

The Dark Alleys That Unsettled Amir's Psyche: Trauma in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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MA in English,

UGC NET 2019

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Abstract

Life has the habit of giving us shocks, shocks that sometimes go away with time and shocks that stay with us forever like nightmares and recur in various forms. These mental shocks or wounds are what we call trauma and to probe deep into the mind of a traumatized person is something very difficult as well as engrossing. This paper intends to rediscover the journey of the protagonist Amir of Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner*, how he suffers from his childhood trauma and the way he finds redemption. Isabel Allende, the author of *The House of the Spirit*, remarks about this particular novel "This is one of those unforgettable stories that stay with you for years. All the great themes of literature and of life are the fabric of this extraordinary novel: love, honour, guilt, fear, redemption..." The novel, besides being an honest story of love, loss and betrayal, deals with human psyche and tries to narrate how life becomes static and meaningless while the mind is wounded and overpowered by an ineffable traumatic event.

Keywords: Trauma, Flashbacks, Guilt, PTSD, Hallucinations, Redemption

In Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner* (2003) a traumatic event shatters the life of the protagonist as well as the narrator of the novel Amir and his friend Hassan, their servant's son. However, before exploring the nuances of Amir's trauma the concepts of trauma theory need to be recapitulated. The word 'trauma' is originated from the Greek word by the same name which means 'wound', originally referring to an injury inflicted upon a body. With Freud, however, trauma moved into the realm of the psychological from the physiological. Here the term 'trauma' is understood as a wound not upon the body but upon the mind. Cathy Caruth, an important name in the modern trauma theory, considers trauma as "the wound of the mind – the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world – is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that...is experienced too soon, too expectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor." (The Wound and the Voice, 3-4). However the history of trauma theory goes back to Jean Martin Charcot and Pierre Janet, the two famous French traumatologists. Charcot in his public demonstrations, used to hypnotize his patients and insisted them to give an account of their traumatic dreams and hallucinations which apparently cured them of their hysteria. Pierre Janet noted the impact of 'vehement emotions' in the experience of trauma. By 'vehement emotions' he meant terror and fear. He asserted that the painful memories became locked into a kind of 'unrecited memory' which simply replayed and replayed but was never integrated. In her most important work as well as in her introduction Caruth repetitively brings the

reference of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) in which he postulated that a 'death drive' works in opposition to the libidinal 'pleasure drive'. Thus Freud moved beyond the pleasure principle since it did not explain repetitive disturbing dreams in trauma patients and did not fit his theory that dreams are mediums of wish-fulfilment. Caruth has not given any clear definition of the term 'trauma'. And the impossibility of any clear definition of the term, for her, lies in how trauma cannot be defined by the traumatic event itself. The event may not be equally traumatic for all, or for some, may not be traumatic at all. Trauma lies in the reception of an event. She further argues that traumatic dreams and flashbacks are literal and non-symbolic. However, Caruth in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996) remarks:

In its most general definition trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the events occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena. (11)

In her introduction "The Wound and the Voice" she says that literature uses a language that can convey the gaps and silences hence does have the power to become a fit medium to examine accounts of trauma: "If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language and literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet." (Cathy, 2). Therefore, trauma is something very personal. Experiencing trauma does not necessarily mean that the person would develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) but it makes a person more prone to such a disorder. Young children are especially vulnerable to trauma and should be psychologically examined after a traumatic event has occurred to ensure their emotional well-being. A traumatized person generally experiences an intense or overwhelming emotion while having disturbing thoughts or flashbacks of the traumatic event.

The Kite Runner, a heart-wrenching story of love and friendship, deals with trauma on multiple levels. All the above mentioned symptoms of trauma and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are protuberant in this novel. Throughout the novel the trauma of the protagonist Amir and its aftermath are described in the novel. But the traumas, that Hassan and his son Sohrab face are more severe in nature and play a very crucial part in this novel. The story is narrated by Amir who is now a thirty eight years old successful writer and lives in San Francisco, USA. At the very beginning of the novel the protagonist-cum-narrator Amir recalls some events that he confronted in his childhood in the winter of 1975 which created a grown up Amir of today:

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 frozen creek....it's wrong what they say about the past, I have 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. (*The Kite Runner*, 2013, p.1)

Thus, from the very beginning of the novel it is clear that Amir is still haunted by the memory of that traumatic event. For the last twenty six years he has been 'peeking through' that alley where he came to face some traumatic event which is not yet disclosed in the novel.

