

When Memories Haunt: A Psychological Approach to Trauma in Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

عندما تطارد الذكريات: نهج نفسي للصدمة في فيلم حسيني عدا الطائرة الورقية

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Abstract

This thesis is a psychoanalytic study of Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner*. The life of the Afghani people is captured in the novel and how the regret the main character feels for not doing certain things that can change the course of his life. The characters of the novel are haunted by their childhood memories. Being possessed by these traumatic memories control their subsequent actions and behaviors. How memories can traumatize these characters, and their reactions once they find themselves in similar situations that remind them of what they have experienced are explored and analyzed. The current study anchors its interpretative structure in the traditional, psychoanalytic framework, it aims to diverge from and expand it in different ways. It interprets the trauma victims' silence or uncreatability as an intentional act of resistance rather than their failure to remember and relate their stories. Moreover, it reads the novel in the context and spirit of recovery rather than within the traditional trauma theory's limited theoretical frame of acting out, madness, and illness.

Keywords: Trauma, Pashtuns, Hazara.

الخلاصة:

هذه الأطروحة عبارة عن دراسة تحليلية نفسية لرواية خالد حسيني عداء الطائرة الورقية. يتم تصوير حياة الشعب الأفغاني في الرواية وكيف تشعر الشخصية الرئيسية بالندم لعدم القيام بأشياء معينة والتي يمكن أن تغير مجرى حياته. شخصيات الرواية تطاردها ذكريات طفولتهم. إن امتلاك هذه الذكريات المؤلمة يتحكم في تصرفاتهم وسلوكياتهم اللاحقة. كيف يمكن للذكريات أن تصيب هذه الشخصيات بصدمة نفسية ، وكيف يتم استكشاف وتحليل ردود أفعالهم بمجرد أن يجدون أنفسهم في مواقف مماثلة تذكرهم بما مروا به. تركز الدراسة الحالية على هيكلها التفسيري في إطار التحليل النفسي التقليدي، وتهدف إلى الابتعاد عنه وتوسيعه بطرق مختلفة. يفسر صمت ضحايا الصدمة أو عدم قابليتهم للإبداع على أنه عمل مقاومة متعمد بدلاً من فشلهم في تذكر قصصهم وربطها. علاوة على ذلك، تقرأ الرواية في سياق وروح التعافي بدلاً من الإطار النظري المحدود لنظرية الصدمة التقليدية المتمثل في التمثيل والجنون والمرض.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصدمة، البشتون، الهزارة. (تأكد الكلمات ترجمة)

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 Traditional and Psychological Trauma Theories:

The attention paid to trauma studies in literary criticism witnessed a significant flourish in 1996 when Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* was published along with Kali Tal's *World of Hurt: Reading the Literature and Trauma*. The early conversance and research spread the notion of literary trauma theory by placing it in the frame of unrepresentable events which cannot be expressed or portrayed. A psychoanalytic post-structural approach pioneered by Caruth was introduced to define trauma as a problem of the unconscious which is unsolvable, therefore trauma being represented as a problem of the unconscious portrays an inherent contradiction of experience and language (Balaev 2014).

Caruth in her book *Trauma and Experience: Introduction* defines traumatic stress as the response of some suppressing and overwhelming events. Sometimes the response is delayed, and they appear in the form of frequently repeated encroaching hallucinations, dreams, thoughts, and behaviors resulting from the events. Furthermore, she adds, the events are not immediately and fully experienced, rather experienced afterward when the events possess the one who experienced it (Caruth 1914). The point behind Caruth's definition is to suggest that these traumatic events hit with a great force that fails in the brain to absorb or record the traumatic event which is

in action. Nevertheless, the conscious does not remember what happened until the memory of the traumatic event shows up in flashbacks, dreams, and nightmares. Based on her framework, trauma is non-representable and mysterious and therefore is pathological. This means that her model is driven by the notion that trauma is genuinely incomprehensible, disconnected, and therefore not representable. In other words, the nature of trauma being non-representable means that trauma is unspeakable, not expressed in language (Caruth 1914).

