

Exploration of Trauma Narrative in *The Kite Runner**

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As the first Afghan novel written in English by Afghan American writer Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* provides reader a window into Afghan history and culture as well as the impact of trauma on individuals. Through interweaving protagonist Amir's personal trauma from sin to self-salvation with the racial and national conflicts as the collective trauma of the Afghan, Khaled Hosseini not only foregrounds the coming-of-age theme of sin, guilt, and redemption but also successfully presents the racial conflicts and national pain in Afghanistan. Under the framework of trauma theory and through close reading of the novel, the aim of the present paper is to analyze how trauma is narrated in the novel and thus help readers to have a better understanding about the Afghan history and life.

Keywords: *The Kite Runner*, trauma narrative, individual trauma, collective trauma, racial trauma

Introduction

The Kite Runner (2003) is Afghan American writer Khaled Hosseini's fiction debut. Narrated by protagonist Amir, it tells a touching story about boyhood friendship destroyed by jealousy, fear, social evils, and war. Running parallel to this personal narrative of loss and redemption is the story of modern Afghanistan and of Amir's equally guilt-ridden relationship with the war-torn city of his birth. As the first Afghan novel written in English by Afghan American writer, *The Kite Runner* provides reader a window into Afghan history and culture as well as the impact of trauma on individuals. Through interweaving protagonist Amir's personal trauma from sin to self-salvation with the racial and national conflicts as the collective trauma of the Afghan, Khaled Hosseini not only foregrounds the coming-of-age theme of sin, guilt, and redemption but also successfully presents the racial conflicts and national pain in Afghanistan. Under the framework of trauma theory and through close reading of the novel, the aim of the present paper is to analyze how trauma is narrated in the novel and thus help readers to have a better understanding about the Afghan history and life.

As a Trauma Fiction

Originally the word "trauma" is derived from the Greek word "traumatizo" which means "wound". It is "a piercing of the skin, a breaking of the bodily envelope" (Garland, 1998, p. 9). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud describes trauma as a mental disturbance of survivors of devastating events which involve a risk of life, such as railway disasters, accidents, or the terrible war which has just ended (Freud, 1990, p. 104).

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Although the concept of trauma is from psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, over the past century trauma has also become a key term in cultural criticism and literary theory. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth (1996), one of the most innovative scholars on trauma theory, defines trauma as “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, or other repetitive phenomena” (p. 91). In her book, *Trauma Fiction*, Anne Whitehead (2004) for the first time bringing trauma theory and literary texts together examines the literary potential of trauma and describes trauma fiction as a relatively recent genre, which emerged along with trauma theory as a way to “elaborate on the ethical and cultural implications of trauma” (p. 4) and explores the “politics, ethics and aesthetics” (p. 3) of remembering. Trauma, she writes,

...repositions the relationship between language and the world, so that the text shifts from a reflective mode—based on a position of self-awareness and self-understanding—to a performative act, in which the text becomes imbricated in our attempts to perceive and understand the world around us. (Whitehead, 2004, p. 13)

Written by Afghan American writer Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* tells a heartbreaking story of fierce cruelty and fierce yet redeeming love. In the 1970s in Afghanistan, the Pushtun boy Amir and the Hazara boy Hassan are raised together in Kabul. They always play kites together in the street. One day, after Amir winning a competition of flying kite, Hassan runs to bring a kite to Amir, but is beaten and raped by the local bully Assef in an empty street. Amir witnesses the assault but does not help the loyal Hassan. On the day after his birthday party, Amir hides his new watch in Hassan’s bed to frame the boy as a thief and force his father to drive Hassan and his father Ali away. In 1979, the Russians invade Afghanistan and Baba and Amir escape to Pakistan. In 1988, they have a simple life in Fremont, California, where Amir graduates from a public college. Later Amir meets his countrywoman Soraya and they get married. In 2000, after the death of Baba, Amir is a famous novelist and receives a phone call from his father’s friend Rahim Khan, who discloses the secret that Hassan is his half-brother, asking Amir to return to Peshawar, in Pakistan, to find and rescue Hassan’s son, Sohrab, who is forced into prostitution under the reign of Taliban.

Setting in Afghanistan’s tragic recent past in the 1970s, *The Kite Runner* is full of violent events: unexpected rape by local bullies, war, loss of homeland, death of beloved ones, brutal reign of the foreigners, racial discrimination so on and so forth. The impact of these violent events is so overwhelming that it leaves tremendous trauma on the characters in the novel.

