

# Sacrificing and Saving the Lamb: Betrayal, Guilt, and Redemption in *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini

Imdad Ullah Khan<sup>1\*</sup>, Saood Khan<sup>2</sup> and Ayesha Perveen<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

*Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner (2003) tells the first-person narrative of a traumatized protagonist who tries to atone for his past sins and transgressions through committing acts of atonement and compassion. As Amir tells his story to the reader, he also uses storytelling as an act of healing one's psyche and as a means of liberating himself from the "karma" of guilt. By the end of the novel, Amir comes to terms with his troubled past, can live a relatively more peaceful life, and starts a journey of rediscovering his fellow Afghani community in the United States whom he begins to cherish as his identity reference group. This article uses a methodological approach based on thematic analysis (TA) to analyze the narrative texture of the story. TA is more focused on what is said rather than how it is said that is often a concern for discourse analysis or conversation analysis. Using TA, this article investigates how the protagonist comes to have a compelling sense of remorse that forces him to seek redemption. Told against the background of the devastated country of Afghanistan ravaged by wars and violence, *The Kite Runner* is a powerful narrative of personal guilt, redemption, and reconciliation with one's community in a foreign land.*

**Keywords:** Trauma; Guilt; Redemption; Atonement; Karma, Otherization.

## 1. Introduction

Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) is a powerful tragic narrative of its first-person narrator whose trauma in the past keeps haunting his present life and compels him to seek redemption and atonement through paying for his sins. The protagonist of the story, Amir, recounts his personal tale of betraying his close friend Hassan and failing to stand up for him when he was raped by Assef in an alley and the impact of this incident in his childhood upon his subsequent life in the United States where he becomes a celebrated novelist. However, his coming-of-age story is not only a *bildungsroman* but a political allegory that is set in a traumatized country that witnessed several wars in the past and has two major upheavals during the life of Amir – the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent taking over of political control of the country by Taliban militants. The novel recounts devastation and violence in the socio-historical context of Afghanistan and its impact upon the psychological lives and identity of the characters in the story. Violence and

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<sup>1</sup> Department of English and FL, University of Swat, Pakistan.

<sup>2</sup> Department of English and FL, University of Swat, Pakistan.

<sup>3</sup> Department of English, Virtual University, Lahore, Pakistan.

\*)Corresponding Author.

Email: [imdad.khan@uswat.edu.pk](mailto:imdad.khan@uswat.edu.pk)

trauma underpin the narrative structure of the novel that tells a narrative that is personal as well as political, psychological, and sociological. As Jefferess (2009) points out, critics have adopted “diverse approaches to interpreting the novel—as ethnography, coming-of-age narrative, and/or morality tale”. This diversity speaks to the richness and complexity of the novel as a story that is hard to simplify and box in any neat critical category for easy to swallow understanding of the thematic understructure of its narrative.

The novel’s violent structure portrays a socio-political milieu that is hard to reconcile. Traumatic events happen in the novel one after another including the rape of Amir’s close friend Hassan, the murder of Hassan and his wife at the hands of Taliban operatives, sexual abuse of Hassan’s son Sohrab, and Amir’s father’s and his close friend Rahim Khan’s death in the United States because of cancer. Against this starkly traumatic background, Amir’s narrative account is a coping strategy through which he attempts to alleviate his traumatized mind and come to terms with the consequences of his past transgressions against his close friend Hassan. The current article focuses on the circular structure of Amir’s narrative by first analyzing what compels him to respond to his sense of guilt, i.e. the haunting memories from his guilt-ridden past. Secondly, it uses the Buddhist concept of “karma” as a point of departure to analyze Amir’s struggle towards regaining peace of mind and the ultimate facing of his sins through acts and bravery in the present. The paper uses a close reading of the text to arrive at the thematic center of the novel, i.e. how “to be good again”? The article argues that unlike Mohsin Hamid’s story of *Changez* who experiences alienation and estrangement in the west, Amir’s character presents the journey of a peripheral subject who is quite well settled in the West until his need for contrition forces him to revisit his homeland that he disliked for many years.