Scholars embraced this concept and theorized it in their scholarly endeavors to explore psychological issues of people being confronted with violent experiences. Initially, the effects of the traumatic violent events have been recognized under several names mostly chosen concerning the World War I realities: shell shock, traumatic neurosis, fright neurosis, war neurosis, and nervous shock (Joseph 1998)

Tracing its origins, the term trauma is derived from the Greek trauma meaning a wound or injury that is apparent on the body. However, the term trauma refers to a wound or injury in the mind rather than the body (Caruth, 1914). Moreover, trauma as a concept emerged from Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud's theories about hysteria at the beginning of the twentieth century. Janet and Freud observed that women with hysteria develop a kind of dissociative personality in response to trauma and other events which lower their integrative mental capacity (Moskowitz 2008).

Trauma theory and literary texts were brought together for the first time by Anne Whitehead to examine the literary potentials of trauma, describing trauma fiction as a recent genre that emerged with trauma theory. This combination of trauma theory and trauma fiction elaborates on the different implications of trauma and its aesthetic values which are found in memory (Whitehead 2004). Changes in the psychological definitions of trauma, semiotics, rhetorical, and social concerns marked the evolution of the psychological trauma theories which are an undeniable part of the study of literature and society (Balev 2014) Trauma and the effects of trauma have received detailed descriptions in both scientific and clinical research in the last half-century. This wave of research and investigation in the field witnessed the efforts of many scientists, psychiatrists, and writers. Examples may include Figley (1995), who was an American psychiatrist, and Judith

Herman, author of the landmark book *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), (Lutisha and Flynn 2020)

Herman who is a part-time professor of psychology at Cambridge Health Alliance defines trauma events as extraordinary since they engulf people's lives. Therefore, this assumption is because these events disconnect and disturb a person's system of life and care, in other words, the connection between the units in a person's system is disconnected which causes the system's failure. Moreover, it removes the sense of control and meaning in it (Herman 2015).

Similarly, as an extension of this idea, Karen Saakvitne after investigating sexual abuse experience in a person's childhood, explained trauma as an objective event that threatens a person's life after their subjective experience of that event. This experience becomes a continuous threat in their lives (Lutisha and Flynn 2020).

Herman believes that in the study of psychological trauma, there have been frequent alternations between cyclical periods of active inquiry and neglect. She writes that from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century, psychological trauma has revealed itself in the public consciousness in a specific form which has to do with three political movements. The first form to come to the surface was hysteria, commonly related to the psychological disorder of women during the nineteenth century. The study of hysteria was facilitated by the emergence of the anticlerical, secular political movement of the late nineteenth century in France. The second form of trauma had various names, including shell shock, or combat neurosis (Herman 2015), the explorations of which was initiated in the aftermath of WWI, and it culminated after the Vietnam War in England and the United States when the political context was one of the anti-war movements. The most recent form of trauma is intertwined with sexual and domestic violence. Investigating this form of trauma started after the emergence of women's liberation movements in Western Europe and North America in the 1970s. Today's understanding of psychological trauma is based on the combination of these three distinct lines of inquiry (Herman 2015). This means that each time the intermingling of politics and science has been a key aspect in the emergence of trauma in its many forms.

It was not until 1980, in the third edition of the *American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III), that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder became a recognized diagnostic entity. DSM-III covers not only collective but also personal traumas: rape and sexual assault-related traumas (gender-based trauma) and those experiences that are in the companion of others such as military combat, genocide, and the Holocaust (Horvitz 2000; Diedrich 2018).

2.1 Hosseini and *The Kite Runner*:

Khaled Hosseini was born into a home where both parents were passionate about education. Kabul is where he was born. Despite his formal familial circumstances, he grew up in a nice environment and became friends with Shi'a Muslims. He spent his time as an immigrant composing stories (Laila 2017). Khaled Hosseini, like the novel's protagonist Amir, was born in Kabul, Afghanistan. He relocated to the United States of America in 1980. He is one of the world's most well-known authors, having written three *The New York Times* bestsellers: *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and *And the Mountains Echoed*. In addition, he serves as a goodwill envoy for the UNHCR and the UN Refugee Agency. He is also the founder of the non-profit organization "The Khalid Hosseini Foundation," which gives humanitarian aid to Afghans (Bammi2021).