Based on the ideas of trauma, when he first writes about the Buffalo Creek catastrophe, Kai Erikson (1976) distinguishes “individual trauma” from “collective trauma” in *Everything in Its Path* and states that:

By *individual trauma* I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one’s defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively.... By *collective trauma*, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with “trauma”. But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared.... “I” continue to exist, though damaged and maybe even permanently changed. “You” continue to exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But “we” no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body. (pp. 153-154)

In *The Kite Runner*, besides presenting the profound loss and intense fear of Afghan, by using first-person point of view and through interweaving protagonist Amir's personal trauma from sin to self-salvation with the racial and national conflicts as the collective trauma of the Afghan, Khaled Hosseini not only foregrounds the coming-of-age theme of sin, guilt, and redemption but also successfully presents the racial conflicts and national pain in Afghanistan.

Amir's Individual Trauma

Individual trauma generally arises from some personal experience and attacks the victim with unexpected suddenness and consequences. In *The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini complicates protagonist Amir's personal trauma through depicting him as both a victim and a sinner. In the novel, Amir, a well-to-do boy from the Wazir Akbar Khan district of Kabul, is tormented by the guilt of abandoning his friend Hassan, the son of his father's Hazara servant who actually is Amir's half-brother when Hassan is beaten and raped by the brutal Assef and other two local bullies in an empty street. Although Amir is physically unharmed, the traumatic memory of his cowardice and betrayal haunted his later life as Khaled Hosseini (2003) narrates at the beginning of the novel "standing in kitchen with the receiver to my ear, I knew it wasn't just Rahim Khan on the line, it was my past of unatoned sin" (p. 1).

The traumatic effect of the rape like an intruder or a ghost also severely influences Amir's normal life. He constantly suffers from the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): nightmares, avoidance symptoms, hyper vigilance, disturbed sleep, and distracted mind, etc.

I thought about Hassan's dream, the one about us swimming in the lake. There is no monster, he's said, just water. Except he'd been wrong about that. There was a monster in the lake. It had grabbed Hassan by the ankles, dragged him to the murky bottom, I was that monster. That was the night I became an insomniac. (Hosseini, 2003, pp. 93-94)

Lenore Terr (1990), a child psychiatrist who did the first longitudinal study of traumatized children writes: "psychic trauma occurs when a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming intense emotional blow or a series of blows assaults the person from outside. Traumatic events are external, but they quickly become incorporated into the mind" (p. 8). Traumatic experience as a witness of the rape of Hassan generates indelible effect on Amir's psyche that alters his normal relation with Hassan. Before the accident, Amir and Hassan are intimate friends like a carrot and pea.

When we were children, Hassan and I used to climb the poplar trees in the driveway of my father's house and annoy our neighbours by reflecting sunlight into their homes with a shard of mirror. We would sit across from each other on a pair of high branches, our naked feet dangling, our trouser pockets filled with dried mulberries and walnuts. We took turns with the mirror as we ate mulberries, pelted each other with them, giggling, laughing. (Hosseini, 2003, p. 3)

While after the accident, Amir suffers from the impact of trauma brought by the shame and guilt, and undergoes violent mood swing. One day, Amir asked Hassan to go up the hill and told him he wanted to read him a new story. They sat against the low cemetery wall under the shade thrown by the pomegranate tree. To Hassan's great surprise, Amir picked up an overripe pomegranate and hurled the pomegranate at him.

Amir also deliberately avoids the person and things associated with the accident, which results in his hysteric behavior of faking a lie and drives Hassan away from his home. On the day after his birthday party, Amir

hides his new watch in Hassan's bed to frame the boy as a thief and force his father to fire Ali. But his behavior does not release his conscience from recalling his traumatic experience, instead his sense of guilt worsened.

...I wanted to tell them all that I was the snake in the grass, the monster in the lake. I wasn't worthy of his sacrifice; I was a liar, a cheat, and a thief. And I would have told, except that a part of me was glad. Glad that this would all be over with soon. Baba would dismiss them, there would be some pain, but life would move on. I wanted that, to move on, to forget, to start with a clean slate. I wanted to be able to breathe again. (Hosseini, 2003, p. 115)

Amir's shame and guilt follows him after he and his father escape to the United States, where he attends college, gets married, and becomes a successful novelist. The wound of trauma is not healed until Amir returns to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and risks his own life to rescue Sohrab, Hassan's son from the evil Assef, then a Taliban "monster". Thus when Assef beats Amir, Amir feels: "My body was broken... but I felt healed. Healed at last. I laughed" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 303). Finally, Amir reaches his personal redemption and healing.

In the preface of the novel, Hosseini dedicates the novel to his children—Haris and Farah—as well as to children of Afghanistan. By employing children characters to speak of and about the trauma they experience, Hosseini successfully conveys the message to children that they should treat trauma as part of life, the way to be mature is to face trauma bravely and endeavor to remedy the faults and to obtain personal redemption.

