



AN ANALYSIS OF CONFLICT AND TRAUMA IN THE KITE RUNNER

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Abstract: *The Kite Runner* is a modern classic of our times; not only because of its prose but also because of the way it deals with intricate subjects. In this research, we shall analyze the intertwined themes of conflict and trauma, as it is presented in the novel. Conflict comes in many forms and here we take a look at socio-political conflict, i.e. the turmoil faced by the country, and identity conflict, i.e. the issues of identity faced by individuals. Apart from this, trauma is an important component of the novel and we analyze how it manifests in various characters. Our aim is to uncover the relationship conflict has with trauma, and to see the effect of one on the other.

Keywords: Conflict, Trauma, Identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Kite Runner is a bestselling novel written by Khaled Hosseini, who was born in the Afghan capital of Kabul in 1965. His work which aims to tell the story of Afghans, who are affected by the invasion of the Taliban, is influenced by his own experiences. His father was an Afghan Foreign Ministry diplomat, while his mother was a Farsi and history teacher at a Kabul high school. The Hosseini family was transferred to Paris by the Foreign Ministry in 1976. They were ready to return to Kabul in 1980, but their motherland had already seen a bloody communist coup and the Soviet Army's invasion. The Hosseinis applied for and were given political asylum in the United States, and they settled in San Jose, California, in September 1980.

The impact of Hosseini's life from Kabul to one in a diaspora can be seen in the empathy his work has for the ones affected by socio-political conflict and in the details of his characters. His characters in *The Kite Runner* are also forced into migration and try to build a new life from scratch in a foreign land. To analyse the conflict and the trauma that the characters represent that the paper focuses on, it is important to briefly understand its plot.

II. NARRATIVE

Amir, a Pashtun kid, and Hassan, a Hazara who is the son of Ali, the family's servant, spend their days kite fighting in Kabul in the 1970s in *The Kite Runner*. Hassan is a successful "kite runner," as he knows where the kite will fall without having to observe it. Amir is a competent kite flyer. Amir's father, lovingly known as Baba, is a wealthy trader who adores the boys but is often harsh on Amir. Baba does not understand Amir and does not support his desire to write but Rahim Khan, Baba's closest friend does.

Assef, an older boy inclined towards Nazism and a vicious thirst for violence, frequently mocks and insults Amir for interacting with a Hazara, whom he regards as a lower race. Amir wins the local kite-fighting championship one triumphant day, cutting all other kites in half, and finally earning Baba's admiration. "For you, a thousand times over," Hassan says as he sprints to retrieve the last sliced kite, a beautiful trophy. Hassan, on the other hand, meets Assef in an alleyway after finding the kite. Assef physically beats and rapes Hassan for refusing to give over the kite. Amir sees the crime but is afraid to intervene. He understands that if he fails to bring the kite home, Baba will be disappointed in him.

He feels terrible about the situation, but he knows that telling the truth would ruin any hopes he had for Baba's love, so he keeps quiet about it. It is horrifying on several levels: Amir's cowardice, Assef's harshness, Hassan's victimisation, and the general sentiment among all parties involved that a Hazara does not deserve the respect shown to Afghanistan's ethnic majority. Hassan is shaken by the alleyway event, but he refuses to tell Amir about it. Both boys act as if it never happened. However, Amir's guilt begins to weigh him down. He is unable to continue living because simply seeing Hassan reminds him of his cowardice. Amir's response to all of this is ruthless. Amir decides to drive Ali and Hassan away rather than telling Baba what occurred or revealing to Hassan that he witnessed the rape. Amir stuffs cash and a watch beneath Hassan's mattress after his birthday party. He informs Baba that his belongings have gone missing. Hassan confesses to stealing the money and watch and since he knows Baba will never forgive Amir for his betrayal. Baba is heartbroken when Ali and Hassan leave. Amir is no longer plagued by daily reminders of his weakness and betrayal, but he continues to live in their shadow.

Five years later, in 1979, the Soviet Union intervenes militarily in Afghanistan. Amir and Baba flee to Peshawar, Pakistan, and then to Fremont, California, where they take up residence in a shabby apartment in a run-down building. Baba starts working at a gas station, which appears to be a major setback for him. Baba and Amir supplement their income by selling discarded goods at a flea market every Sunday.