His current challenges, according to Laila, affected his literary style, which includes his difficulties and experiences as an immigrant. Hosseini's writing aims to remind readers that the conflict in Afghanistan has pushed the country's socioeconomic conditions to an all-time low. For example, a youngster may be severely raped by another child. The American audience responds well to Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner*. According to *Nielsen Book Scan*, his work was the best-seller of 2005. There are social statuses in Afghan culture that categorize people into several identities. Pashtun and Hazara are characters from *The Kite Runner*. This socioeconomic position is reflected in two characters in this novel. Amir is an example of Pashtun, whereas Hassan is an example of Hazara. Pashtun has the highest status, whilst Hazara has the lowest. This narrative includes

religious divisions as well. There are two types of Muslims in Afghanistan. The first is Shia, and the second is Sunny (Laila 2017).

The novel is, as Prasad explains, primarily focused with the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and the Taliban era, without which no study of Afghanistan would be complete without a study of starvation, conflict, landmines, refugees, and so on. Hosseini fled Afghanistan when he was 11 years old, when his father was assigned to the Afghan Embassy in Paris. Following the 1978 coup and Russian invasion, the Hosseinis moved to the United States, where they were granted political asylum in 1980 (Prasad 2020).

The novel's opening words depict Afghanistan in the 1970s:

I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter Of 1975[...] That was long time ago , but it 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. (Hoseini 1)

The above depiction of the image reflects the life of the Pashtuns, who are believed to be Afghanistan's royal dynasty, superior to many other ethnic groups such as Hazara, Uzbeks, and Kuchis. In the first section of the novel, Hosseini embarks in sentimental childhood reenactment of a lost Afghanistan during the latter days of the monarchy Zahir Shah and the dictatorship that destroyed him. Moreover, one can observe that the opening of the novel in the above quotation shows the attached stings between the Ameer who is the speaker here, and his past life, in a way he is still stuck in it.

The first Afghani author who effectively fictionalizes his culture for a western audience is Khaled Hosseini. Blending the daily struggles of regular people with the horrific historical sweep of a shattered country in a complex and soul-searching story shows how Afghanistan has gone from a monarchy to a republic in the blink of an eye. Poverty, economic catastrophe, terror, and uncertainty characterize life in Afghanistan as a result of the Russian-Taliban conflict. This type of battle damaged Afghanistan's communities, streets, and other physical infrastructure. This book makes these points very

evident. The reader may easily envision what Khaled Hosseini describes as the country's true history. The Taliban destroyed not just the country, natural wealth, and innocent people, but also the cultural legacy that had been constructed hundreds of years before. (Prasad 2020). The shift in the political situation of Afghanistan and the fall of its monarchy is captured thoroughly in the novel and to what level it has affected the life of the people. As a result of the Russian invasion, many Afghans were forced to flee their homes and belongings, seeking safety in neighboring countries. Similarly, Amir and his father are doomed to abandon their homeland. Hosseini tries to depict what sort of life the refugees had and the different jobs they did. The shift in the politics of the country is also reflected in the life of its people and how it has changed. An example of that is Amir's father, from being one of the wealthiest men in Kabul, to an assistant at a gas station.

In an article by "Erika Milvy which is about salon's interview with Hosseini", the question of to what extent the author has put his own life experiences and personal life in the novel is explained: "Did you create the character of Amir as a stand-in for you?" (Milvy 2007). Hosseini in answering the question partially approves, but says no more than the majority of first-time writers who write in first person. The backdrop in 1970s Kabul, Amir's house, the films he watches, and, of course, the kite flying and love of storytelling are all from my own upbringing. The plot is fictitious. Salon also asks him about the relationship between Amir and Hassan, and if it is in anyway related to Hosseini: "What about the relationship between Amir and his servant, Hassan, a friendship that nearly transcends class lines but does not in the end. Was that based on something from your own life?" (Milvy 2007), Hosseini, for the second time, puts the audience in suspicion, not telling yes or no. He answers telling the audience that there was a similar person, a guy like Hassan from the novel with a different age whom for a number of years, this Hazara guy who was 38 years old, worked for Hosseini's family. As he talks about this man, tells the audience that they ended up becoming excellent friends. The Hazara guy trained him in flying kites, and he assisted him in learning to read; it was a great connection, and he finally left. The most surprising thing, as Hosseini says that he finished [writing] the entire work without thinking about him once. Nevertheless, once he finished, he told himself, "Oh my God, of course

that's where this character comes from!" The powers of the subconscious were surprising to me (Milvy 2007).