## 2. Literature Review

*The Kite Runner* has sparked different opinions about reading the novel as a political allegory that metaphorically reflects the struggles of Afghanistan in the broader geopolitical landscape of the present times. Jafferess (2009), for instance, studies the novel as a political allegory of global humanitarian ethics. He argues for Amir’s quest for personal redemption as allegorically representing Afghanistan’s political struggle and its gradual recovery after a long history of foreign invasions, internal strife between Afghan factions, and the effect of a milieu of violence. The quest of the protagonist for redemption and mental piece novel represents the need to understand the Other by challenging dominant divisions and stereotypes based on differences of nationality, religious and racial backgrounds. Somewhat similarly, O’Brian (2018) takes “trauma” as a point of departure to read the novel as an allegorical representation of the global divides based on the division of center versus periphery. The current global ethos of global migration from the East to the West is challenged as problematic for the subjectivity of postcolonial subjects. Hosseini grapples with complex identities based on migration from

Afghanistan to Pakistan to the US problematizing the center-periphery debate. It is not only Hassan who undergoes a personal trauma but also Sohrab's who is unable to speak and enunciate his trauma to the West. Afghanistan's national trauma is thus rendered in anthropomorphic imagery that documents the struggles of a troubled country and its nation struggling to be heard in a highly bifurcated global ethos predicated upon imperialistic exploitation.

Hosseini's novel can also be read as a fictional depiction of a troubled mind that is struggling with betrayal and guilt and struggles for redemption by attempting to correct past wrongdoings. Guilt and redemption thus have significant repercussions for the perception of the Self of the protagonist Amir and his identity. Saraswat (2014) studies the shaping of identity of a young boy, Amir, whose betrayal of his close friend Hassan in the past makes him feel guilty, restless, and insomniac despite apparently living a comfortable life with his family in the United States. However, Amir is not facing an identity crisis like that of Changez in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* who feels alienation and estrangement in the West. *The Kite Runner* tells the tale of stark class differences in Afghanistan where Amir lives as a boy and later migrates to the United States. According to Saraswat, Amir's story is different as he feels well-settled in the West and feels estrangement when he returns to his childhood neighborhood in Afghanistan. Amir is thus more plagued by internal angst and existential crisis of living with a sense of betrayal and lack of self-worth than with external troubles of living in an alienating cultural space in the West. Saraswat argues:

*Amir's "unatoned sins", as they are described in the novel's opening chapter, have plagued his conscience and cast an oppressive shadow over his joys and triumphs... Amir is a cultural hybrid which makes him distinct and unique. Thus the novel revolves around the central axiom of personal selves permeated by political prejudices and permutations. (p. 166)*

Relatedly, Du (2017) studies *The Kite Runner* as a fictional metaphor for the spiritual growth of the protagonist of the narrative, Afghanistan, and its people. The journey of self-discovery predicated upon revisiting past sins and omissions. "To be good again" is made possible through confronting one's deepest shadows and psychological secret spots that constantly interrupt the present life of Amir, suffusing with a sense of restless unsettlement and insomnia. To affirm his humanity, Amir needs to reconnect with his lost innocence in his childhood when he chose to turn a blind eye to his best friend getting raped in a deserted alley. Du (p. 90) argues that *The Kite Runner* is not only the story of "a person's spiritual growth, but also the history of the soul of a nation, and of a country's suffering. It is about a journey of salvation and return of humanity... a journey of self-discovery while accepting the past".

Hosseini and Zohdi (2016) read the novel as an allegory of the ethnic and racial struggles that are a source of strife and anguish for different regions in the world. For the authors, *The Kite Runner* depicts two major ethnicities of

Afghanistan, Pashtuns, and Hazaras, who experience ethnic tension due to essentialized characteristics and otherization of Hazaras based on ethnic differentiation. The conflict between Pashtuns and Hazaras is not restricted to ethnicities only but encompasses social, religious, and cultural domains. They argue that “racism is not the result of scientific observation, but it is due to the human differences that happened between 16th and 19th century when people began differentiating among themselves” (p. 33). However, racism is often seen as based on essential inherent differences between different groups of people rather than as a socio-cultural construct. The novel thus charts the consequences of a racialized society along ethnic lines in Afghanistan, the effect of racialization on individual actions, and the long-term consequences of those actions.

