

---

RECOUNTING THE RAMIFICATIONS OF TRAUMA IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S  
*THE KITE RUNNER*

SHERLIN SMILE RM

Research Scholar, PG and Research Department of English, Government Arts College (Autonomous)  
Coimbatore, Email: sherlinsmilepsg@gmail.com

---

**Abstract**

*The Kite Runner*, the debut novel of Khaled Hosseini which was published in year 2003, illustrates the traumatic pain and sufferings and its impact on its characters in various forms. The novel represents the traumatic events and the difficulty in transforming that traumatic memory into a narrative. In addition, Khaled Hosseini's presentation of war and terrorism, as the background, intensifies the dynamics of trauma. This paper attempts to explore the ramifications and dynamics of trauma, and its psychological effects on Amir, the central character, by realizing the trauma undergone by him, its implications and dynamics.

**Keywords:** Post Trauma Stress Disorder, Hallucination, Sufferings, Pain, Silence, Guilt

The influence of literature on human life is wide and the language of literature is empowered to bring out the inner mind of man. As a matter of fact, the human mind is an amalgamation of memories, pains, sufferings, introspection, retrospection, wound, trauma, etc. In recent trends of criticism, "Trauma theory" plays a vital role in connecting literature to psychoanalysis. Trauma is prevalent in literature as it shades the agonies and pains of the characters in a literary narrative.

The word 'trauma' has its origin from the Greek word *traûma* meaning "wound in the body". Trauma refers to any kind of emotional wound which leads to psychological injury or events that cause great distress.

Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* establishes the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis. Cathy asserts that "trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other uncontrolled phenomenon" (11).

Psychoanalysis in literature delves deep into the emotions of characters and traumatic memories and their struggles to overcome it. Psychoanalytic theory explores literature in a productive way to depict the emotional strife of characters and how trauma is embodied in events which return to their life in the form of dreams, flashbacks, memory, and nightmares. So, contemporary trauma pinpoints that, events which cannot be perceived by the conscious mind is recognized and accepted by the unconscious mind.

Recounting the ramifications of trauma is an emotional disturbance and a shock, so the traumatic memory narration shifts back and forth in flashback and nightmares which drive the protagonist into a different world. Moreover, the conscious mind of the victims fails to recollect the traumatic moment even though s/he wants to because the traumatic event was not completely established or perceived by the victim at the time of its occurrence. Felman and Laub elucidate, "(t)he traumatic event, although real took place outside the parameters of 'normal' reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event which has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during, no after" (69).

In *The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini illustrates the miserable impact of trauma mainly through his protagonist, Amir, and his half-brother, Hassan. Amir, when he was twelve years old happens to witness the miserable rape of Hassan, the Hazara boy, by Aseef, a local ruffian marks the beginning of trauma in the life of Amir. He witnesses the event with fear and in long silence and he narrates, "just watched everything, paralyzed" (Hosseini 69). That horrible incident paralyses his mind and body and Amir finds it difficult to explain his state of mind at that time. Amir tries to confront this trauma, by avoiding Hassan's presence in the house, thereafter.

Amir attempts to overcome this trauma by planning a trip with his father to Jalalabad to get a change of atmosphere to cleanse his traumatic memories. Despite the love and affection of his father, and despite making his long cherished desire of spending time entirely with his father in Jalalabad, he couldn't escape from the clutches of trauma which deprives him of sleep. This trauma continues to haunt him throughout the journey and leaves him anguished.

Amir was desperate to confide his mind to someone, when he fails to find a soul to listen to him he screams "I watched Hassan get raped, with an intention to be heard by others". He continues to express "A Part of me was hoping someone would wake up and hear, so I wouldn't have to live with this lie anymore. But no one woke up and in the silence that followed; I understood the nature of my new curse: I was going to get away with it" (Hosseini 80). This outbreak of his emotion makes his unconscious mind acknowledge the bitter reality of his life, he says "That was the night I became an insomniac" (Hosseini 81).

Judith Herman, an American psychiatrist, decodes the three stages of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction: Amir is a manifestation of these three categories. Hyperarousal refers to the sleeplessness or startle in the middle of sleep is what Amir undergoes after the traumatic event. Intrusion is the repeated interruption of the trauma. Amir is been interrupted by this trauma throughout his life and it haunts him even when he is thirty in America. He recounts his past 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 1).