2.1.1 Trauma as A Consequence of Sexual Violence:

Readings of *The Kite Runner* tend to emphasize the narrator's quest to right unforgivable wrongs as a personal history of unatoned misdeeds. Paying attention to these pivotal events provides a more nuanced view on the type of abuse that serves as the novel's lynchpin. After all, it is the rape of a young Hazara (Hassan) by an aggressive Pashtun (Assef) that significantly drives the plot, prompting the protagonist, Amir, to return to his hometown in a desperate attempt to atone for witnessing this sexual crime without interfering. This and other such incidents in the book are better understood in the context of pervasive and indiscriminate sexual abuse (Banita 2020).

Hosseini's dedication to accurately portraying Afghan history for a Western audience is most evident in his representation of Afghanistan's national pain, which he transforms into Hassan's rape an occurrence seen by Amir. Hosseini presents Hassan's rape and subsequent anguish as an allegory for the turbulence that has engulfed Afghanistan since a revolution in 1973 overthrew the monarchy and prompted decades of political uncertainty, beginning with a communist takeover and Russian invasion in 1979. These events are only obliquely mentioned, happening silently in the backdrop of the novel's main plot. In Hassan's rapist, Assef, we see a narrative portrayal of all the factions European powers, different strong elites, and subsequently the Taliban whose brutality has afflicted Afghanistan for years (O'Brien 2018).

Translations like these are helpful because, according to Stef Craps, Western trauma conceptualizations are not always suited for direct translation into non-Western contexts. Craps considers the imperative within trauma theory to diversify and address non-Western contexts in *Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma Theory in the Global Age*, arguing that the uncritical cross cultural application of psychological concepts developed in the West amounts to a form of cultural imperialism. Simply couching the experience of individuals

living in non-Western areas in Western terms presume the universality of the latter perspective and reinforces the Other's subjugation (Craps 2014). Such elements include economic dominance or political oppression, as well as racism and other types of continuous oppression that cannot be encompassed by Western concepts of trauma, and probably most pertinent to Hosseini's mission in *The Kite Runner*, is communicating the pain born by persistent conflict and bloodshed to a Western environment that is mainly inexperienced with constant upheaval (Craps 2014).

As Hassan is attacked by his attackers, Amir's narrative viewpoint destabilizes and drifts away from what is happening in the alley. The narrative is broken by unprompted recollections and remembrances of dreams a rare instance of upheaval in a work that normally avoids playing with form or structure. The reader is unsure if the recollection enters our mature, narrator Amir's, awareness or that of his younger self. Given the nature of trauma and the instability of perspective it generates, this blurring of the lines is intended, portraying the moment when Hosseini's protagonist is forced to confront a horror so vast that he is unable to fully digest its enormity (O'Brien 2018).

Before the rape scene, the author gives the reader a foreshadowing of what might happen next. Hosseini compares fighting kites to a battle. He describes the way children prepare themselves the night before to soldiers getting ready the night before a battle: "In Kabul, Fighting Kites was a little like going to war" (Hosseini 47) in this context just like how the fate of a soldier is never known in the war, what is going to happen to Amir and Hassan next day is not clear, no one knows who is going to survive. Hosseini makes this more obvious when he describes Amir's feeling when stepping into the field of the fighting kites: "suddenly I wanted to withdraw. Pack it all in, go back home. [...] when I already knew the outcome" (Hosseini 58) feeling scared and frightened Amir anticipates his failure. Similar to a soldier in the war when anticipating his death before the battle. Nevertheless Amir knows that if he fails his father will be disappointed in him which worsens his situation. Before the scene which will change the course of the novel and cause a trauma in the life of Amir and Hassan, and during the fighting kites' scene, another foreshadowing is observed: "The tension in the air was as taut as the glass string I was tugging with my bloody hands. [...] But all I heard __all I