Taking a broader perspective on the implications of fictional representations in a polarized world, Edwards (2009) focuses on the responsibility of an artist as an individual and the limits of artistic license. Taking “clash of sensibilities” as a point of departure, he dialogically deliberates upon “the outcry in Afghanistan over ‘culturally inflammatory’ elements of both novel and film typically framed by the Anglophone press as the gap between Western liberalism and ethnoreligious extremism” on the one hand and juxtaposes them against “hostilities against antagonisms toward Hosseini’s work expressed within the Afghan expatriate communities” (p. 1). Edwards concludes that fictional art transgresses the norms of the society from which it originates and offends its sensibilities lives in cultural spaces that put constraints on the creative expression and license of the artist. Communally-imposed constraints put checks on literary artistic production and skew readers’ sensibilities towards the literary product.

### 3. Methodology

The current article is based on using thematic analysis (TA) as a methodological orientation as well as a heuristic device. Historically, TA developed from content analysis and could be regarded as a form of qualitative content analysis (Joffe, 2012). However, although TA recognizes the significance of language and discourse analysis at the micro level, it concentrates more on what is said rather than how it is said. It does not, therefore, require a technical analysis of language use at the grammatical and syntactical level (Block, 2010). In line with this analytical procedure, the focus of analysis in the present study is not on a microanalysis of language use but on the thematic ideas emerging from the data.

In recent times and with the influential publication of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2014), TA has emerged as a theoretically flexible analytical approach that can be adapted for various qualitative analyses. Following Braun and Clarke’s six phases of analysis in TA, data analysis phases in the present study included: familiarization with the data; initial coding; categorizing themes; reviewing themes; defining and refining themes; and linking themes into theoretical framework. However, these phases were not implemented in a

linear fashion but in an iteratively and recursively manner. As our understanding of the data developed, we went back and forth in the data several times to revisit earlier stages in the coding process and to modify, revise, and refine the coding and analysis.

#### **4. Analysis**

This section analyzes the text of the novel *The Kite Runner* through a close reading focusing on key aspects of betrayal, guilt, and seeking of redemption as experienced by different characters in the narrative. Set in Kabul, Afghanistan in 1978 at the time of the Soviet invasion of the country, it is a captivating tale of friendship between the well-off Amir and the son of their servant Hassan whom Amir finds out later on to be his half-brother. It is a story of violence and its ravaging effect on social structures; the transformative capacity of education; and the relationship between fathers and sons. But more than anything, it is the story of paying back for betrayal in the past, a struggle to achieve contrition, and a search for redemption.

It's a harrowing story of the journey of its protagonist Amir as he tries to run away from the haunting memories of his troubled childhood but his guilty conscience forces him to confront the consequences of his past actions and seek redemption through the atonement. The narrative juxtaposes varying degrees of guilt felt by characters in the narrative and how it affects their personal relationships. The relationship between Amir and Hassan, Baba and Ali, and Amir and Sohrab are lived under lingering shadows of betrayal and guilt and the possibility of redemption – “to be good again”. Amir's guilt is far heavier than the other characters although it is quite mirrored in the guilt his father feels for having an illegitimate son (Hassan) with Ali's wife and for the betrayal of his son's right to have a loving father. Amir's abandonment and betrayal of his friend Hassan when he needed him the most as he was raped by Assef in an alley is the epicenter of Amir's feelings of guilt. He tries unsuccessfully to bury his past wrongdoings and move on but he is never able to erase the haunting memories from the past. Living in a cyclical world where time and life repeat itself, Amir gets a chance to seek atonement through rescuing the Sohrab, the son of Amir's friend and half-brother Hassan, and free himself from karma of guilt that gave him sleepless nights and insomnia for many years. The following lines critique how betrayal, guilt, and haunting memories of wrongdoing in the past drive characters and their actions as they seek peace and expiation in a cyclical world.

