

**FLYING FREE: 'THE KITE RUNNER' AS A TRAUMA NARRATIVE**

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**Abstract:**

*'The Kite Runner' is a best-selling novel written by Afghan American author Khaled Hosseini. The novel speaks about the impact of sexual harassment on the psyche of children. The story is narrated by its lead character Amir who is a Pashtun and belongs to the upper social class. His best friend Hassan is a Hazara who belongs to a socially backward class. Both Amir and Hassan are inseparable best friends until the day when Amir witnesses Hassan being raped by Aseef. Amir ignores the incident and hides in silence. Rather, he drives away Hassan from his home with a false accusation. Later, political instability in Afghanistan forces Amir and his father to flee to Pakistan and later to the United States. Years later Amir gets a call from his uncle when he becomes aware that Hassan has been killed and that he was Amir's half-brother. He also learns that Hassan's son Sohrab is in Taliban's clutches. Amir takes it as a call for his redemption and sets to Taliban ruled Afghanistan to save Sohrab and bring him back to the United States. This study focuses on the role of socio-cultural factors in bringing up a healthy society. The message of this narrative is that social stratification of individuals or groups makes them an easy victim. A broader understanding of social equality can help in preventing traumatic evils like childhood rape thereby creating a safer society.*

**Keywords:** *Childhood Sexual Abuse, Rape, Betrayal, Guilt, Trauma, Redemption.*

Childhood sexual abuse is one of the most devastating events that induce fear, shame, depression, and anxiety to the mind of the victim. Rape during childhood is particularly gruesome because the victim is too young to understand, express, and seek help to deal with the situation. As argued by Judith Lewis Herman in 'Trauma and Recovery' (1992), during the untreated phase the victim can feel helpless, shocked, and overwhelmed losing the sense of control, meaning, and connection. If left unhealed the victim's psyche can be destroyed resulting in a lifetime of post-traumatic stress disorders altering their personality altogether. As stated by Cathy Caruth in 'Trauma: Exploration in Memory' (1995), and 'Unclaimed Experience' (1996) post-traumatic stress disorders can be observed by the change in social participation, day-to-day activities, emotional health, spiritual well-being, education, work, leisure, and rest activities of the victim. Other symptoms may include the change in temper, aggression, irritability, amnesia, numbness, avoidance, declining performance, change in regular sleeping patterns, and many more. The recovery begins when the victim fully recognizes the traumatic incident. However, it can prove to be extraordinarily challenging for the victim. In certain cases, the victims can suppress the memories of trauma in their subconscious mind whereas in other cases they recollect the memories of trauma through triggers. The victim's mind struggles between refusing to accept the incidence and the will to overcome the trauma. Sometimes the trauma might have caused years back, but the recovery may be triggered by current experiences or situations which may demand action from the victim. Though trauma is a medical and psychological topic of study, it is surprising that more influential and detailed insights about trauma have come from the field of literary sources. The gradual spurt of literary studies in the field of childhood trauma can be attributed to the literary work of Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman who explored the topic during

the early 1990s. Since then, literarians across cultures have been exploring creativity combining literature and childhood trauma.

The Kite Runner is the first novel written by Afghan American author Khaled Hosseini which has been listed as one of the bestselling novels of all times. The story is set among the suburbs of Kabul during the period of the 1970s when Afghanistan moves from monarchy to republic leadership. The narrative explores trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, and recovery through the view of its main character Amir who witnesses the sexual abuse of his best friend Hassan. Though both Hassan and Amir become the victims of trauma both use a different behavioral pattern to depict post-traumatic stress disorder. While Hassan is successful in suppressing his triggers of trauma, Amir struggles with the memories of trauma until he fights his demons and gains redemption from trauma. Apart from post-traumatic stress disorder the narrative also sheds light on factors like socio-cultural influences, and guilt that lead to trauma.