Amir meets Soraya and her family, a fellow refugee. Baba is diagnosed with terminal cancer and passes away shortly after, but not before ensuring that Amir marries Soraya. Amir gets a call from Rahim Khan, who is dying, fifteen years after his wedding, requesting him to come see him in Peshawar. He tells Amir, cryptically, that there is "a way to be good again." (p.168), and Amir is on his way. Rahim Khan informs Amir of what has occurred since his departure from Afghanistan. After the Taliban took power, he, Hassan, and Farzana (Hassan's wife) moved into Baba's house. Sohrab was their firstborn kid. But, in a sad twist of fate, Hassan and Farzana were mercilessly killed by the Taliban, leaving Sohrab orphaned. Sohrab is now stranded in Kabul, with no family or protection. Amir is to go to Kabul and rescue Sohrab, according to Rahim Khan. Rahim Khan further informs Amir that Hassan is his half-brother, implying that Baba slept with Ali's wife, Sanaubar, essentially betraying his servant and friend. Hassan and Amir were never told about it by Baba.

Amir embarks on a mission to find Sohrab in war-torn Afghanistan. He hears that a Taliban officer visited the orphanage where Sohrab was being held and abducted him. The director instructs Amir on where to look for the official. When Amir meets the man, he learns he is actually Assef. Sohrab is imprisoned at Assef's home, where he is abused. If Amir can defeat Assef in a fistfight, Assef offers to release him. Assef then brutally assaults Amir until Sohrab shoots a brass ball into Assef's eye with his slingshot. Sohrab and Amir then escape the house. Sohrab learns about Amir's plans to return to America and maybe adopt him. American authorities, on the other hand, want proof of Sohrab's orphan status. Amir tells Sohrab that he may have to return to the orphanage for a bit while they work out the problem, but Sohrab attempts to suicide because he is afraid of returning to the institution. Fortunately, Amir saves him and takes him back to the United States of America. Sohrab refuses to communicate with Amir or Soraya after his adoption until the former reminisces about Hassan and kites, while the latter shows him some of Hassan's skills. Sohrab only gives Amir a lopsided smile in the end, but Amir accepts it with all his heart as he runs the kite for Sohrab, saying, "For you, a thousand times over." (323)

III. ANALYSIS

The Kite Runner as a trauma narrative is focused on the individual trauma of each character like Amir, Hassan and Baba. Amir's character is more focused on the internal self but the trauma of Hassan and Baba, in the larger space, also represents collective trauma faced by communities they represent. Amir's trauma can be interpreted as 'survivor's guilt', the feeling of having seen someone wronged, not stopping it and escaping the situation without facing any strong consequences for oneself. Amir belongs to Afghanistan, a part of the world where a multitude of people have witnessed some form of violence inflicted on people around them owing to the difficult times their country has seen. His action of running away and

leaving Hassan behind after he was raped show his dissociation from his surroundings as he tries to protect his psyche from further trauma. However this further trauma still recurs from the ‘memory of the event’, which Freud had talked about in his early research on trauma. Cathy Caruth has explained this concept of trauma by Freud in detail:

What is at the heart of Freud’s writing on trauma, both in what it says and in the stories it unwittingly tells, is that trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (Caruth 4)

To stop this recurring trauma, Amir’s mind tells him that if Hassan was no longer in his house or around him, he would be able to escape the guilt that keeps gnawing on his mind. Meanwhile, the silence between them is a symptom of trauma as well as a coping method for Amir.

Even before the unfateful incident, Amir has had an internal conflict about Hassan since childhood. He spends most of his time with Hassan and could be considered as brothers as they grew up together in the same house. However, he is unable to accept Hassan even as a friend to himself or in front of others. Even as a child, something stops him from considering Hassan his equal despite knowing that he loved him and would do anything for him. Apart from the fight or flight syndrome as possible reasons for his inaction on witnessing Hassan being raped, it is also possible that the sense of distance between the two that he constantly maintained in his mind deterred him from immediately acting to save or at least attempt to help Hassan as Assef inflicted violence on him.