##### **4.1 Ghosts from the past: haunting memories of guilt and betrayal**

Coming to terms with past betrayals and guilt drive the central character of the novel Amir throughout the story as he initially tries to bury his past and forget what he did in the past. Living a comfortable life in the United States thousands of miles away from his war-torn country of Afghanistan, Amir however cannot get rid of insomnia and the ghastly memories of his past sins. Starting at his birth, Amir blamed himself for the death of his mother who

passed away while giving birth to him. He feels even stronger guilt for how he betrayed his friend Hassan and failed to rescue him from Assef and his bully companions. Amir finds it hard to live with the choice he took in the alley and proved himself to be a physical coward who abandoned his friend for fear of physical assault by Assef and his gang. His guilt starts taking a toll on him immediately afterward. Only a few days after Hassan is assaulted, Amir's guilt is nagging at him as he lies in bed unable to go to sleep.

*"I watched Hassan get raped," I said to no one. Baba stirred in his sleep. Kaka Homayoun grunted. A part of me was hoping someone would wake up and hear, so I wouldn't have to live with this lie anymore. But no one woke up and in the silence that followed, I understood the nature of my new curse: I was going to get away with it. (86)*

As the quote shows, at first, Amir tries to lessen the burden of his guilt by disclosing the secret of the betrayal of his friendship with Hassan. However, he starts to think of "going away" with the guilt by avoiding Hassan's company. It is, however, only a matter of time that the reader would know whether he can get away with his guilt without facing it squarely? Whether the "nature" of his "new curse" was that he was going to get away with it or that he will never be able to do so? Amir's guilt is so overwhelming that he decides to betray Hassan a second time by wrongfully accusing him of stealing from Amir. In order to allay his feelings for his first guilt, Amir commits another and more heinous betrayal that pushes Hassan and his family out of Baba's house because of their shame over a charge of stealing. As he planted money, his watch, and some gift under Hassan's mattress, Amir "hoped [these] would be the last in a long line of shameful lies" (104). However, he discovers the hard way later in his life that the shadows of his betrayal and lies stretched far into the future than he could ever imagine at the time of committing them. While living a well-settled comfortable life in the United States, Amir keeps having nightmares about his guilt-ridden relationship with Hassan and his responsibility in the demise of Hassan and his family.

*His hands are tied behind him with roughly woven rope cutting through the flesh of his wrists. He is blindfolded with black cloth... He is kneeling on the street, on the edge of a gutter filled with still water... I step closer. A thousand times over, he mutters. For you a thousand times over... I see a faint scar above his upper lip... I see the barrel first. Then the man standing behind him. He is tall, dressed in a herringbone vest... He places it on the back of the kneeling man's head... The rifle roars with a deafening crack... I see the face behind the plume of smoke swirling from the muzzle. I am the man in the her-ringbone vest. I woke up with a scream trapped in my throat. (239-140)*

Amir's suppressed feelings of deprivation from his father's affection lie at the root of his unconscious feeling of aversion for his best friend Hassan whom Baba adorns so dearly. Baba always thought of Amir as an effeminate boy who probably had gay tendencies. As his father tells his friend: "I'm telling you, Rahim, there is something missing in that boy." (24). Amir tries his best to win the favors of his father but he finds himself in a paradoxical situation in which the target of his anger is his best friend. His vengeful and careless actions destroy not only Amir's own peace of mind but the actual lives of other characters. Taking a trip down his memory path, the narrative voice of Amir could still remember how he became what he is today due to the repercussions of his choices in the past.

