Wounds that Echo: Resurrecting the Unquiet Past through the Intersections of Trauma, Memory, and Redemption in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract

Literature has long served as a powerful medium for examining the enduring effects of trauma and the complex ways in which the past continues to shape individual and collective identities. Through narrative, memory, and silence, literary texts give form to experiences that resist easy articulation. This paper offers a comparative analysis of Khaleed Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, examining how trauma, memory, and redemption intersect within distinct yet historically violent contexts. Drawing on trauma theory, the study argues that trauma in both novels functions as an unassimilated experience that persistently intrudes upon the present through repetition, repression, and haunting. Amir's guilt following his betrayal of Hassan mirrors Afghanistan's collective trauma, shaped by ethnic hierarchies and political upheaval, while Sethe's psychological suffering embodies the intergenerational violence of American slavery. In both narratives, memory operates as an active force, collapsing temporal boundaries and demanding ethical reckoning. The paper further explores redemption as an ongoing and fragile process grounded in confrontation with the past and collective acknowledgement of suffering.

Keywords: individual trauma, collective trauma, memory, haunting, recovery

Introduction

The past, a tireless specter, frequently uses control to shape personalities, identities, relationships, and the trajectories of lives and forces its will on the present. Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* are two unbelievable accounts that unwind the frequenting hold of history, both individual and collective. These texts are not merely fair stories but significant reflections on how trauma is acquired, recalled, and maybe recovered from. Hosseini paints the turbulent scenes of war-torn Afghanistan, whereas Morrison delves into the turbulent repercussions of American slavery.

Hosseini's The *Kite Runner* unfurls against the background of Afghanistan's moving sociopolitical landscape, from the relative steadiness of the government to the Soviet intrusion and, afterwards, the Taliban regime. The ethnic conflict between the overwhelming Pashtuns and the marginalized Hazaras plays a central part in the story. Amir's disloyalty to Hassan is not just an individual shortcoming but a reflection of the societal preferences imbued in the Afghan social fabric. The guilt Amir carries is hence interwoven with the collective blame of a society that sustains such hierarchies. On the other hand, Morrison's *Beloved* is rooted in the chronicled trauma of slavery, drawing inspiration from the original

story of Margaret Garner, a runaway slave who murdered her child to save (them) from bondage. Sethe's act of infanticide typifies the extraordinary dehumanization forced by slavery, and the ensuing haunting by Beloved's returned spirit represents the inevitable nature of this psychological trauma. The novel's post-Civil War setting underscores the paradox of what is understood as freedom, where the physical chains may be gone, but the mental scars remain. Despite their distinct historical and social milieus, these texts focus on their depiction of trauma of the past as a permanent drive in the present and memory as a dynamic presence in the protagonists' lives, eventually forming their redemptive curves.

Scholars have long been fascinated by the examination of trauma, memory, and redemption in literature. A fundamental understanding of trauma as an unhealed wound that recurs to haunt people and societies can be found primarily in Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Trauma, as characterized by Cathy Caruth, represents an unassimilated encounter that interferes with the present. It is not only the past event itself, but rather it is the inconceivability of completely getting a handle on it at the moment, tearing the self apart. Individual trauma, as seen in *The Kite Runner*, stems from Amir's disloyalty to his companion Hassan, compounded by the socio-ethnic pressures between Pashtuns and Hazaras in Afghanistan. Alternately, in *Beloved*, Morrison addresses collective trauma, centering on the mental and social scars of slavery as epitomized in Sethe's child murder. Through Amir's guilt-ridden betrayal of Hassan in *The Kite Runner* and Sethe's heart-wrenching act of infanticide in *Beloved*, these literary pieces examine the ways in which the past directs the present, driving their protagonists toward the strenuous journey of recovery. This paper seeks to draw a parallel between these accounts, investigating how individual trauma interlaces with collective history, how memory transcends its inactive role to become an assertive drive of reckoning, and how redemption rises not as an endpoint but as a persistent process of healing.

Literature review

The proposed study builds upon existing scholarship primarily in the field of Trauma Studies and Medical Humanities. The literature review will provide an overview of existing scholarly works, a critical analysis *of The Kite Runner* and *Beloved*, setting the foundation for the aimed work. By drawing on previous scholarship, this study seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding trauma and memory studies.

