

An Economic Enlightenment

By Ben Holse

Economic difference is frequently a key element that separates people. Members of different classes rarely engage with one another, which creates ignorance. Often people even shelter themselves from others' suffering, suffering that could be occurring in their own realm. This type of situation is similar to what Plato describes in his "Allegory of the Cave," in which he depicts a group of prisoners who believe they are viewing reality when, in fact, they are viewing nothing more than shadows of artifacts upon a wall. In terms of economics it is a fact that people suffer from poverty. This poverty is regularly ignored by those who enjoy financial advantage, creating a shadow of ignorance. *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini shows that people who become exposed to economic indifference can dramatically change as a result. The book also illustrates Plato's metaphor when the privileged Amir is "dragged" out of his cave and discovers the harsh reality of his economic inequality.

As the son of a wealthy businessman in Kabul, Afghanistan, Amir lives in a large house with servants and a caring father. This is the total opposite to how most other Afghans live. Amir's wealthy father shields him from the hardship that others endure. Although his best friend, Hassan is a poor Hazara servant, Amir never comes to terms during his childhood with all the economic hardship that his neighbors in Kabul endure. Invisible to Amir is the fierce economic and social inequality among the Afghans. Plato illustrates this idea in his allegory when he says "They [the prisoners] are in it [the cave] from childhood with their legs and necks in bonds so that they are fixed, seeing only in front of them . . . Their light is from a fire burning far above and behind them . . . [they] see along this wall human beings carrying all sorts of artifacts,

which project above the wall [in front of them] . . ." (193). Amir arguably spends his entire childhood in a similar cave of economic privilege. *The Kite Runner* refers to Baba as "One of the richest merchants in Kabul . . . Baba and Rahim Khan built a wildly successful carpet-exporting business, two pharmacies, and a restaurant" (15). Furthermore, his father is the man who perpetuates the illusion of the shadows that he believes to be the truth. Just like Plato's prisoners, Amir is bound to this cave, and thus he is kept ignorant. These bonds keep him from turning his head and seeing truth. Like Plato's prisoners, Amir believes "that the truth is nothing other than shadows of artificial things" (194). One of these truths that Baba unintentionally holds from Amir is the extent of hardship that Afghanistan endures. He does this by living a wealthy lifestyle in their impoverished nation. A second and more important truth that is withheld from Amir is that he and Hassan are in fact half-brothers. One could make the case that if Amir had access to this fact, events in the story may have played out much differently. When he leaves Afghanistan, Amir still has little idea about the hardship his countrymen suffer. What he holds to be true are merely the "shadows on the wall" that his father has shown him.

Amir then escapes from his "cave" to America, where he lives twenty years, still oblivious to the hardships that are occurring in his home country. In terms of Plato, he lives twenty additional years believing the illusions of his childhood to be true, and wishing to flee from what he knows is real—namely Hassan's brutal rape by Assef. As Amir confesses, "For me, America was a place to bury my memories" (129). Finally, he is offered a chance to redeem himself in Afghanistan with the search for his nephew. At first Amir resists the idea of going back and remembering the problems he left behind. He ultimately makes the decision to go however, after much coercing from Rahim Khan. When he sees the people on the side of the road, he is bewildered by the poverty and hardship that they are enduring. He assumes that the

economic situation has gotten much worse since he had left. As Amir comments to his driver, Farid, "I feel like a tourist in my own country" (231). Farid then goes on to explain to Amir that Afghans have always lived this way with the unsympathetic comment, "You've always been a tourist here, you just didn't know it" (232).

Through the lens of Plato's allegory, Farid becomes the individual who first drags Amir along the metaphoric rough, steep way out into the sunlight and into the truth. This is obviously a rough and steep ascent because it upsets Amir to the point he becomes ill. Likewise, Plato predicts such an event will occur when he writes, "If someone dragged him away from there [the cave] by force along the rough, steep, upward way and didn't let him go before he had dragged him out into the light of the sun, wouldn't he be distressed and annoyed at being so dragged" (194)? After Amir returns to America, it can be argued that his nephew, Sohrab, further drags him from the cave. Sohrab represents a constant reminder to Amir of the terrible hardships in Afghanistan, as well as a reminder of his blood ties to Hassan. When Farid first explains to Amir how the people in Afghanistan live, Amir does not understand. He cannot grasp how he could live in a country with so much economic hardship and be completely oblivious to it. However, slowly he begins to accept this new reality as truth. He begins to understand that his economic status had sheltered him from this reality when he was a child.

Plato describes this event and says that it takes time for a prisoner to get accustomed to the truth, before he or she can accept it. It is also apparent from the story that after this event, Amir feels the overwhelming desire to help the people as much as he can. He says, "I had never been the active type before, but when a man named Kabir . . . called and asked if I wanted to help him with a hospital project, I said yes" (Hosseini 363). He also pays Farid a significant amount of money for helping him find his nephew, and toward the end of the novel begins to

help Afghans in his surrounding community. When Amir returns to America, he even begins to write about the living conditions in his homeland, in an attempt to enlighten others. As Plato predicts, "He [enlightened prisoner] is compelled in courts or elsewhere to contest about the shadows of the just or the representations of which they are the shadows, and to dispute about the way these things are understood by men who have never seen justice itself" (196).

In summary, Amir's situation is a good example of how relevant Plato's allegory remains in the modern times. Amir's economic status made him ignorant to the realities that lie just outside his door. This is not so different from the type of situation that people live in today. Many have no idea of the hardships that other's endure daily. In Amir's case, when he goes back to Afghanistan, he is enlightened and drug out of his cave. Unfortunately, many of us will never understand others' hardships and thus live in our caves, bound by the chains of our own privilege and ignorance, never to be exposed the light.

Works Cited

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Plato. "Allegory of the Cave." *Republic*, Book VII. Trans. Allan Bloom. Basic Books, 1968: 193-199.