*I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975. I remember the precise moment, crouching behind a crumbling mud wall, peeking into the alley near the frozen creek. That was a long time ago, but it's wrong what they say about the past, I've learned, about how you can bury it. Because the past claws its way out. Looking back now, I realize I have been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty-six years. (1)*

Amir finds the hard way through a life of mental torment and guilt that the past can never be buried; that it suffuses the present with haunting memories and a lingering feeling of betrayal and guilt. *The Kite Runner* documents the painful journey of self-actualization as Amir comes to acknowledge the necessity of facing his past squarely. As he acquires the courage to stand up for who he wants to be instead of who he has been for the last twenty-six years, he has difficult choices to make that require him to stand up for Sohrab, redeem him from pain and suffering and, through him, redeem himself.

#### **4.2 Breaking karma: Redemption in a cyclical time**

The concept of Karma is a key concept in several religions including Hinduism and Buddhism. Based on a cyclical understanding of actions and their effect, Karma conceives of a person as responsible for what happens to them in the future. Instead of focusing on external punishment and rewards, Karma crystalizes a worldview in which individuals seek redemption and freedom – nirvana, by taking their consciousness to a higher level to transcend the perpetual cycle of suffering caused by their actions. Therefore, individuals can free themselves from cycles of suffering and misery by paying attention to how to live their lives well to escape reincarnation and repetition of misery (Ghose, 2007).

In *The Kite Runner*, Amir does not know how to dispel his angst of guilt over his past actions. Rahim Khan points out that "there is a way to be good again" (238). That he could seek atonement through love and compassion by adopting Hassan's son Sohrab. He is reluctant to let go of his house, career, and family and revisit Afghanistan to correct what has gone wrong in the past.

He gets a second chance to break the cycle of his internal angst and free himself from perpetual repetition in his mind and dreams of his past wrongdoings, he could not convince himself to take this chance.

*"I have a wife in America, a home, a career, and a family". But how could I pack up and go back home when my actions may have cost Hassan a chance at those very same things? And what Rahim Khan revealed to me changed things. Made me see how my entire life, long before the winter of 1975, dating back to when that singing Hazara woman was still nursing me, had been a cycle of lies betrayals, and secrets." (238)*

To break free from karma, the individual needs to choose a path of action that breaks the cycle of misery. Although he has started to realize what Rahim Khan pointed out to him, Amir is not convinced at the consciousness level that it would be a wise decision to take the risk of losing all that he has acquired in the United States and that Hassan could not get because of Amir's actions.

Amir's conscious awareness of guilt had begun long before he takes any step to amend what he has done wrong in the past. Quite earlier in the novel, he shows the realization of what motivated his disdain for his close friend Hassan; that he chose to sacrifice the lamb (Hassan) in order to pay a price for winning the favors of Baba.

*I was afraid of Assef and what he would do to me... That's what I told myself as I turned my back to the alley, to Hassan. That's what I made myself believe... The real reason I was running, was that Assef was right: Nothing was free in this world. Maybe Hassan was the price I had to pay, the lamb I had to slay, to win Baba. Was it a fair price? The answer floated to my conscious mind before I could thwart it: He was just a Hazara, wasn't he? (77)*

This religious connotation of the sacrifice of a lamb to appease God (with historical allusion to the attempted sacrifice of Ishmael by his father Ibrahim, serve to reinforce the necessity of suffering and facing one's internal demons in order to arrive at inner peace and freedom from guilt. At this point in time, however, Amir is not yet willing to take this leap of faith and embrace his guilt. He tries to shift the ethical necessity of taking action by resorting to otherize Hassan as "just a Hazara", thus dehumanizing him in order to make it easy for himself to shun his responsibility towards Hassan.

