

## **Element of Guilt and Redemption in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner***

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Khaled Hosseini, the Afghan born American novelist and physician is a compassionate storyteller. As a child, he read a great deal of Persian poetry as well as Persian translations of novels ranging from *Alice in Wonderland* to Mickey Spillane's *Mike Hammer* Series. His precious childhood memories of Afghanistan during the pre-Soviet era and his personal experiences with the Hazara people of Afghanistan led to the writing of his first novel *The Kite Runner*. The novel captured contemporary and historical themes depicting the skill of Hosseini in character study. It is a political chronicle as well as a deeply personal tale. *The Kite Runner* is a beautifully told story of two boys growing up in Kabul during the final days of monarchy in Afghanistan and the first days of the shortlived republic. Despite being in the same household and having shared the same wet nurse, Amir and Hassan grow up in different worlds. Amir is the son of a prominent wealthy man, a Pashtun, whereas Hassan, the son of Ali, Amir's father's servant is a Hazara, a member of a shunned ethnic minority. Their fates and their intertwined lives reflect the tragedy in the world around them. When the Russians invade Afghanistan, Amir and his father flee for a new life in America. Amir thinks he has escaped his past yet he cannot leave the memory of Hassan behind him.

*The Kite Runner* is a story about friendship, loyalty, betrayal, corruption, guilt and redemption. It is about bonds between fathers and sons and the power of their lies. The novel describes the rich culture and beauty of a land in the process of being destroyed. Along with the devastation, Hosseini gives hope through the power of redemption.

Amir, the introvert and insecure Afghan narrator and his best friend Hassan spend their days running kites and telling stories of mystical places and powerful warriors until an unspeakable event changes the nature of their bond in ways neither of them could have predicted. Amir, the central character of the story has a privileged upbringing. Being the son of a rich Afghan he is accustomed to having what he wants. The only thing he feels deprived of is a deep emotional connection with Baba, his father, for which he blames himself. He thinks Baba wishes he was more like him and he holds himself responsible for his mother's death as she died during his birth. Consequently, Amir is jealous of anyone receiving Baba's affection. His relationship with Hassan only worsens this. Though Hassan is Amir's best friend, Amir feels he's beneath him as he is a Hazara, a servant. He mocks Hassan's ignorance and plays tricks on him. Amir never learns to assert himself against anyone as Baba would have liked, but Hassan always defends him. As a result Amir shows cowardice in sacrificing Hassan, his only competition for Baba's love, in order to get the blue kite; the kite of his final opponent, which, acting as a trophy, will bring him Baba's approval: "Nothing was free in this world. May be Hassan was the price I had to pay, the lamb I had to slay, to win Baba" he thought (68). When Amir wins the kite flying competition and makes Baba proud, Hassan runs for the blue kite and Amir asks him to: "Come back with it" and Hassan replies, "For you a thousand times over".

As Hassan gets the blue kite he gets chased by Assef, Wali and Kamal who ask him to hand it over to them. Hassan refuses and the boys charge him. Amir watches the whole thing not saying anything. He watches Assef rape Hassan but later on when he sees him crying and bleeding he pretends that he was looking for him all that while. Hassan hands over the kite to Amir as promised. On arriving home Baba hugs Amir, who presses his face into his chest and weeps – a reflection of his guilt. This event is the source of the guilt Amir feels as an adult and

it is why the image of the alleyway, where Hassan was raped as he stood and watched, is permanently etched on his mind, to his horror. Once on a visit to Jalalabad Amir tried to rid himself of the guilt. While everyone was asleep, he said to no one, "I watched Hassan get raped" (75) hoping someone would wake up and hear so he would not have to live with this lie anymore. But no one woke up and he felt the burden of the curse which made him an insomniac thereafter.