willed myself to hear __ was the thudding of blood in my head” (Hosseini 61) The narrator through Amir’s thoughts wants to indirectly tell the readers what might happen next and this next will damage the relationship between Hassan and Amir it also creates the trauma in the lives of both children. Although Hassan is the one who gets raped, but Amir lives the traumatic scene for the rest of his live when everything around him will be a remainder of Hassan and his failure in saving him. The scene which will continue hunting Amir’s mind is Hassan standing against Aseef and his two friends, protecting Amir’s kite, while Amir watches him get abused and raped: “Hassan was standing at the blind end of the alley in a defiant stance: fists curled, legs slightly apart. Behind him, sitting on piles of scrap and rubble, was the blue kite. My key to Baba’s heart” (Hosseini 67).

The story has successfully addressed Amir's reaction to childhood trauma. His best buddy Hassan is sexually molested by Aseef, while Amir stands by helplessly:

I exhaled, slowly, quietly. I felt paralyzed. I watched them close in on the boy I’d grown up with, the boy whose harelipped face had been my first memory. (Hosseini 67)

I STOPPED WATCHING, turned away from the alley. Something warm was running down my wrist. I blinked, saw I was still biting down on my fist, hard enough to draw blood from the knuckles. I realized something else. I was weeping from just around the corner, I could hear Aseef’s quick, rhythmic grunts. (Hosseini 72)

The incident puts him in a condition of psychological trauma that undermines his entire sense of safety and security to the point where the shock is followed by numbness to the point where Amir is unaware that he was biting his wrist so hard that blood had exited his skin. Amir also notices that he has been sobbing on his way back from the alley. Amir's anguish can be attributed to the remorse he felt as a result of abandoning Hassan, who had always been faithful to Amir. Amir is haunted by the memories of betraying Hassan and his reluctance to stand up for what is right. Amir, like other traumatized children, is unable to communicate his trauma in words. The symptoms of Amir's post-traumatic disorder include headache,

suffocation, nightmares, insomnia, eating disorder, avoidance, isolation, and mental distraction. The post-traumatic disorder of Amir is observed in his own words as:

I closed my eyes, turned my face to the sun. Little shapes formed behind my eyelids, like hands playing shadows on the wall. They twisted, merged, formed a single image: Hassan's brown corduroy pants discarded on a pole of old bricks in the alley. (Hosseini 79)

Amir's mind was busy as he replayed the attack in his imagination. Because his mind's emotions were so agitated, he could constantly find painful recollections whenever he saw Hassan. He was so upset that he couldn't sleep as a result of his regular nightmares: "That was the night I became an insomniac." (Hosseini 81) He was so affected with grief that he pictured himself to be a horrible monster: "[...] Except he had been wrong about that. There was a monster in the lake. It had grabbed Hassan by the ankles, dragged him to the murky bottom. I was that monster." (Hosseini 81) One can observe the disintegration of Amir's relationship with Hassan as well as the failure of language as Hosseini's narrative develops in the wake of this trauma. Notably, the reader never experiences Hassan's bodily or emotional suffering since the narrative never flips to his point of view during the rape. For his part, Hassan doesn't offer to describe the attack or mention Amir's blatant refusal to acknowledge that something bad happened during his apparent absence. As he finds himself suddenly unable to communicate or find language to help him reacquaint himself with his surroundings, Hassan exhibits the normal symptoms of trauma (O'Brien 2018). As Amir's recalls "He began to say something and his voice cracked. He closed his mouth, opened it, and closed it again. Took a step back. Wiped his face" (Hosseini 74) with Hassan's behavior one can observe that Hassan soon gave up trying to communicate his awful experience since he was making no progress.

