



'That was the night I became an insomniac': Trauma in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*.

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ABSTRACT

A physician by profession, Khaled Hosseini became a popular name in the field of contemporary English literature, with the publication of his first novel *The Kite Runner* in 2003. Written against the background of Afghanistan- a country nearly destroyed by constant war and terrorism, the novel succeeds to appeal both to our emotion and intellect. Besides rediscovering eternal humane bonds like love or friendship, this multilayered fiction delves deeper into human psyche and records the terrible sufferings one undergoes in the face of unspeakable traumatic events. This paper attempts to explore the ramifications of the protagonist's trauma and his ultimate freedom from it with the help of modern trauma theories.

KEYWORDS

traumatic experience, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, sharing the trauma.

Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan born American creative writer is probably the first and the only contemporary English novelist to voice the sufferings of the common people of Afghanistan, which is often considered to be 'an unlikely setting for literary fiction'(Smith,2003,para.1). Hosseini's debut novel, *The Kite Runner*, published in 2003, documents an indomitable 'desire to overcome or elude partisan, ethnic, religious, and national divisions' (Aubrey 2009, p.26) and quite deservedly received a worldwide popularity and critical accolade. Translated into over forty languages and adapted for a popular film, this phenomenal novel introduces a complex plot, in which, personal and topical amalgamate to reveal a touching picture of friendship, loyalty, betrayal and redemption. Surprisingly, the novel that opens with the nostalgic, childhood recollection of Amir, now a middle aged writer well settled in America, very soon turns out to be the story of a person haunted by an unspeakable childhood trauma and a devastating feeling of guilt and shame. This paper endeavours to explore the dynamics of Amir's trauma, and the way he overcomes it, by using the tool of trauma theory.

Before we begin to focus on the protagonist's, i.e. Amir's trauma and its ramifications as represented in the narrative, we must summarize a few very important theoretical concepts regarding trauma that will help us to understand this particular aspect of the novel in a better manner. Etymologically, 'trauma' comes from the Greek word *trauma* that implies 'wound'. Originally at the beginning, the word used to refer to, 'an injury inflicted on a body' (Caruth, 1996, p.3), but in modern times, the term implies a wound that affects the mind, rather than the body. Cathy Caruth, an important name in the field of modern trauma studies, considers trauma to be,

the breach in the mind's experience of time, self and the world- is not, like the wound of the body, a simple healable event, but rather an event that, ... is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly... (Caruth, 1996, p.3).

She further states that the trauma is always caused by some incident that remains, 'outside the range of usual human experience' (Caruth, 1995, p.3). Such incidents may include a wide range of things like witnessing violence, physical, emotional and sexual abuse etc. The most important characteristic of trauma is that the victim is never capable of registering the entire traumatic event into his/her consciousness completely. In fact, it is his/her response to the particular overwhelming incident, 'which takes the form of repeated intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience...' (Caruth 1995, p.4), results into that unusual mental state known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or simply trauma. So, the symptoms of trauma are always re-

petitive and therefore compel the victim to undergo the traumatic experience again and again. Hence, quite interestingly, trauma, as Netta Nakari puts it, '... is not merely something diabolical that takes place in an individual's past, but takes over the victim's mind and becomes a part of her, repeating itself and possessing the individual' (Nakari,2009, p.9). The prolonged anguish that the trauma victim has to undergo, leads to another major symptom- the desperation to stop remembering or building a kind of resistance towards those memories. Another defining symptom of trauma is the curious relationship between trauma and the survivor. In stead of feeling fortunate, the person who manages to survive the traumatic event, like an accident or war, often feels guilty for his/her escape. And sometimes the traumatic reaction ensues not from the horrible event itself, but from their 'survivor guilt' (Verbestel, 2010, p.12).

Though there are different opinions regarding whether a person can heal from trauma completely, there is no doubt about the fact that it is a very long and very difficult process. Psychologists often tend to label its phases with terms like 'mourning' and 'melancholia' or 'acting out' and 'working through'(quoted in Verbestel,2010, p.15) etc. Ellen Verbestel very clearly explains these terms.