This is the most distinct characteristic of trauma – it’s repetitive nature in the form of hallucination, flashbacks, dreams etc. and therefore it compels the victim to undergo the traumatic experience again and again. In this context another information is very important. In the very first chapter Amir says that Rahim Khan, his relative from Pakistan, calls him and asks him to go to him and hangs up the call by saying “There is a way to be good again.” What does this ‘good’ signify? Has Amir committed something ‘wrong’ twenty six years ago? The story slowly reveals all those things as Amir, the narrator recounts those past days which he had spent in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Amir belongs to a wealthy, aristocratic family and is settled in peaceful, pre-Soviet Kabul. In a family where there is no motherly figure or feminine touch, Amir’s only companion is Hassan, the son of their Hazara servant, Ali. These motherless boys are connected to each other from a very tender age :

Hassan and I fed from the same breast...under the same roof we spoke our first words.

Mine was *Baba*.

His was *Amir*. My name. (10-11)

Though Amir and Hassan were good friends, Amir was a bit jealous of Hassan as his father used to like Hassan more. Amir’s father was confused by Amir’s hobbies and preferences. His father wanted him to be ‘manly’ but Amir preferred studies more. He liked to read and write stories. His father failed to understand how could his son not like violent Afghan sports? Why could Amir not stand up for himself? On the other hand, his father found all these qualities within Hassan. That’s the reason a sort of jealousy was their within Amir but ultimately they were good friends.

Everything changed on a winter evening in 1975. There was a massive kite flying tournament. And a twelve year old Amir was desperate to win the local kite flying tournament as he saw this as a way to finally win Baba’s love and his loyal friend Hassan promised to help him. But neither the boys could foresee what would happen to Hassan that afternoon, an event that is to shatter their lives. Amir witnessed the brutal rape of Hassan by a local bully Assef. All the time during this traumatic event Amir, hiding in the mouth of the alley “just watched. Paralysed” (69). He did nothing to help Hassan:

I had one last chance to make a decision. One final opportunity who I was going to be. I could step into that alley, stand up for Hassan...and accept whatever would happen to me. Or I could run.

In the end, I ran. (72)

Amir, however, could never describe his mental state at that particular time in details because physical and mental paralysis accompany a traumatic experience almost always. When Amir finally met Hassan it was early evening and he thanked the fading light as he had least courage to face Hassan’s eyes:

I was grateful for the early evening shadows that fell on Hassan’s face and conceal mine .I was glad I didn’t have to return his gaze. (73)

This protracted agony and the excruciating distress that a trauma victim has to undergo, leads to a desperate attempt to stop remembering or building a kind of resistance towards those memories. Amir also undergoes the same condition. After that day, he tries to

deal with his trauma by avoiding all contacts with Hassan – a trigger of his traumatic memories. He visits his uncle Homayoun's house with his father but he is far from forgetting it. Everyone was enjoying except Amir:

I closed my eyes, turned my face to the sun. Little shapes formed behind my eyelids, merged, formed a single image: Hassan's brown corduroy pants discarded on a pile of old bricks in the alley. (79)

So basically, Amir could not forget the event and the flashbacks repeatedly come to his mind. He was overwhelmed by a sudden burst of emotion that night and he wanted to tell everyone "I watched Hassan get raped." But he could not. This is more venomous because had he been able to tell it somebody, the pain would have been less. The fact that Amir could not confess his guilt to anyone makes him more uncomfortable. He considered himself as the monster and that was the night he became an 'insomaniac'. Then Amir started to refuse Hassan's every attempt to make their relationship normal. He started to believe that life would be easier and he would get rid of the tormenting memories if Hassan were not around. So he falsely accused Hassan as a thief and got Hassan and Ali out of their house. Amir was freed of the daily reminder of his cowardice and betrayal, but still lived in their shadow.

The two emotions which leave an astounding impact upon the children who live through traumatic events and develop post traumatic stress disorder are guilt and shame. Some of the symptoms of PTSD in children are problems with self-regulation, self-contempt, and interpersonal functioning as well as difficulty regulating emotions. Guilt and shame both result from the perceived violation of social norms and personal standards. Shame differs from guilt because it deals with failures that reflect on the core or ideal self. In other words shame affects the way that people see themselves in an extremely negative way. They feel angry and disgust with themselves. The trauma survivors who feel shame and blame themselves usually see no way to repair a deeply negative self-image. Sexual, physical and emotional abuse appears to be particularly shaming to children. But children who witness traumatic events can also develop a sense of shame. Children usually feel guilty after living through a traumatic event for not being able to act due to fear, for having hidden instead of helping, for being unable to defend etc. In Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, the protagonist Amir shows all these signs of PTSD. The guilt and shame he felt for not being able to stand for his friend Hassan, actually rose from his trauma. He felt guilty for not assisting Hassan in the alley:

I opened my mouth, almost said nothing. Almost. The rest of my life might have turned out differently if I had. But I didn't. I just watched. Paralyzed. (69)

He felt responsible for what happened to Hassan:

School gave me an excuse to stay in my room for long hours. And, for a while it took my mind off what happened that winter, what I had let happen. (85)

He was angry upon himself and considered himself a bad person. Even a grown up Amir cannot get away from these feelings and throughout his life he seeks redemption. Even in America he never could forget the event or forgive himself for what he did. Amir and his wife Soraya have no child and this he thinks as the punishment of his sin he committed some twenty six years back. He starts to heal only when Rahim Khan shows him "The way to be good again"(1).

Twenty six years later Amir returns in order to seek redemption. He meets a dying Rahim Khan and gets the shocking news that Hassan is his half brother. He also gets the information of Hassan's death in the hands of the Talibans. Rahim Khan also reveals that he knows everything what happened to Hassan on that day of kite flying and he shows Amir a way following which he can lessen his sense of guilt and find redemption. Rahim Khan requests Amir to save and bring Hassan's son, Sohrab, back who is supposed to be kept in an orphanage in Kabul. Amir revisits Kabul, Afghanistan and reaches that orphanage but does not find Sohrab there. There he gets the news that Sohrab is taken by a Taliban leader. However, he finds Sohrab and to his surprise he finds that it is Assef, the leader who uses Sohrab as a male prostitute and sexually abuses the boy. Assef says he wants to settle some unfinished business. He beats Amir with brush knuckles, breaking Amir's ribs and splitting his lip. Sohrab threatens Assef with his slingshot and when Assef lunges at him, Sohrab shoots him in the eye, allowing Amir and himself to escape. Thus Amir has to revisit the past. The scene is history repeating itself, this time with Amir not running away from the victim of rape, like he did with his friend Hassan. Amir takes a step further by admitting his sins and accepting responsibility. He asks Sohrab to live in USA with him. Thus the pain of the trauma Amir has been going through reduces a bit. His guilt is lessened as he now stands for Sohrab. Amir is able to find a sort of relief. Moreover, by sharing one's memory with some sympathetic listener, a person can recover himself or herself from trauma. Amir finally 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 of my chest. (298)

Apart from the protagonist Amir, mention should be made of Sohrab who has gone through severe traumatic experiences. Hassan also has undergone trauma but in this novel his condition is not clearly explained. On the other hand, whatever is mentioned about Sohrab, we can clearly see how dangerous a traumatic experience can be. Sohrab has been sexually abused by Assef. Amir returns to Pakistan with Sohrab and they stay in a hotel. We can see here how Sohrab also shows the signs of suffering from PTSD. When Amir and Sohrab visit the Shah Faisal Mosque, he says:

I miss my father and mother too...but sometimes I am glad they are not...they are not here anymore...because I don't want them to see me...I am so dirty...I am so dirty and full of sin. (293)

He tells Amir that he does not want to go to an orphanage again. But when some problems occur regarding the adoption of Sohrab by Amir, the latter tells him that he may have to go back to an orphanage for a while. Hearing this Sohrab bursts into an overwhelming cry and what he did that night that is something very natural with a traumatized little boy. Sohrab attempts to kill himself. However, he lives but he stops speaking entirely. Even after Amir brings him to California, Sohrab remains withdrawn. As the narrator Amir says:

Sohrab's silence wasn't the self-imposed silence of those with convictions, of protesters who seek to speak their cause by not speaking at all. It was the silence of one who has taken cover in a dark place, curled up all the edges and tucked them under. (331)

The novel, however, ends with Amir running behind a kite for Hassan's son "with the wind blowing in my face, and a smile as wise as the valley of Panjsher on my lips." (340) Amir finally succeeds to make peace with his past and learns to live with it. But for Sohrab, it must

be a long way before he finds peace of mind and gets rid of those traumatic memories. Sohrab only gives a lopsided smile, but Amir takes it with all his heart as he runs the kite for Sohrab, saying “for you, a thousand times over” (340).

Though this paper mainly deals with the personal trauma of the protagonist Amir, it can be said that Hosseini’s novel *The Kite Runner* is unique in its subtle representation of trauma on multiple levels. The way the most horrible traumatic experiences are presented with tender humane emotions like love, friendship, loyalty or compassion make the novel remarkable.

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