The narrative begins with Amir explaining his guilt resulting from unatoned childhood trauma that continues to haunt him for twenty-six years. He remembers of his childhood where Hassan serves Amir as his master just the way his father Ali serves Amir's father. Irrespective of their differences, both Amir and Hassan are best friends. Both Amir and Aseef study at the same school and live in the same neighborhood. Aseef is a Pashtun who has extreme hatred towards Hazaras. He hates Amir's friendship with Hassan and eyes later to teach him a lesson. He believes that Hazaras like Hassan are insignificant to Afghanistan and they should be driven off from Afghanistan. On the day of kite running competition, Hassan runs to fetch the kite for Amir but he gets into the clutches of Hassan who rapes him by the alley. Amir searches for Hassan to find him being raped by Aseef but he doesn't protest. Rather he helplessly watches Hassan from a distance and leaves the scene in shock. Amir is shattered to the extent that he is unable to call for help. His helplessness leaves him in a state of disconnection. Deep inside his mind, Amir's betrayal to Hassan is also influenced by his social supremacy for which he feels guilty when he realizes the impact of his inaction on Hassan. During the 1970s the Hazaras faced political marginalization, social deprivation, and powerlessness in Afghanistan whereas the Pashtuns had a rich and luxurious way of life. The role of Hazaras remained limited to that of serving the Pashtuns. Amir is brought up in a value-based family with a broader mindset which makes him feel guilty for his inaction in protecting Hassan. Every time Amir sees Hassan his trauma gets triggered. He avoids seeing Hassan through altering his schedule but finds it difficult to heal himself. To help Hassan get away from the oppressed environment and get rid of his guilt Amir plots to hide the watch that his father had gifted him along with some money at Hassan's home and frames Hassan for it. When Amir's father knows about the theft, he questions Hassan to which Hassan readily agrees. Though Amir's father forgives Hassan, Ali decides to go away with Hassan to Hazarajat. It is then that Amir realizes that both Hassan and Ali knew that Amir had seen him in the alley and yet didn't attempt to save Hassan. Ali's facial expression worsen Amir's guilt. As Hassan and Ali leave the scene changes with the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan leading to arrests, bombings, and other atrocities on Afghan citizens. Life takes a different turn for Amir and his father who fled Kabul for Pakistan and later to the United States. Though Amir tries to forget the trauma and lead a normal life in the United States by attending college, getting married, and becoming a successful author; the trauma remains with him until the day he gets a call from his father's friend Rahim Khan. It was a call for the redemption from his sins to Hassan. Amir learns from Rahim Khan that Hassan was his half-brother and has been killed leaving a son in an orphanage. Determined to correct his mistakes, Amir decides to save Hassan's son, Sohrab. He returns to Taliban ruled Afghanistan to seek Sohrab where he finds the child in captivity of Aseef who has become a prominent Taliban leader. When Amir offers money to take away Sohrab with him, Aseef refuses and tells that he is on a mission to wipe out non-natives from Afghanistan. Though Amir fears Aseef's intentions, he gathers up the courage to fight for what was believed was ethical. It was something he had failed to do for Hassan. This intimidates Aseef and he agrees to free Sohrab on the condition to fight with

him and win. The thought of winning from Aseef was far from reality for Amir as he had never fought with anyone throughout his life. But he decides to do it for Hassan and Sohrab. During the fight, Amir's jaws were shattered, ribs snapped, left cheekbone snapped, and teeth were broken. Both Amir and Sohrab manage to win the fight and they succeed in escaping from the evil clutches of Aseef. Amir promises Sohrab that he will adopt Sohrab and he will never have to go to the orphanage again. However, the adoption process is hindered due to legal aspects and Sohrab is left with the only option of returning to the orphanage. Sohrab's past experiences haunt him, and he is terrorized by the news of going back to orphanage again that he almost kills himself by slitting his veins. However, he is saved by the Doctors. Amir soon finds a way to adopt Sohrab and gives him a new home in California. Though he is safe with Amir, Sohrab maintains silence and connects from Amir and his wife. It is during the celebration of Afghan New Year that Amir offers a kite to Sohrab for him to fly. Initially, Sohrab remains aloof but shatters his limitations to fly the kite along with Amir. He enjoys flying kite with Amir as a smile escapes Sohrab's lips paving way for his recovery from trauma.

