

TRAUMA AND VIOLENCE IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S THE KITE RUNNER

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ABSTRACT

Trauma plays a major role in the formation of an individual's self. A devalued self often emerges from having a marginal status in the society, where traumas from racism, poverty, violence and exploitation are more likely to occur. The most difficult aspect of traumatic situations for victims is feeling that one is powerless to change his or her situation. Traumatic experience raises many uncomfortable issues for the individuals and the society. It forces us to face difficult human issues like vulnerability, capacity for evil, bearing witness to horrible events and taking sides with the victims or perpetrators. Although trauma damages the individual psyche, collective trauma has further destructive consequences in that it breaks the attachments of social life, degrades the sense of community and support from that community and dominates the mood and interactions of the group. Traumatic experience can inspire not only a loss of self confidence, but also a loss of confidence in the society and cultural structures that are supposed to create order and safety. Trauma Literature puts forth a number of thought-provoking questions before the readers as well as the writers. It ranges from the ethical function of literature to reconsidering our cultural assumptions about identity, relationality, and intentionality, to what contingencies determine how or if the individuals survive the devastations of trauma. Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* published in the year 2003, introduces the readers to the country of Afghanistan, looks at the universal theme of transgression and forgiveness, of homeland and exile. This novel serves as a medium for the hapless millions of Afghans to voice the trauma of their existence.

Keywords: Trauma, Reconciliation, Conflict, Violence, Suffering.

1. INTRODUCTION

Societies and cultures can be affected by trauma on a general level, and the trauma may cause long-term violent actions on visible and invisible levels. Trauma comes from a Greek word meaning wound; the term is widely used in the medical field, especially for the injuries in which the skin is broken, and the internal organs are affected caused by violence as an agent. The word trauma which has been derived from the Greek word meaning 'wound', was probably first used as a medical term in the English language in seventeenth century to refer to piercing and wounding of the physical body. It is still used in this medical sense but with the development of trauma studies, it has moved from a physio-biological approach to a psychological approach. In the twentieth century, Freud used the term to refer to how external events can rupture people's psychological capabilities. Psychologists still use trauma in the same way today as a metaphor for life events that tear at the psychological skin that protects us, leaving us emotionally wounded. Trauma can also be defined as a severe shock that has adverse effects on a person's psyche. Trauma is the suffering, torture, torment and fear caused by a frightening incident. It causes psychological breakdown and agony, crushing an individual's physical and mental strength and making them weak.

Cathy Caruth in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* defines trauma as "In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (p.181). Trauma is also seen as the shattering of the self that challenges the very notion of personal identity. Outwardly, trauma can be an outcome of frightening events such as warfare and assaults and it can also be triggered through racial discrimination, criminal and sexual assault, child abuse, poverty, natural disasters, domestic violence and even terrorist attacks. The political, social, and religious strands often affiliate with violence leading to trauma and the post-traumatic disorders. Therefore, in its evolved usage, trauma can be categorized as hidden trauma, political trauma, social trauma, individual trauma and national trauma. Such kinds of adversity have the strength to shake our very existence of being.

Trauma overwhelms its unfortunate victims and hurls them adrift in a raging sea of phobia, torment, despair, helplessness, fear, rage, depression. It results in self-destructive behaviours. The aspects of trauma can be enlisted as anxiety, agitation, numbness, dissociation, sleep disorders which haunt, torment and strangle a person's present. Traumatic memories are imprints from the past, such overwhelming experiences that are deeply carved into the sufferer's brain, body and psyche. Trauma ends up causing havoc in a person's life, thereby creating emotional or psychological stress and harshness, forcing people into seclusion and state of hopelessness where they are forced to live in horror and pain for the rest of their lives. Trauma is unexpected, unpredictable and uncontrollable.

2. MAJOR THRUST

Hosseini's writing aims to remind readers that the conflict in Afghanistan has pushed the country's socioeconomic conditions to an all-time low. The American audience responds well to Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner*. According to Nielsen Book Scan, his work was the best-seller of 2005. There are social statuses in Afghan culture that categorize people into several identities. Pashtun and Hazara are characters from *The Kite Runner*. This socioeconomic position is reflected in two characters in this novel. Amir is an example of Pashtun, whereas Hassan is an example of Hazara. Pashtun has the highest status, whilst Hazara has the lowest. This narrative includes religious divisions as well. There are two types of Muslims in Afghanistan. The first is Shia, and the second is Sunni. The first Afghan author who effectively fictionalizes his culture for a western audience is Khaled Hosseini. It is the story of Amir and his relationship with his servant-friend, Hassan. The novel is Amir's psychological journey to find peace with himself, as he is the guilt-ridden witness to the tragic rape of Hassan who is also his half-brother. Amir is destined to carry the immense burden of his betrayal, just because he did not have the courage to stop the things that unfolded before his eyes. Blending the daily struggles of regular people with the horrific historical sweep of a shattered country in a complex and soul searching story shows how Afghanistan has gone from a monarchy to a republic in the blink of an eye. Poverty, economic catastrophe, terror, and uncertainty characterize life in Afghanistan as a result of the Russian-Taliban conflict.