The portrayal of guilt and diaspora as symptoms of trauma in *The Kite Runner* has been studied by critics such as Stef Craps. For example, Craps emphasizes how Afghanistan's collective suffering during decades of political unrest is entwined with Amir's personal guilt. In *Beloved*, researchers such as Ashraf H. A. Rushdy contend that Morrison recovers the account of slavery by foregrounding its emotional and psychological repercussions, with memory serving as a disruptive, however essential, drive for healing. While both books have been exclusively considered, there is a scarcity of comparative investigation that bridges the distinct cultural landscapes of Morrison's postbellum America and Hosseini's Afghanistan. This essay seeks to close this gap by examining how these writers approach the interaction of the past and present, the individual and the collective, in both similar and different ways, using trauma theory.

Research Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative pattern of research and discussion to achieve the aim of the work. A substantial quantum of earlier literary works regarding the selected topic under the literary tenet of trauma studies in literature has been sincerely taken care of and studied. Specifically, the previously published research articles, scholarly papers, journals, and lectures available on digital platforms concerning this topic of research have been closely explored. However, this paper re-reads Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to explore the traumatic past and the eventual healing, examining their narrative techniques and socio-cultural contexts. The research methodology implemented herein is investigative, interpretive, and inquisitive in nature.

Research problems

1. How is the interweaving of personal and collective trauma addressed in both the narratives, if looked at from the lens of trauma theory?

2. In describing the lives of the protagonists, how do memory and the shadows of the past serve as active and assertive forces as opposed to static recollections?

3. How much do the historical and social settings of Reconstruction-era America and Afghanistan in the 1970s contribute to the examination of aspects like trauma, memory, and atonement in both the texts?

4. What parallels can be found between the redemptive paths taken by Amir and Sethe at the conclusion of the respective texts, and how do they advance the conversation about trauma studies in literature more generally?

Discussion

The Greek word "traumatizo," meaning "wound," is where the word "trauma" originally comes from. Despite having its roots in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, the term "trauma" has gained significant usage in literary theory and cultural criticism in the last century (YANG 963).

Aesthetics of Trauma and the Shadows of the Past

Trauma theory, as explained by researchers like Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, suggests that trauma is an event that is so powerful that a person cannot fully understand or process it in the mind. Instead, it keeps coming back in "repeated flashbacks, nightmares, or other repetitive phenomena", wanting to be dealt with (Caruth 9). In *The Kite Runner*, Amir's deep emotional pain from his betrayal of Hassan reflects the shared suffering of a country hurt by political problems and ethnic conflicts. In *Beloved*, Sethe's personal pain is closely linked to the terrible experiences of slavery. The way people are treated badly affects not just them but also their families for many years.

The narrative of *The Kite Runner* is set in Afghanistan's tumultuous 1970s, characterized by violent occurrences: unanticipated sexual assault by local aggressors, warfare, displacement from one's homeland, the demise of cherished individuals, the oppressive rule of foreign powers, and racial discrimination, among other atrocities. These violent incidents have such a profound effect on the characters in the book that they suffer from severe trauma (963). Khaled Hosseini skillfully depicts aspects of betrayal, memory, redemption, racial conflicts,

and national pain in Afghanistan with a first-person perspective. He intertwines protagonist Amir's personal journey from sin to self-redemption with the broader collective trauma of the Afghan people.

Individual trauma typically results from a personal experience that strikes the victim suddenly and has unanticipated repercussions. Khaled Hosseini's portrayal of Amir as both a victim and a sinner in *The Kite Runner* complicates his personal trauma (964). The main cause of Amir's trauma can be attributed to his sense of guilt over leaving behind Hassan, apparently the son of his father's Hazara servant, and his own actual brother, when Hassan is raped and beaten by the vicious Assef and two other local bullies in a deserted street. As we get to know from the initial stage of the novel, in addition to being Amir's best friend and the son of his housekeeper, Ali, Hassan has always stood by Amir and overcome all obstacles for him. Despite being physically unharmed, Amir's later life was plagued by the painful memory of his treachery and cowardice.

Amir's everyday life is also significantly impacted by the traumatizing effects of the rape, which are like an intruder or a ghost. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, such as nightmares, avoidance symptoms, mental distraction, hypervigilance, insomnia, occasional silence, and more, plague him constantly. Amir was aware that Hassan had entered Assef's grasp in order to obtain the kite for himself, but he lacked the bravery to confront Assef and rescue Hassan. He is haunted by the memory of betrayal and his incapacity to defend morality. Amir's continuous recounting of that memory and his struggle to verbalize his trauma speaks volume of the nature of the same.