Collective Trauma of Afghan

A collective trauma is a traumatic psychological effect shared by a group of people of any size, up to and including an entire society. Traumatic events witnessed by an entire society can stir up collective sentiment, often resulting in a shift in that society's culture and mass actions. Besides the collective trauma brought by war, what impresses the reader most is the collective trauma suffered by Hazaras in the novel.

The Kite Runner is written in a way that reader can easily become caught up in the class struggle between under-privileged Hazaras (minority) and allegedly affluent Pashtuns (majority). Collective trauma of Hazaras originated from their inferior identities. They were discriminated and oppressed in Afghanistan for many generations. As is depicted in the novel, one day Amir found a history book in the study and found a history book with a chapter on Hazara history, from Amir's narration, readers can get a glimpse of the history of Hazara people:

In it, I read that my people, the Pashtuns, had persecuted and oppressed the Hazaras. It said the Hazaras had tried to rise against the Pashtuns in the nineteenth century, but the Pashtuns had "quelled them with unspeakable violence." The book said that my people had killed the Hazaras, driven them from their lands, burned their homes, and sold their women. (Hosseini, 2003, p. 10)

Such oppression can be clearly seen from people's brutal treatment towards Hassan and his father Ali: "They called him 'flat-nosed' because of Ali and Hassan's characteristic Hazara Mongoloid features.... School textbooks barely mentioned them and referred to their ancestry only in passing" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 9).

Through the voice of narrator Amir, by way of juxtaposition, Hosseini also highlights the injustice and brutal reality. In the novel, Amir contrasts his large house with Hassan's mud shack; he describes Hassan's mother as "beautiful but notoriously unscrupulous woman who live up to her dishonorable reputation" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 8) while Amir describes his own mother as "a highly educated woman universally regarded as one of Kabul's most respected, beautiful, and virtuous ladies" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 11). Moreover, Amir describes

Hassan's father to have monogoloid features, which worsen with several physical disabilities. On the other hand, he describes his own father 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..." (Hosseini, 2003, p. 16). Through Amir's stream of thoughts, readers can also perceive how some people, mostly people from privileged classes in Kabul, would consider the racial and sectarian identity as eternal, as their fate:

Never mind any of those things. Because history isn't easy to overcome. Neither is religion. In the end, I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara, I was Sunni and he was Shi'a, and nothing was ever going to change that. Nothing. (Hosseini, 2003, p. 27)

Racial and sectarian conflict is one of the sensitive issues, even a taboo in Afghanistan. It is a historical pain. Denial, repression, and dissociation tend to operate on a social as well as an individual level. Such attitude towards racial trauma explains why Marc Forster's 2007 film *The Kite Runner* (based on Khaled Hosseini's 2003 novel) is banned in Afghanistan. Afghanistan government claims that the film presents the ethnic groups in "a bad light", and therefore could trigger an ethnic and sectarian controversy. As Din Mohanmmad Rashed Mubarez, the then deputy minister of the Ministry of Information and Culture explained: "We respect freedom of speech, we support freedom of speech, but unfortunately we have difficulties in Afghan society, and if this film is shown in the cinema, it is humiliating for one of our ethnic groups" (Raza, 2008). But as a writer with social responsibility, Hosseini is clearly aware that human beings need to understand the past in order to reclaim the present and the future. In an interview, Hosseini once said: "I believe these issues (racial and sectarian issues) are important and should not be taboo. In fact, it is the role of fiction to take on these difficult subjects and open them up for debate" (as cited in Stuhr, 2009, p. 5). Through Hosseini's artistic creation, readers can realize the power of speaking the unspeakable and witness firsthand the creative energy that is presented in the novel.

Besides the racial trauma of Harazas, the collective trauma of war on Afghans, especially on Afghan children is also clearly represented in the novel. In the novel, readers can find haunting images presenting the war trauma: a man, desperate to feed his children, trying to sell his artificial leg in the market; an adulterous couple stoned to death in a stadium during the halftime of a football match; hanging body on the tree; and suicide on the way of escape. Death permeates every corner, as in the letter of Hassan to Amir:

Alas the Afghanistan of our youth is long dead. Kindness is gone from the land and you cannot escape the killings. Always the killings. In Kabul, fear is everywhere, in the streets, in the stadium, in the markets, it is a part of our lives here, Amir agha. (Hosseini, 2003, p. 233)

Conclusion

In *Trauma and Recovery* (1997), Judith Lewis Herman states: "Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims" (p. 1). As an example of trauma fiction, by employing children characters to speak of the personal trauma they experience, by way of juxtaposition, by using haunting images to present the war, and by interweaving Amir's personal trauma with the racial and national trauma of the Afghan, Khaled Hosseini successfully exposes trauma in personal circumstances and as a social phenomenon, thereby constructing a helpful map for the restoration of the social order and the healing of individual pain in current Afghan society.

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