Acting out, or melancholia, means that the traumatized person is still stuck in the past, as he or she keeps on repeating the painful events in the form of nightmares or compulsive behavior. Working through the trauma, on the other hand, means that the victim is overcoming the traumatic aftereffects of the accident. In this stage, the traumatized person is ready to accept his trauma as a part of his life and because he recognizes this trauma as his own, he can finally start to mourn and learn to live with it. (Verbestel, 2010, p.15)

But one must remember that these two stages are not mutually exclusive, rather they are two inextricably linked parts of a complex process. Since the 'acting out' phase consists of the repetitive recollection of the traumatic event, victim must confront his/her repressed memories in order to reach the 'working through' phase. As a therapeutic measure, the victim can take the help of some expert or can transform his/her trauma into a narrative with his/her traumatic memory at its core. However, when the victim successfully overcomes his/her trauma, he/she is no longer haunted by it, rather recognises it as an inseparable part of his/her life and therefore a part of his/her identity. All these classic symptoms and conditions of trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder abound in the novel titled *The Kite Runner*.

The Kite Runner, often considered to be a heart warming tale of love and friendship, actually under the surface, deals with

trauma on multiple levels. The trauma of Amir, the protagonist and the first person narrator of the story, naturally finds most elaborate expression in the novel, but the traumas that Hassan and his son Sohrab face also form a very crucial part of this multilayered narrative. Amir, the focaliser of the story, belongs to a wealthy, aristocratic family settled in peaceful, pre-soviet Kabul. In a family devoid of any feminine touch or affectionate care, Amir's only companion is Hassan, the son of their Hazara servant, Ali. Both of these two motherless boys are inseparably connected with each other. As Amir reminisces:

Hassan and I fed from the same breasts. ... Under the same roof, we spoke our first words.

Mine was *Baba*.

His was *Amir*. My name. (Hosseini, 2013, pp.10-11)

Together they spend a blissful childhood full of life and laughter. But everything changes on a winter evening in 1975, when twelve years old Amir witnesses the brutal rape of Hassan by a local bully named Assef. All the time during this traumatic event, Amir, hiding in the mouth of the alley, 'just watched. Paralyzed' (Hosseini, 2013, p.69). Amir, however, never could describe his mental state at that particular time in details because physical and mental paralyses accompany a traumatic experience almost always. After this, Amir tries to deal with his trauma by avoiding all contacts with Hassan—a trigger of his traumatic memories. But he is far from forgetting it. The memories keep on haunting him, making him restless and sick. This repulsion towards and fixation with the traumatic memory is a distinctive feature of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. As Sien Uytterschout, in the context of another fiction confirms, 'Typical reactions to trauma comprise either a repression of all trauma-related memory or an endeavour to remember the event and fit it into a coherent whole' (as quoted in Verbestel, 2010, p.33). Quite obsessively,

he starts to refuse Hassan's every attempt to make their relationship normal. He, as is common with underage trauma victims, shuts himself up in his room, spends sleepless nights, hallucinates and yearns for his father's attention more than ever. The unsurpassable guilt and shame he feels for not being able to stand up for his friend actually rise from his trauma. As Jonathan Boulter observes, '...authentic trauma—and the guilt arising from that trauma—is not the initial event but the failure to represent that event' (Boulter, 2006, p.126). His incapability to confide in someone makes his suffering all the more asphyxiating. He remains stuck in his 'acting out' phase for a very long time, so much so that even at the age of thirty eight, when he writes about his days in Kabul, he begins by saying, 'it's wrong what they say about the past... 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' (Hosseini, 2013, p.1). Even in America, he never could forget the event or forgive himself for what he did. He starts to heal only when Rahim Khan shows him the, 'way to be good again' (Hosseini, 2013, p.209) and he lets Amir know that he knows what happened on that day. Breaking resistance against the traumatic memories by creating testimony, i.e. by sharing his memory with some sympathetic listener, is the only way to reach the 'working through' or the healing stage of trauma. Amir reaches this stage, when he tells Soraya, his wife, everything over phone from Pakistan: 'I had pictured this moment so many times, dreaded it, but as I spoke, I felt something lifting off my chest.' (Hosseini, 2013, p.298). The novel ends with Amir running behind a kite for Hassan's son, 'with the wind blowing in my face, and a smile as wide as the Valley of Panjsher on my lips' (Hosseini, 2013, p.340). He finally succeeded to make peace with his past and learns to live with it.

Finally, though this paper dwells mainly on the personal trauma of the protagonist Amir, we cannot help but to wonder how expertly this novel exploits different structural ploys like unconventional, non-linear narrative style, fragmented story line with gaps and lacunas, in order to explore issues that have been avoided in popular fictions for a long time. But the fact that makes *The Kite Runner* unique is not its precise and subtle representation of trauma on multiple levels, but the comprehensiveness with which the novel connects past and present, most horrible traumatic experiences with tender humane emotions like love, loyalty or compassion. In its efforts to provide, 'a non-political solution to the ethnic hierarchies and antagonisms' (Aubrey, 2009, p.37), the novel gives us the ray of hope that defines the very essence of humanity.

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