Hassan carries on with his routine chores in Baba's household, Amir all the while trying to avoid him. But in practically every job that he does, Amir sees: "Signs of his loyalty, his goddamn unwavering loyalty" (78). His loyalty becomes Amir's torture and punishment. Reeling under the pressure of guilt, Amir asks, "Baba, have you ever thought about getting new servants?" (78). This makes Baba furious and he says that he will never replace Ali and Hassan and that they belong there. Baba is so upset that he tells Amir that he is ashamed of him.

Thereafter, Amir makes another attempt to atone for the sin he has committed against Hassan. He asks Hassan, one afternoon, to walk up the hill so he can read him a story. They sit under a pomegranate tree and gathering the fruit Amir asks Hassan what he would do if he throws the fruit at him. Amir pelts pomegranates at Hassan and yells at him to hit him back wishing that he would give him the punishment he craves for so that he may finally sleep at night. But Hassan does not do that, he rather crushes a pomegranate against his own forehead and asking Amir if he was satisfied, leaves the place. Amir thinks that punishment would at least compensate for the way he had wronged Hassan. As Hassan does not retaliate it becomes the biggest torment for Amir. Hassan proves that his love and loyalty for Amir are unshakable whereas Amir's love and loyalty are weak.

Amir's thirteenth birthday party is a big show and as Amir sits to open his presents a thought enters his mind that either he or Hassan must leave now, as the burden of the guilt is becoming unbearable for him. Amir engineers a plan to make Ali and Hassan leave. When Ali and Hassan leave their living quarters to work Amir plants the watch that Baba gave him for his birthday and a handful of his birthday money under Hassan's mattress. He then tells Baba that Hassan stole them hoping it "would be the last in a long line of shameful lies".

When Baba asks Hassan if he stole the money and the watch, to Amir's surprise Hassan says he did. This is Hassan's final sacrifice for Amir. Amir's guilt is only heightened when Hassan admits to stealing the money and the watch. Baba, who has his own share of guilt, forgives Hassan and pleads with Ali to stay but Ali has decided they would leave.

When Baba and Amir move to America Amir sees this disconnection as an opportunity for a new beginning and he thinks he can escape his past there. Amir grows up, establishes his career as a writer and marries Soraya. He loses Baba and becomes fully responsible for himself. Despite growing up, he does not let go a part of his childhood. He still feels guilty about Hassan and this guilt keeps rising to the surface on occasion. He does not share his guilt even with Soraya although she shares about the time she ran away with another man.

The turning point in Amir's life gets a start when he receives a call from Rahim Khan, his father's friend, who wants Amir to see him in Pakistan. Amir has not spoken to him for twenty years. Rahim Khan, the first grown up Amir thought of as a friend is very ill. He is upset to know that Rahim Khan is not well but the call upsets him further as Rahim Khan tells him that there was a way to be good again. Amir realizes that as Rahim Khan had stayed on in Baba's house in Kabul after they had left and had Hassan and his wife, Farzana, as his servants, he knew about everything that happened with Hassan. This again reminds Amir of his treatment of Hassan and he realizes that in this new life in America he will not be free of guilt until he makes up for his misdeed with Hassan. Amir goes to Rahim Khan in Pakistan not only because Rahim Khan is sick but also as Rahim Khan knows a way for Amir to be good again. He hopes that there will finally be some way for him to correct the wrong lingering in his thoughts. There he learns that Hassan and Farzana had been killed by the Taliban and their son Sohrab was in an orphanage. To Amir, the news of Hassan's death means that he can never apologize

to him for allowing his rape by Assef and then lying about him stealing his watch and money. Making up for these actions was part of the reason he travelled to Pakistan. Initially the story suggests that he will have to live with his guilt permanently but Rahim Khan says that one way remains for him to make amends. Amir can go to Kabul, look for Sohrab and bring him back to Pakistan where he can be taken care of and he is the only person who can make sure Sohrab is not abandoned. Rahim Khan further reveals that Hassan was his half brother and hence Sohrab was his nephew. This strengthens Amir's resolve to go to Kabul facing the dangers of the place, to bring Sohrab. Going to Kabul becomes a test of Amir's honor, loyalty and manhood. By rescuing Sohrab Amir can become the man Baba wanted him to be and can finally atone for his sins towards Hassan.