The protagonists' individual trauma in both texts is intricately linked to the trauma experienced by the entire society as a whole. A collective trauma is any traumatic psychological impact that is experienced by a large number of people, including an entire society. Traumatic incidents that are witnessed by a whole society have the power to elicit strong feelings from everyone, which frequently leads to changes in that society's culture and widespread acts. What strikes the reader the most, aside from the collective trauma caused by war, is the collective trauma endured by the Hazaras in the book. Because of the way *The Kite Runner* is written, readers can easily get sucked into the class conflict between the supposedly wealthy Pashtuns (majority) and the impoverished Hazaras (minority). Hazaras' collective trauma stemmed from their negative perceptions of themselves (965). Amir and Hassan's relationship in *The Kite Runner* is set against the backdrop of ethnic tension between Pashtuns and Hazaras. More than just a personal shortcoming, Amir's betrayal is a reflection of the societal injustices that allow such acts to occur, as Hassan's victimization is representative of the systematic discrimination that Hazaras experience on a daily basis. Hassan's suffering shows the ongoing discrimination against Hazaras. In Afghanistan, they endured persecution and discrimination for generations.

People's harsh treatment of Hassan and his father, Ali is a glaring example of this oppression: "They called him 'flat-nosed' because of Ali and Hassan's distinctive Hazara mongoloid features." They were little addressed in school texts, and their ancestry was only acknowledged in passing (Hosseini 9). By using contrast and the narrator Amir's voice, Hosseini also draws attention to the harshness and injustice of reality. In the novel, Amir compares Hassan's mud shack to his spacious home; he calls Hassan's mother a "beautiful but notoriously unscrupulous woman who live up to her dishonourable reputation" (8), while Amir calls his own mother "a highly educated woman universally regarded as one of Kabul's

most respected, beautiful, and virtuous ladies" (11). Additionally, Amir describes Hassan's father as having mongoloid traits that deteriorate with a number of physical impairments. He contrasts this with his own father, describing him as "a towering Pashtun specimen with a thick beard, a wayward crop of curly brown hair as unruly as the man himself, hands that looked capable of uprooting a willow tree" (16). Through Amir's thinking, viewers can also see how certain individuals—mostly from Kabul's affluent classes—would view racial and sectarian identity as unchangeable.

Many critics have provided different interpretations of Morrison's *Beloved* in terms of trauma theory. The representation-defying experience of slavery is made tangible in *Beloved* through the use of trauma as a narrative technique. In *Beloved*, where the protagonists are haunted like ghosts by recollections of tragic past events, repetitive phenomena are common (Mohamed 12). This recurrent or eerie effect is connected to a common occurrence that trauma survivors like Sethe or Amir encounter, which is the confusion of reality.

In Morrison's *Beloved*, the lasting effects of slavery are explored against the backdrop of the American Civil War. The novel's plot parallels the personal agony of Sethe, the protagonist, with the suffering of the African-American community as a whole. The author emphasizes how the trauma brought on by the atrocities of slavery is cyclical and cuts across generations rather than just individuals. *Beloved* revolves around Sethe's inner turmoil, which results from her time spent as a slave at Sweet Home and her subsequent decision to murder her child. The turning point in her life is this act, which was carried out in a last-ditch effort to protect her daughter from the prevalent horrors of slavery. In a tragic and desperate act of defiance against slavery, Sethe, the common black slave protagonist of the story, attempts to kill her child. Since she believes that having your own free self is different from what is called freedom, she is unwilling to give her child to the slave owner merely in the name of "family integrity." Time may heal physical scars and pain, but it is difficult to erase mental trauma, which happens to be the case for Sethe as well. Black people suffer from the same physical and psychological trauma as all the other people under the system of slavery.

In an effort to free Beloved from potential bondage of slavery, Sethe had decided to kill her by slitting her throat with a saw. This conduct results from Sethe's mother's conviction that, should she be forced to stay a slave, she will unquestioningly choose death. However, this causes a deep psychological trauma for Sethe on an individual level. Eighteen years later, Beloved makes a physical return to her family and accuses Sethe of causing her pain. In the face of slavery, Sethe's maternal love seems so helpless. Morrison portrays the psychological cost of the act and the cruel suppression of maternal love as Sethe completely withdraws from her community due to her intense guilt (Lu and Zhang 198). As a slave woman, she has seen terrible things happen to her, like being raped and having her breast milk stolen by slaveholders. Sethe's decision to murder her child, though immensely personal, is also a desperate response to the collective suffering of African American slaves.