Hassan is a complex character to analyse. A major reason is his suppressed voice in the narrative. It could be that Hosseini’s attempt was to write a narrative which reflected the society it was based on. Hassan’s trauma and his complete acceptance of his plight throughout the narrative is a reflection of the violence and trauma his community of the Hazaras were subjected to. This class discrimination and the social conflict it creates is clear in the narrative and can be contrasted with the narrative of Baba and Amir and their “difficult life” of restarting in a new land. Even though the true pathos of the situation lies in the plight of the suppressed classes, who could not escape the horrible times the invasion of the extremists was to bring, Hosseini focuses on the privileged ones who are able to start anew somewhere else.

This brings us to the social structure of Afghanistan. The power politics in Kabul provided the Pashtuns with more privilege than the Hazaras. Despite this, Assef and his resentment towards Hassan for belonging to the lower class and towards Amir for spending time with him despite being a Pashtun is due to the insecurity of any community who enjoys the top position in the hierarchy and is constantly threatened by the existence of the ones lower in the food chain so much that even slightest of their actions would provoke a brutal aggression. This is the manner in which socio-political hierarchies function across space and time, be it hierarchies based on gender, ethnicity or race.

The oppressed are conditioned by this system so deeply over generations that they forget their rights or accept that they are lesser and meant to be treated in this manner. Hassan not only pulls himself through the sexual trauma, which is unimaginably painful for a helpless boy, but also from the betrayal of his friend Amir. He has no complaints or aggression towards Amir, again because he does not think he has the right to. His family leaves when Amir brands Hassan as a thief. How Hassan dealt with the traumatic incident, its memory, the loss of his close friend and father figure, how he struggled in the recurrent violent and frightening events after the rise of Taliban is a long silence in the plot. This silence is a critical aspect of the narrative that needs to be analysed. Critics like IlkaSaal have considered that trauma reflected in literature can be an outlet for people who have experienced similar events in real life to express their own stories. Saal had written in her work, *Trauma Transfer and Narrative Framing in Jonathan Safran Foer’s ‘Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close. Modern Fiction Studies’*:

...bringing the trauma of 9/11 into conversation with other, older collective traumata suggests an attempt to engage the pain of others and to consider the myriad ways in which global power structures implicate one’s own vulnerability in that of others. (Saal 455)

According to this, trauma literature can be a cathartic experience for readers who can express or approach their own similar painful stories, possibly feeling a oneness with the narrative and the character representing their trauma. With these individual stories, trauma literature has the potential to bring a positive impact for the readers by making it clear that they were not alone in not being able to forget the trauma. This is the reason why it has been a recurrent attempt of authors to write more of it. However, *The Kite Runner* does not express the pain of the victim of trauma. Instead, it uses its silence as an echo or reflection of the collective trauma of violence and suppression that people who belong to the Hazara community face.

This unexpressed trauma which is an intrinsic part of this conflict between the Pashtuns and Hazaras is also something that has been passed down since generations. Hassan's father, Ali, had also suffered injustice because of Amir's father, who slept with Ali's wife. Even then, he had not spoken against this injustice and continued to serve him all these years. This trans-generational trauma of the Hazaras is eventually passed onto Hassan's son, Sohrab, who also suffers as a child at the hands of Assef, the same perpetrator who harassed Hassan. However, with Amir's help, and his own courage to hit Assef at the right opportunity, Sohrab escapes and survives, thus putting an end to the long silence. Sohrab's escape is not only a point of redemption for Amir but also a sign of hope from the narrative that there is a chance for the oppressed to escape the powerful, however powerless they are made to feel over time.

While the trauma of one side of the power conflict is delivered in silence, the trauma of the community in power becomes the course of the second half of the narrative. Baba makes the decision of leaving Kabul for America to take his son away from the times of terror he foresaw with the invasion of the Soviets. He looks forward to being well-established and well-settled in the host country and accepting life beyond their original homeland. He starts building a new life with Amir but eventually he does not find the same lifestyle or sense of belonging. As time passes, the narrative focuses on identity issues either "over there" (i.e., in the real—or symbolic— homeland) or "over here" (i.e., inside the host country), including the difficulties of maintaining the identity of both the people and the homeland, and the challenges of preserving social or political status in the host state. (Shain 117)

The identity definitely suffers for diasporic communities. 'Baba loved the idea of America' (109) when they reached there. He told Amir,

There are only three real men in the world, Amir... He'd count them off on his fingers: America the brash savior... (109)

One of the incidents described in the novel is an example of the conflict Baba has to face. His life in Kabul was one of privileges and status, however, he cannot accept the coldness he is treated with in America. They visited a bookstore where Baba expected the owners to let him buy oranges with a check as he did not have cash on him. Their request for his ID makes him furious.