Traumatic memories haunting the victim and depriving the person of verbal representation is one of the significant characteristics of PTSD. Even when Soraya courageously reveals her past to him on their engagement day, Amir is haunted by his past trauma, inefficiency and failure to confide his mind to her. The predicament of Amir is expressed as "And in the end of the question that always came back to me is always this: How could I, of all people, chastise someone for their past?" (Hosseini 151-152)

Amir in order to come out of his agony and as a sort of penance for his mistake tries to infuriate Hassan by hitting him with pomegranates continuously yelling "Hit me back" (Hosseini 86). This act of Amir is a clear indication of something like surrendering oneself to a traumatic event of the last stage of PTSD, i.e., constriction as decoded by Herman. It is in such a predicament that the character gets fed up and yields as Amir craves to Hassan "Hit me back, goddamn you!" I wish he would. I wished he'd give me the punishment I craved, so maybe I'd finally sleep at night" (Hosseini 86).

At last, circumstances make Amir to yield to trauma as expressed in the words of Herman "[t]he system of self-defense shuts down entirely. The helpless person escapes from her situation not by action in the real world but rather by altering her state of consciousness" (42).

In psychological trauma, the element of repetition is the key symptom which is characterised by flashback, hallucinations, irrationality, anxiety, emotional instability, etc. Khaled Hosseini's central character, Amir, was caught in a psychological trauma that engulfs him and torments him throughout his life. Recounting the trauma fills Amir with a sense of agony and guilt. He feels remorse that he did not do anything to save Hassan, he narrates "Did he know I knew? And if he knew, then what would I see if I *did* look in his eyes? Blame? Indignation? Or, God forbid" (Hosseini 73). Amir becomes repulsive and agitated about the trauma and he could not face Hassan anymore. This is the very first sign of PTSD in Amir.

However, trauma can change the attitude of the victim. Many a time, trauma helps the characters to be positive towards their life. Traumatic memory guides and supports the traumatic victim to find solace from his torment and sense of loss. Life begins to change in front of their own eyes from trauma, suffering, and pain to knowledge and understanding. Amir in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runners* suffers from a sense of guilt even after settling in America. He could not forget or forgive himself. Amir realizes that there is an outlet or solution for his eerie when

Rahim Khan shows him the, “way to be good again” (Hosseini 209). When Amir shatters the fear and silence of his traumatic memories by opening himself to an empathetic and benevolent listener, he understands and acknowledges the fact that it is the only way to attain solace and heal from the psychological injury caused on him. It is actually this purgation of emotions and feelings helps the trauma victims to overcome the trauma. Amir when he opens up to his wife Soraya about his childhood trauma that haunts his life throughout through the phone, he gets relieved and verbalized as “I had pictured this moment so many times, dreaded it, but as I spoke, I felt something lifting off my chest” (Hosseini 298).

Amir becomes a new man with new perspectives and his mental relief is accompanied with more physical action of becoming a kite runner to his kite runner Hassan’s son, Sohrab. His act of being a kite runner again relieves him from guilt, frustration, and anxiety: the feelings that burdened his life. This moment is the most triumphant of moments in his life. Thus, he transformed his soul by conquering his past trauma and experiences an optimistic life. Amir expresses his transformation as “with the wind blowing in my face, and a smile as wide as the Valley of Panjsher on my lips” (Hosseini 340). They have, indeed, driven it out of consciousness and out of memory, and apparently saved themselves a great amount of psychic pain, “but in the unconscious the suppressed wish still exists”, only waiting for its chance to become active, and finally succeeds in sending into consciousness [...]. (Freud 21)

To conclude, recounting trauma is no longer a haunting event to Amir as he decides to get rid of it completely from his life. Amir and Sohrab distance themselves from the recurrent memories of their life which haunt them by “Only a smile. A tiny thing. A leaf in the woods, shaking in the wake of a startled bird’s flight” (Hosseini 340).

## References

- Hosseini, Khaled. *The Kite Runner*. Bloomsbury, 2003, pp. 1+.
- Caruth, C. *Unclaimed Experience*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1996, p. 11.
- Felman, S., and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. Routledge, 1992, p. 69.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Origin and Development of Psychoanalysis*. NuVision Publications, LLC, Dey 11, 1382 AP, p.21.
- Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books, 1992, p. 42.