The Kite Runner as a trauma narrative is focused on the individual trauma of each character like Amir, Hassan and Baba. Amir's character is more focused on the internal self but the trauma of Hassan and Baba, in the larger space, also represents collective trauma faced by communities they represent. Amir's trauma can be interpreted as 'survivor's guilt', the feeling of having seen someone wronged, not stopping it and escaping the situation without facing any strong consequences for oneself. Amir belongs to Afghanistan, a part of the world where a multitude of people have witnessed some form of violence inflicted on people around them owing to the difficult times their country has seen. His action of running away and leaving Hassan behind after he was raped show his dissociation from his surroundings as he tries to protect his psyche from further trauma.

The Kite Runner begins with the affirmation that traumatic memories do not rest but keep clawing their way back into the lives of their victims. Even after a lapse of twenty-six years, Amir cannot bury his past, thus suggesting that a traumatic experience is a powerful shaping force that has the potential to determine what course its victim's life should take. Amir has not changed much from what he had become at the age of twelve, in the winter of 1975. The twenty six years of his life that he led since, have hinged on a single event—the rape of his best friend, Hassan to which he has bore witness. This single moment of trauma has defined his entire life. The fact that he is in a land miles away from his homeland, where the event took place, offers him no comfort.

Hosseini's dedication to accurately portraying Afghan history for a Western audience is most evident in his representation of Afghanistan's national pain, which he transforms into Hassan's rape an occurrence seen by Amir. Hosseini presents Hassan's rape and subsequent anguish as an allegory for the turbulence that has engulfed Afghanistan since a revolution in 1973 overthrew the monarchy and prompted decades of political uncertainty, beginning with a communist takeover and Russian invasion in 1979. Hosseini's dedication to accurately portraying Afghan history for a Western audience is most evident in his representation of Afghanistan's national pain, which he transforms into Hassan's rape an occurrence seen by Amir. Hosseini presents Hassan's rape and subsequent anguish as an allegory for the turbulence that has engulfed Afghanistan since a revolution in 1973 overthrew the monarchy and prompted decades of political uncertainty, beginning with a communist takeover and Russian invasion in 1979.

The Kite Runner is a novel about friendship, loyalty and the price that should be paid for betrayal. Written against a history that has not been told in fiction before, the novel describes the rich culture and beauty of the land that is on the verge of complete destruction. Taking us from the Afghanistan in the final days of the monarchy to the present, *The Kite Runner* is a beautifully told story of friendship between two boys growing up in Kabul. Raised in the same household and sharing the same wet nurse, Amir and Hassan nonetheless grow up in different worlds. Amir is the son of a wealthy and prominent businessman, while Hassan is the son of their servant. Their intertwined lives and their fates reflect the eventual tragedy of the world around them. When the Soviets invade, Amir and his father (Baba) flee the country for a new life in the United States. Amir thinks that he has escaped his past but in no time realizes that he cannot leave the memories of Hassan behind.

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beginning with a communist takeover and Russian invasion in 1979. The oppressed are conditioned by this system so deeply over generations that they forget their rights or accept that they are lesser and meant to be treated in this manner. Hassan not only pulls himself through the sexual trauma, which is unimaginably painful for a helpless boy, but also from the betrayal of his friend Amir. He has no complaints or aggression towards Amir, again because he does not think he has the right to. His family leaves when Amir brands Hassan as a thief. How Hassan dealt with the traumatic incident, its memory, the loss of his close friend and father figure, how he struggled in the recurrent violent and frightening events after the rise of Taliban is a long silence in the plot.

Many traumatized persons, however, experience long periods of time in which they live in two different worlds or realms: the realm of the trauma and the realm of their current, ordinary life. Very often, it is impossible to bridge these worlds. It is like a permanent duality, or a parallel existence. The young and the adult Amir are similar existences, separated by space and time. The different steps that Amir adopts towards healing would enable him to bridge this gap, narration being one among them. That traumatic memory or experience is timeless, is a fact to be reckoned with. A traumatic memory is not a story placed in time, with a beginning, middle and end that is characteristic of narrative memory. When it gets told, it is still a re-experience. Hassan is the kite runner and the novel projects his victimisation. It almost appears that Amir bears the brunt of the rape, when Hassan is its real victim. Nothing much is revealed about how Hassan copes with the trauma. Occasional references in the narrative like, "He smiled his Hassan smile and disappeared around the corner. The next time I saw him smile unabashedly like that was twenty-six years later, in a faded Polaroid photograph" (TKR 59), hints at the impact the rape must have caused in Hassan's life.

3. CONCLUSION

Though Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* lack the chaotic, disorienting and sober aspects that are often associated with trauma fiction, his works offer voice to the millions who suffer in private and attempt to call the world's attention to the issues that are often ignored and go unchecked in the society. Trauma can close off self knowledge, but mourning and working through leads to reconciliation with pain that must be acknowledged if healing is to occur. *The Kite Runner* presents a quest for the self. Amir functions in isolation and his quest takes the shape of an inward journey. The author's use of the first person narrator makes the character into a writer or creator of some sort who is engaged in the process of reconstituting a self diminished by loss.

4. REFERENCES

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