As Amir's character evolves through the narrative, he is finally able to accept fully his wrongdoings in the past and his ethical obligation to save his son Sohrab by going back to a war-torn Afghanistan ruled by extremist religious groups. Thus, his "initiation" into a path of redemption obligates him to not only seek amends in the present by facing Assef who now works for the Taliban in Afghanistan but also gives the moral aptitude to acknowledge his past without any racist othering. He can finally own his sins and stand up for himself and his friend's son who is kidnapped and abused by the Taliban

operatives under Assef's command. When Amir is finally able to stand up for Sohrab and is severely beaten by Assef, ironically enough he finds his physical torture liberating. It is as if Assef was helping him lay at rest the haunting memories of guilt about his past when Amir failed to confront Assef and stand up for Hassan, he relishes in his new-found freedom from guilt and remorse: "My body was broken—just how badly I wouldn't find out until later—but I felt healed. Healed at last. I laughed... I was on the ground laughing" (289). As he suffers physical trauma at the hands of Assef, Amir feels "healed" of his mental anguish over his inability to act in the alley when Hassan was raped. He could not compete physically then nor he could match him now but get beaten by Assef seem to allow him to relive the past, to change it, and to feel redeemed in the knowledge that he was able to stand up for a friend, at last, to fulfill his moral obligation toward him. Connecting through compassion with the 'other', caring for the 'other', and coming to terms with the evil within seem to break the karma for Amir as he embraces his guilt and starts a journey of redemption.

## 5. Conclusion

The above analysis analyzed themes of betrayal, guilt, and redemption and how characters in the novel struggle to attain exoneration and atonement especially the main character of the story Amir. Through Amir, the novel tells an absorbing story of a child's coming of age and his struggles with a traumatic past. Read as a bildungsroman, the narrative starts with a joyful child Amir who is completely invested in his periphery country of Afghanistan. His subsequent estrangement with his close friend Hassan and later expatriation to the United States seem to cut him off from those earlier roots. However, a feeling of guilt over the betrayal of his best friend keeps haunting him in the West until he mustards up the courage to take the risk of going back to his war-torn homeland and rescue Sohrab from the Taliban. Having rescued him, Amir could have settled him with a nice Pakistani family. However, he feels obligated to take him to the United States. Having gone through a journey of self-discovery and exoneration, Amir not only finds Sohrab in Afghanistan but also a new and more empowering indigenous identity for himself. Having confronted his traumatic past and after resolving his psychological conflict, Amir assumes a new role and regains his voice as a person.

Whereas Sohrab is brought to 'safety' in the US, war comes to his new homeland soon after him. Amir describes the feeling of disorientation for him and all Afghans when "one Tuesday morning last September, the Twin Towers came crumbling down and, overnight, the world changed (332). The September 9/11 attacks signal the beginning of a new struggle for Amir and all Afghans who have fled the war in their own country. Soon after, the US starts bombing Afghanistan as it is accused of harboring terrorist attackers of the Twin Towers. Amir assumes a different role and starts advocating for Afghans "out of a sense of civic duty" (333). He is a changed person from the

time when he was happy to be living a comfortable life in the west. Having resolved the traumatic reminiscence of his past life, Amir is free from a cycle of guilt and shame that forced him to avoid his homeland of Afghanistan. He is able to integrate fully into the expatriate Afghani community in the US and advocates for their voice and innocence in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers. The novel thus brings us full circle to find Amir rehabilitated at the end of the novel and committed to adding his voice to the voices of his marginalized community in the United States. He can break the cycle of denial and guilt and fully come to terms with his identity as an Afghan expatriate in the west.

Read as an allegorical tale of Afghanistan and its perceptual realization in the west, *The Kite Runner* challenges stereotypical binaries of periphery/center, developing/developed, and barbaric/civilized. Hosseini makes clear how the Afghan characters in the novel are effectively perplexed and disoriented with the events of 9/11 and the subsequent “War on Terror” and precludes any notions of them having answers for why the terrorist attackers of the Twin Towers committed their heinous crime. Through Amir and his traumatic tale of coming to terms with past transgressions, Hosseini puts Afghanistan on the world imaginary as a complex cultural entity that is marked by conflicts, contradictions, and confusion like any country in the world. Through this tale of personal growth and being able to meet the ‘other’ in a ‘third space’ of cultural possibilities, Hosseini suggests the need for compassion and cross-cultural bridges as a way to build a more harmonious world.

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