On reaching Kabul Amir learns that Sohrab has been taken from the orphanage by the Taliban and the Taliban official from whom Sohrab will have to be rescued is Assef. It is clear that Sohrab is being sexually abused by Assef – a reminder of Hassan's rape by Assef. Amir can now intervene in this and save him. Assef puts on metal knuckles and there is a scuffle in which Amir is brutally beaten up by him. Amir's aim is not to win but to bear it as a deserved punishment for his actions towards Hassan. It comes as a healing relief and the cut he gets in his lip is like the harelip Hassan had.

Amir and Sohrab reach Pakistan where Sohrab attempts suicide when told he would have to stay in an orphanage though Amir had earlier promised not to send him there. Sohrab has to be hospitalized there and Amir feels guilty for Sohrab's attempted suicide. Sitting by Sohrab's side in the hospital Amir feels that his sins have revisited him.

After passing through all the required formalities, Amir brings Sohrab to America to his house where an excited Soraya awaits him. Amir tells Soraya's father plainly about how Sohrab was his half brother's son.

Forgiveness is slowly budding for Amir as he tries to get a smile from Sohrab though after reaching, even till the end of the story, Sohrab does not utter even a single word.

*The Kite Runner* is a story of intertwined lives of fathers and sons. Baba and Amir's lives have the burden of guilt all through the story and both atone for their sins differently. Amir ultimately takes Sohrab to America, seeing in him Hassan, his half brother about which he learns very late in the story. Rahim Khan told Amir that Baba had slept with Ali's wife Sanaubar, fathered Hassan and never told Hassan or Amir that they were brothers. Baba was torn between two halves, specifically between Amir and Hassan. Baba's inner conflict never becomes obvious to Amir as he very much separated his inner emotions from his outer appearance. For instance, Baba builds an orphanage, which appears to be a simple act of charity, but as Rahim Khan explains, Baba built the orphanage to make up for the guilt he felt on not being able to acknowledge Hassan as his son.

When Hassan was born Ali found his joy in him thereafter. Less than a week after his birth his mother Sanaubar ran away with a clan of travelling singers and dancers. Baba hired the same nursing woman, who had nursed Amir, for Hassan. So, the two brothers were fed from the same breast, took their first steps on the same lawn in the same yard and spoke their first words under the same roof.

As an atonement of his guilt Baba gave Hassan a unique birthday present. Although on every birthday he gave him a surprise gift but this time he summoned a plastic surgeon Dr. Kumar to correct his cleft lip. Baba explained to Hassan that he wanted to give him a present that would last him forever.

Baba showed unusual affection for Hassan all the time. After Hassan's rape by Assef and Amir watching it and not intervening made Amir unbearably guilty, and, therefore, he wanted to have Ali and Hassan out of the house. He asked Baba if they could have new servants and this annoyed Baba extremely. He spoke out what was, in the fact the truth "Hassan's not going anywhere", Baba snapped. "He is staying right here with us, where he belongs. This is home and we're his family. Don't you ask me that question again!"

Amir tried to get rid of Hassan by placing his watch and some money under Hassan's mattress so as to falsely accuse him of theft. He told Baba this and Ali and Hassan were summoned. But to Amir's shock Baba stunned Amir by saying, "I forgive you" to Hassan when Hassan made the sacrifice for Amir by saying that he had stolen the watch. Ali took the decision to leave Baba's service and go to Hazarajat but Baba pleaded with him not to go. Amir saw a pain and a fear in that pleading. So much so that Baba even cried – Amir saw him crying for the first time.

*The Kite Runner* is a touching story of the guilt and attempted redemption of the father and son--Baba and Amir. Efforts are put in for redemption by both but only partial redeeming becomes possible. Khaled Hosseini's skill at creating authentic human lives and behaviour leaves a permanent impact on our minds.

### REFERENCES

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2. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The Kite Runner](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Kite_Runner).