (p.28)

Mohsin's feeling of loss and powerlessness worsens his situation. Because he can no longer stand what is happening to him, he has to die. Atiq too feels that he is losing control of his mind. Once he is aware of his state of mind and the fragmentation of his psyche, he has to die too because no place is left in the "city of madmen" for wise people

*Astaghfirullah, Atiq says to himself once more. What's happening to me? I can't bear the dark, I can't bear the light, I don't like standing up or sitting down, I can't tolerate old people or children, I hate it when anybody looks at me or touches me. In fact, I can hardly stand myself. Am I going stark raving mad?* (p.31)

Atiq fights against the violence of his disintegration through the use of violence on other people. Either through inflicting physical violence on people around him in the streets of Kabul or moral violence at home with his wife or in the jail on his friend Nazeesh, he tries to slow down the process of loss as much as he can. However, his violent acts accelerate the process and his mind finally blows up. Moreover, like most people of Kabul, atiq " [does not] believes in miraculous rains or the magical transformations of spring, and even less in the dawning of a bright new



tomorrow." (p.13) .His abnormal obsession with Zunaira is in fact an obsession with the idea of escape from a gloomy reality he has endured all these past years. Until his meeting with Zunaira, Atiq has been a rather passive actor of his own destiny, quite satisfied with his lot, spending his days between the jail and his house without any complaint. In reality, the characters in the novel are aware that what is happening to them is due to the circumstances they are living and that are beyond human power. They try to resist as much as they can.

Zunaira is no Taliban, and her husband's not mad; if he lost his way in a moment of collective hysteria, that's because the horrors of everyday life are sufficiently powerful to overwhelm all defenses, and human degeneracy is deeper than any abyss. Mohsen is behaving like other people, recognizing his distress in theirs, identifying with their degradation. His deed provides proof that everything can change, without warning and beyond recognition. (49)

Many examples in the novel show how men and women lose their minds because of the condition in which they find themselves. They mourn the form of life prior to the advent of the Taliban. Because of their inability to find out alternative ways of surviving or to conform with the demands of the Taliban's, they find themselves lonely and desperate, unable to adapt to a reality their minds refuse to accept. Accordingly, they no longer feel at home within their own environment. They lose faith in their country, in their people, and even in God. However, even these people are not spared from the punishment of the Taliban. Like any criminal or sinner, they are stoned or lashed to death.

*Things in Kabul are going from bad to worse, sliding into ruin, sweeping along men and mores. It's a chaos within chaos, a disaster enclosed in disaster, and woe to those who are careless. An isolated person is doomed beyond remedy. The other day, there was a madman in the neighborhood, screaming at the top of his lungs that God had failed. From all indications, this poor soul knew neither where he was nor how he had lost his wits. But the uncompromising Taliban, seeing no extenuating circumstances in his madness, had him blindfolded, gagged, and whipped to death in the public square. (p.49)*

Although the people who lose their minds and turn mad are described as poor creatures, they are not spared from punishment. They are stoned and





killed by all society, starting with children to men and old people because they are a threat to the sanity of others too. By letting them alive, they become mirrors of the society in which the 'sane' people are living, so they have to perish. Indeed, the mad people are allowed a freedom of speech that the others have not. By denouncing the hardships lived under the Taliban regime and the alienation of their society, they make people face the harsh reality of their living. Accordingly, they have to die.

The violence with which they are beaten and stoned hides in fact the frustration and helplessness of all these people who are unable to find a way out of their 'mad' lives.

### **Conclusion**

In Yasmina Khadra's novel, *The Swallows of Kabul*, memories provide the characters a sense of continuity. Whenever they feel sad or powerless, they start recollecting older times when they were happier and less concerned with the world around them. They also start comparing their previous life before the civil war with the present one under the Taliban regime and wish that nothing had changed. Although the characters belong to different camps/ sides, they have the same feeling of emptiness and despair towards their present life and a longing desire to return to a happier time in the past. They take comfort in the past since longing for it never disappears while their present is never fully accepted. They have lost faith, joy of life, and hope in the future offered to them by the new government, or in any betterment of their situation.

Despite all that seems to separate them in terms of social position or political convictions, they have the same worries and the same torments. They suffer from the psychological pains of war and repression and wander in the streets of Kabul without any specific aim. They do not know what to do with their lives. They feel isolated and alienated even from their own people. Through their memories, they return mentally time and again to a happier time and place. They become nostalgic for an older time when they lived a simpler and happier life, not afraid of being caught laughing in the street or listening to music, or even making confidences to friends who may turn against them one day. Memory becomes also, for the characters of the novel, a strategy of survival. They maintain hold on all that can make them feel alive, to constrain their descent into madness.



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