Individual trauma is a reflection of collective trauma in Morrison's work. Black slaves have been suffering significant physical and psychological harm under America's cruel slavery system. Slaveholders on plantations control every aspect of the slaves' lives and own everything pertaining to them. They treat slaves like animals and unjustly shift or kill them. Stable family relationships are nearly impossible for Black people to maintain under the oppression of slavery. Slave mothers use extreme measures to protect their kids, but the kids reject their maternal affection in return. Slavery led to the recurrence of the mother-child

trauma, which is how the trans-generic ghosts originated (198). Caruth in her trauma theory opines that the story of trauma is "between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival" (7). And given this occurrence, it might be argued that Sethe is traumatized by both her prior experiences and the fact that she survived them.

Memory that reverberates

In her trauma theory, Cathy Caruth claims that the victim's reaction to trauma is frequently uncontrollable, delayed, and manifests in repetitive ways in their mind, including flashbacks and other recurrent symptoms. This gets manifested in both the novels where memory as an active, and an almost sentient force shapes the protagonists' present realities. It is evident from the start of *The Kite Runner* that Amir is still troubled by the memory of that horrific incident. He has spent the past twenty-six years "peeking through" the alley where he encountered a traumatic event that isn't yet mentioned in the book (Pal 72). Amir's thoughts remain preoccupied, and he keeps mentally reliving the assault all through. His mind is so overworked with emotions that he finds trauma triggers in nearly everything he does. He remains so disturbed that he is hardly able to sleep due to nightmares. Since traumatic experiences almost always result in both physical and mental paralysis, Amir's inability to provide a detailed description of his mental state at that time seems all the more understandable. A trauma victim's prolonged suffering and agonizing distress cause them to make an exhausted attempt to forget or develop some form of resistance to those memories. Amir experiences the same. After that day, he tries to cope with his trauma by avoiding all interactions with Hassan, who somewhere serves as a trigger for his traumatic memories. Amir's evasion of Hassan includes avoiding as well as maintaining silence whenever he is with Hassan. Amir, moreover, denies reading stories to Hassan as they did before the traumatic occurrence. Silence and avoidance, which are seen in Amir, go as critical signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PSTD).

Repression and the return of the source are common elements in both the trauma-dealing process and the trauma-recovery process (Hinson 150). Due to her experiences with various forms of trauma, Sethe in Morrison's novel is particularly representative of this crossover. Very similar to Amir, Sethe refuses to communicate with people and avoids her painful memories. Particularly in her conversations with Denver, Sethe frequently ends her stories with a pause or in silence. The trauma goes beyond the articulation ability for Sethe, not only because she is reluctant to do so, but also because she is unable to do so. The past being so painful, Sethe refuses to think or discuss it. As a trauma victim, the recurring story and flashbacks that Sethe experiences regularly, just like Amir does in Hosseini's text, are examples of unconscious behaviours that are beyond the conscious mind's control. Repetition is how they show up, trying to force the survivors to relive the trauma while being cut off from their subject consciousness. Such encounters almost make Sethe and Amir numb. There are various "categories" of memories that Sethe can recall consciously but chooses not to, some of which are traumatic memories that resurface as uncontrollable flashbacks, and only a small number of which she has fully suppressed (14). Sethe's traumatic memories could resurface at any time and in any way, interrupting her resolute efforts to forget. These memories could be brought on by current sensory perceptions like sight, sound, or smell. She vividly recalls, for instance, the "shameless beauty" of Sweet Home's surroundings in spite of the horrors that took place there (17). Sethe believes that the past and present are entwined. She ends up speaking incoherently as a result. Her frequent flashbacks are signs of trauma

that continuously compel Sethe to relive the traumatic event, and her repeated words are the outward manifestation of it. Driving the past away is the most important thing Sethe does every morning when she wakes up. It is not repetition that heals wounds but rather strengthens them. Sethe "works[s] hard to remember as close as to nothing as was safe" so not to carry the burden of her traumatic memories on a daily basis (16). She cannot avoid the eerie and unavoidable memories of her time as a slave, her act of infanticide, and the fallout from it.