The narrative has effectively explored the impact of childhood trauma caused to Amir as his best friend Hassan is sexually abused by Aseef while Amir witnesses the whole incident helplessly. The event leaves him in a state of psychological trauma refuting his whole sense of safety, and security such that the shock is followed by numbness to the extent that Amir doesn't realize that he was biting his wrist so hard that blood had escaped his skin. Amir also takes time to realize that he has been crying on his way back from the alley. Amir's trauma can be said to be primarily led by the feeling of guilt that resulted from abandoning Hassan who had always remained loyal to Amir. The memory of betraying Hassan and his inability to stand up for right doing haunts Amir. Like most traumatized children, Amir also fails to express his trauma in words. Amir's post-traumatic stress disorder includes mental distraction, loss of appetite, avoidance, silence, nightmares, insomnia, headache, and suffocation. His post-traumatic stress disorder can be 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 shadow on the wall. They twisted, merged, formed a single image: Hassan's brown corduroy pants discarded on a pile of old bricks in the alley (Hosseini, Chapter 8)." Amir's mind stayed distracted and he continued to replay the assault in his mind. The emotions in his mind were so overworked that he could find triggers to trauma whenever he saw Hassan. He was disturbed to the extent that nightmares did not allow him to sleep and he became insomniac. Amir's guilt overpowered his emotions in a manner that he considered himself as a heinous monster as "I thought about Hassan's dream, the one about us swimming in the lake. There is no monster, he said, just water. Except he'd 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. That was the night I became insomniac (Hosseini, Chapter 8)." Amir lost appetite after the traumatic incident. He would leave his breakfast unfinished almost every day. There were changes in his day-to-day schedules. He would spend most of the time in his room reading and come out just to eat food as "I closed myself in my room. I read a book every couple of days, wrote stories, learned to draw horses (Hosseini, Chapter 8)." Amir would find excuses to keep to himself and avoid seeing or spending time with Hassan as "I'd hear Hassan shuffling around the kitchen in the morning, hear the clinking of silverware, the whistle of the teapot. I'd wait to hear the door shut and only then I would walk down to eat (Hosseini, Chapter 8)." If Amir had to face Hassan, he would ignore Hassan and maintain silence. Amir would not play with Hassan as they used to do and refused to read stories to Hassan as they did before the traumatic incidence. Amir's emotional sufferings can be understood by the way he speaks of Hassan as "Because when he was around, the oxygen seeped out of the room. My chest tightened and I couldn't draw enough air; I'd stand there gasping in my own airless bubble of atmosphere (Hosseini, Chapter 8)." Amir tries for redemption with his plot to send away Ali and Hassan to Hazarajat. In his deeper conscious he wants them gone so that Hassan is saved from extremists like Aseef. At the same time, he also

wants to forget his trauma. Amir hides the watch that his father had gifted him along with some money at Hassan's home and frames Hassan for it. When Amir's father knows about the theft, he questions Hassan to which Hassan agrees. Amir knew well that his father trusted Hassan and if Hassan had refused of the theft, his father would have questioned him to find the truth, never to be forgiven. Hassan remained loyal to Amir even when he and Ali were in deep suffering caused by Amir. This is followed by Amir realizing that Hassan knew Amir had seen him getting abused but did not do anything to protect him. He feels overwhelmed when he understands the grave mistake he has done; the feeling of self-guilt engulfs him with a mighty force that worsens further. The narration states Amir's realization of seeing Ali's expressions as "His mouth twitched, and for a moment, I thought I was a grimace. That was when I understood the depth of the pain I had caused, the blackness of the grief I had brought onto everyone, that not even Ali's paralyzed face could mask his sorrow (Hosseini, Chapter 9)."