"He wants to see my license," Baba bellowed in Farsi. "Almost two years we've bought his damn fruits and put money in his pocket and the son of a dog wants to see my license!" ... "Does he think I'm a thief?" Baba said, his voice rising. People had gathered outside. They were staring. "What kind of a country is this? No one trusts anybody!" (Hosseini 111)

Baba's attempt to find Kabul in California makes him disappointed, frustrated, bitter and sad. However he lives through it by toiling at the gas station for a better life for his son. He is a part of the diaspora who believe they are not – and may never be – totally accepted by the new society. As a result, they feel partly estranged and insulated from their host society and see their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place where they belong.

On the other hand, Amir embraces America as it is a place which does not know his past and where he can forget his sins. He lives in America in his youth and appreciates all his father has done for him. While his father never really becomes American, Amir's education and profession as a novelist makes him feel more American. When he returns to Afghanistan to see if he can get a chance at redemption with Hassan, he 'feels like a tourist in his own country'. To which his companion, Farid, asks if he still thinks of Afghanistan as his own country. (203)

However, it is soon seen that he cannot be disconnected from his roots so easily. Even when in America, he chooses a life partner and people he connects with are from Afghanistan. It evinces their connection with each other as they preserve a collective memory about their original homeland.

I sat against one of the house's clay walls. The kinship I felt suddenly for the old land ... it surprised me. I'd been gone long enough to forget and be forgotten. I had a home in a land that might as well be in another galaxy to the people sleeping on the other side of the wall I leaned against. I thought I had forgotten about this land. But I hadn't ... Maybe Afghanistan hadn't forgotten me either. (Hosseini 211)

He is also able to see the difference in his country from when he lived there. The poverty of his host's family is evident and the role Taliban played in impoverishing the common people is pointed at in their conversation.

"I'm sorry we can't offer you meat," Wahid said. "Only the Taliban can afford meat now."

"This looks wonderful," I said. It did too. I offered some to him, to the kids, but Wahid said the family had eaten before we arrived ... As I ate, I noticed Wahid's boys, all three thin with dirt-caked faces and short-cropped brown hair under their skullcaps, stealing furtive glances at my digital wristwatch. (208-209)

The gap between the host country and his homeland seen through Amir's eyes is to evince how the diaspora is in a perpetual conflict of being able to enjoy the privileges the host country provides and at the same time, feel guilty for their people back home not having access to the same. The characters in the narrative represent a large Afghan diaspora existing in the world.

Among the various groups involved in the post-conflict dynamics, the Afghan diaspora is an important participant. In relation to the size of the state, Afghanistan has a large and diverse diaspora. It is estimated that there are some 300,000 settled in the United States, at least 150,000 in UAE, 125,000 in Germany, and smaller numbers in Canada, Australia, and across Europe (Koser, 2014).

The problem of the conflict of the Afghan diasporic community is thus a large one. Hosseini's narrative deals with the trauma of Afghan people through its characters. But it can offer healing of this trauma only for one of them. Amir returns to Afghanistan to find Hassan. He learns of Hassan's execution by the Taliban making another poignant note of the trauma of violence, which has become a part of daily lives of the people in Afghanistan. He finds an opportunity to find redemption for his sin of betraying Hassan and decides to act on it. He feels a sense of healing for his guilt when he manages to save Hassan's son Sohrab from Assef, a member of the Taliban.

The other characters, Ali and Hassan, die without getting a chance to heal their trauma. Had there been a solution to the socio-cultural and political conflict between the Hazaras and the Pashtuns or later, the Hazaras and the Taliban; or a way to protest the existing hierarchy that forced the Hazaras into generations of oppression, they would have found a way to heal too. The only hope the narrative provides is Sohrab's escape. It is significant to understand here that Sohrab as a Hazara would probably also have lived a life similar to his father and grandfather without Amir's help. It can thus be interpreted that a solution to the conflict lies in a sense of brotherhood and empathy transgressing the existing socio-political issues. However, as the narrative reflects, it is only a hope and only for a few fortunate individuals while millions of people still live in conflict and survive their trauma daily.

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