When Beloved's reincarnation causes Sethe's suppressed trauma to resurface, Beloved's spirit describes how all of these elements collide in Sethe. Sethe embodies the description of repression as "to divert [trauma] into the dark silences" (Moglen 24) through leveraging a halt as a defence mechanism rather than forming healthy relationships. The survivors of slavery experience disruptions in their regular lives due to the recurrence of unhealed trauma in different ways. Sethe's recurring aberrant behaviours and Beloved's revelation of past trauma are the primary manifestations of the reappearance of trauma. And, through the stream of consciousness, Beloved's spirit recounts the tragic experience of black slaves in the cabin as they were transported to America, as if she were on the ship for sale. *Beloved* exposes the unhealed trauma that haunts the living and reminds them of the wounds they have got to survive (196).

Journey from suffering to healing

Recovery in both novels involves a reckoning with the past and a commitment to repairing what has been broken. While Amir's redemption is rooted in action—returning to Afghanistan and adopting Sohrab—Sethe's redemption is more introspective, involving her acceptance of love and communal support. Amir's journey to rescue Sohrab parallels Sethe's struggle to exorcise Beloved. Following Baba's passing in *The Kite Runner*, Rahim Khan calls Amir and says, "There is a way to be good again" (2). In an attempt to turn his life around, Amir returns to Kabul. There, he gets to learn a lot of buried truths, the most significant of which is Hassan's actual lineage. When he realizes he has betrayed his own brother, his burden doubles, and he is driven to make amends. After reading Hassan's letter and learning that the Taliban had killed him, he becomes compelled to save his nephew Sohrab, who is currently in a Peshawar orphanage. Amir believes that the only way to atone for both his own and his father's sins is to bring Hassan's child along and provide him with all that he always deserved (Mothika 58). One of the key moments here is the encounter with Assef, the man who raped Hassan twenty-six years ago, now represents the Taliban's institutionalized brutality. Amir suffers brutal beating in order to save Sohrab, which is comparable to the suffering he caused Hassan by betraying him and remaining silent. The brass-knuckle punching that Assef delivers is exactly the same beating that Amir refused to endure decades ago in order to protect Hassan. Hosseini makes it clear how important this moment is; Amir laughs while getting beaten up during the fight because he feels somewhat relieved about being "healed at last" (303). Amir's eventual act of taking his nephew to live with him finally makes him progress toward self-redemption.

Healing for Sethe in *Beloved* starts when she gives herself permission to fully remember and accept her lived trauma. By pushing Sethe to face her past instead of repressing it, Paul D, a fellow former slave, contributes to this process. Sethe understands that discussing the intolerable past with him could ease the pain. Sethe is able to cry at last, which helps her let go of the pressure. The incident where the white person stole her milk is the most humiliating

trauma she has ever experienced. She never had the guts to bring it up in Sweet Home. In her conversation with Paul D., she describes what occurred sporadically (198). As Caruth argues, through the narration of the past, the trauma victim, i.e. Sethe here, alleviates her psychological burden. An essential moment in Sethe's recuperating happens when the women of the community assemble to expel the spirit of Beloved in order to stop the tragedy, which stands in contrast to the neighbours' indifference when she killed her daughter years ago (199). Finally, the ghost that has plagued Sethe for so long vanishes, and the new community leads Sethe in a different direction, a more modern form of healing. When Sethe was not being able to adjust to reality and live a typical life, it is the community that creates it conceivable for Sethe to empty the burden of her trauma and regain her rational soundness. Beloved's exorcism represents Sethe's acceptance of her behaviour and her choice to live on. Setting herself free from the constraints of the past, Sethe begins to reclaim her identity and her position in the community.

Conclusion

This paper presents an intricate examination of trauma and memory in two socially distinct yet thematically resonant novels, offering us a lens through which to examine the enduring power of literature in delivering voice to the silenced and offering hope in the midst of despair. Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* are magnificent representations of how the past permanently shapes the present. By interweaving individual and collective trauma, both authors highlight the perplexing ways memory acts as a drive that both haunts and redeems. The historical settings of postcolonial Afghanistan and post-slavery America give the rich ground, upon which these stories unfold, exhibiting the all-inclusiveness of human suffering and strength. Through the redemptive journeys of both the protagonists, Amir and Sethe, this parallel study depicts how recovery is not the deletion of the past but the courage to confront it, to reconcile with its apparitions, and to chart a new way forward.

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