From this moment on, the trauma lives as something unspeakable between Amir and Hassan, tearing apart their formerly easy relationship and transforming it into one of uncomfortable, tense exchanges until its eventual collapse. Hassan finally reappears, hesitant to handle the aftermath of the incident, and he appears to recognize his impotence and the futility of focusing on his pain. Hassan's silence reflects those disenfranchised

communities that remain the mute Other within the narrative. As a result of the trauma, both boys are left unable to communicate their experiences. Even adult Amir, reporting from the present, cannot identify Hassan's attack as rape. Instead, he keeps referring to it loosely as something that “happened in the alley” (Hosseini 74). Hosseini shows the reader how failing to recognize or give voice to the anguish caused by violence may have far-reaching implications. The relationship between Amir and Hassan never was like how it was before the traumatic incident. Both of the boys tried to keep away from each other, since they remind each other of what happened that day in the alley. They try to overcome and forget their trauma as much as they can. As the days pass, Amir describes his feeling and what happens when facing Hassan or Hassan being around the room “Lately, every time Hassan was around, I was getting a headache” (Hosseini 82), “Because when he was around, the oxygen speed out of the room. My chest tightened and I couldn’t draw enough air.” (Hosseini 83)

Amir's transfer to the West does not signify the pivotal moment in his bildungsroman that the reader may anticipate due to the developmental standstill brought on by trauma. Significantly, the effects of Hassan's trauma are not further examined, and his departure from Baba's home represents Hosseini's last interaction with Hassan's rape-related effects. The story chooses to focus on the affluent Pashtun child and follow his ascent to the position of national advocate, leaving Hassan behind. Even though Amir seems to be successfully assimilating into Western culture, he is nevertheless unable to let go of his past. Amir's anxiety in the West is used by Hosseini to reflect the awkward position Afghanistan holds in Western discourse. Amir did not succeed in building a life free from the shadow of his tragedy after departing Afghanistan. An air of anxiety pervades this part of the story as Amir's existence in America never fully provides the escape he craves. Eventually, Amir finds employment as a novelist, marries Soraya, and grieves the loss of his father (O’Brien 2018).

After several years, Amir ultimately went back to Afghanistan and confronted the source of his pain. Importantly, given that the narrative is set in Afghanistan, Hosseini must grapple with the challenges of witnessing pain that happened while Amir was abroad but that he was oblivious to. Amir is forced to adopt an identity that he is no longer entirely able to recognize as

his own. As a result, Amir's identity shifts into the story's main topic, shifting from his upbringing as a native Afghan to his current identity as an outsider attempting to fit in in a country he can no longer unproblematically represent.

The narrative's climax is Amir's encounter with Assef, a powerful Taliban commander and the abductor of Hassan's orphaned son, which represents his struggle to cope with the long-lasting effects of childhood tragedy. Assef's defeat serves as a rejection of the destructive powers for which he represents, allowing the audience to view this confrontation more accurately as the extermination of demons. Amir is ultimately able to convey to Soraya the magnitude of his trauma after going through this process, and he then advances toward the fulfilment of his bildungsroman

Then I did what I hasn't done in fifteen years of marriage: I told my wife everything. Everything. I had pictured this moment so many times, dreaded it, but, as I spoke, I felt something lifting off my chest. (Hosseini 298)

Following this admission, it is decided that Sohrab, Hassan's child, should be adopted and transferred to the United States by Amir and Soraya. However, the adoption procedure is tough, and Sohrab is further traumatized as a result. Sohrab is unable to tolerate the prospect of returning even briefly to an orphanage before the adoption can be formalized, narrowly averting death in the endeavor. As a result of this tragedy, Sohrab is rendered voiceless for the rest of the novel, and he represents the long-term impact of trauma on succeeding generations of minority voices.

3.1 Conclusion:

By the end of the book, Hosseini presents Amir as a character who has finally realized his identity and restored his ability to tell the sorts of stories required for the goals of world literature. Readers of *The Kite Runner* first meet Amir at this point in the novel, and Hosseini has now brought the readers full circle to see him prepared to take on his role as a voice of the margins. Amir may now represent Hosseini, Hassan, and Sohrab without being hampered by the trauma that silenced him as a child. This allows

readers to experience Afghanistan's turbulent history via the symbolic retelling of his coming of age story.

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