While the story is told from Amir's point of view who is the witness to childhood sexual abuse, the narrative remains effective in portraying the victim's trauma as well. The author explains Hassan's post-traumatic stress disorder through changed sleeping patterns. Hassan started spending more time sleeping in the daylight as it temporarily helped him erase the memories of trauma. Hassan used to sleep to escape from the pain induced by trauma. He attended to his chores because Ali monitored him strictly. However, Hassan embraced sleep as soon as he was done with his chores. Sleep is often used as a coping mechanism from trauma. It is because during sleep the world and its problems cease to exist for conscious human minds. The challenges begin again when an individual wake up from sleep. Apart from the change in sleeping patterns, Hassan's post-traumatic stress disorder included reduced eating. Hassan had not been eating well and taking care of his health resulting in him becoming weak and lose weight. His physical weakness has been stated as "Hassan looked tired too - he'd lost weight and grey circles had formed under his puffed-up eyes (Hosseini, Chapter 6)." However, Hassan shared the incidence with his father as a result of which Ali and Hassan decided to leave Kabul for good. Though Ali or Hassan didn't share this in the narration, Amir learns of it from Ali's protective gesture towards Hassan.

The author also shares the trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder of Hassan's son Sohrab who is tormented in the captivity of Aseef. Sohrab is depicted as a helplessness and hopelessness child who is scared to the extent that he avoids eye contact with the people as "His eyes fell on me. Lingered. Then he looked away. Looked down at his naked feet (Hosseini, Chapter 22)." The trauma caused by the Taliban has left a deep scar on the mind of Sohrab such that he decides to give up his life instead of going back to the orphanage. He attempts to kill himself by slitting his veins using an old blade. However, he is saved by the Doctors and survives the attempt. Amir soon finds a way to adopt Sohrab and gives him a new home in California. Though he is safe with Amir, Sohrab still reflects post-traumatic stress disorder in his silence and numbness as "The unanswered questions, the blank stares, the silence, it was all too painful (Hosseini, Chapter 25)." Sohrab feels that his world has been destroyed and would never be the same again. He thinks that his home, people, and country are taken over by terror which will never remain the same as it used to be.

The Kite Runner is a narration of recovery that ends in happiness and hope. Though Hassan's recovery is not narrated in the novel, both Amir and Sohrab recover from their trauma. Amir's recovery happens as his body gets shattered in the fight with Aseef. Between the immense pain, Amir laughs for the first time in years after Hassan's rape as "I don't know at what point I started laughing, but I did. It hurt to laugh, hurt my jaws, my ribs, my throat. But I was laughing and laughing (Hosseini, Chapter 22)." The series of actions to correct his guilt led Amir to heal and redemption. Sohrab's situation demanded action from Amir, who fought Aseef to protect Sohrab from the clutches of the Taliban. Amir felt relieved amidst the intense physical pain because he knew that he had not sinned. Amir has stood up for his faiths, beliefs, and ethics as "My body was broken - just how badly I wouldn't find out until later - but I felt healed. Healed



at last. I laughed. Then the end. That, I'll take to my grave (Hosseini, Chapter 22)."

Sohrab's recovery begins with the celebration of Afghan New Year when Amir offers a kite to Sohrab for him to fly. Sohrab remains aloof for some time but shatters his limitations to fly the kite along with Amir. He enjoys flying kite with Amir and cuts another kite. A smile escapes Sohrab's lips and Amir asks him if he wants Amir to run that kite for him. Though Sohrab did not respond Amir can read his expressions and says, "For you a thousand times over (Hosseini, Chapter 25)."

The whole narration is a heart-clenching depiction of a gradual shift from the playful days of innocence and childhood to those of Hassan and Amir being a victim to childhood trauma; a childhood bully becoming the leader of the Taliban and tormenting children in the name of social supremacy. A significant part of the writing speaks of Amir's trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder as the narration is told in the first person. However, the author has successfully narrated the observations of the victim's trauma too. While Amir was struggling to deal with his guilt Hassan was struggling with the trauma resulting from being a rape victim. *The Kite Runner* is a reliable story that speaks of trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, and recovery. In his writings, Khaled Hosseini effectively conveys the complexity of helplessness when haunted by the memories of childhood sexual abuse.

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