

From Pain to Voice: Trauma, Violence, and Narrative Reconstruction in *The Kite Runner*

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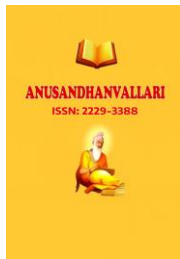
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Abstract: This study examines the narrativization of trauma, violence, and cultural identity in Khaled Hosseini's fiction, particularly *The Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). As an Afghan-American novelist, Hosseini integrates personal memory, historical experience, and political consciousness to portray Afghanistan's sociocultural realities. His works articulate multiple forms of violence—personal, structural, and cultural—while situating these within both national and transnational contexts. Through the lens of trauma and cultural theory, this paper explores how Hosseini fictionalizes the legacy of collective suffering and displacement, foregrounding gender oppression, ethnic discrimination, and patriarchal hegemony as recurring sources of violence. Characters such as Amir, Hassan, Mariam, and Soraya embody psychological and physical scars shaped by familial neglect, ethnic hierarchies, and gendered marginalization. The study highlights how Hosseini transforms fiction into a medium of social critique and moral reconciliation, representing trauma not only as destruction but also as a catalyst for healing. By drawing on Jeffery Alexander's concept of cultural trauma, the paper rests Hosseini's narratives within a global discourse on post-war memory, identity, and human rights. Ultimately, Hosseini's fiction reimagines Afghanistan's suffering as both a local and universal condition, inviting readers to confront the enduring consequences of violence through empathy and ethical renewal.

Keywords: Trauma, Violence, Cultural identity, Gender oppression, Afghan diaspora

Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan-American novelist, is the author of four internationally acclaimed works: *The Kite Runner* (2003), later adapted into a film in 2007, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), and *the Mountains Echoed* (2013), and *Sea Prayer* (2018). In *The Kite Runner*, the representation of violence not only shapes the fictional narrative but also invites readers to connect the depicted events with real historical and socio-political contexts of Afghanistan, drawing on their prior knowledge of the nation and its people. Nevertheless, Hosseini's novels, including *The Kite Runner*, have received mixed responses, particularly from Afghan audiences, who often critique perceived exaggerations in his portrayal of Afghan society and experiences. Importantly, Hosseini does not claim to document reality or provide nonfictional accounts; instead, he engages in storytelling that blends fiction with elements influenced by his personal background and cultural identity as both Afghan and American.

Marianne Hirsch's theoretical framework of post memory, as outlined in *The Generation of Post memory* (2012), explores how the second generation relates to the trauma endured by the first generation through mediated rather than direct experience. Post memory is marked by its belatedness, hyper affectivity, and reliance on representational transmission rather than lived memory. Rooted originally in Holocaust studies, Hirsch's concept has broadened to include other historical traumas such as slavery, colonial violence, and displacement. In *The Kite Runner*, post memory provides a lens through which to view the scars of Afghanistan's wars, civil unrest, and Taliban rule—traumas that deeply shape those who never experienced them firsthand. Amir exemplifies the inheritor of his father Baba's unspoken guilt and moral contradictions. Baba's concealed sin—fathering Hassan with a Hazara servant—becomes a moral silence that structures Amir's shame and betrayal. Amir's treachery toward Hassan reflects not mere personal failure but an embodied repetition of Baba's buried



guilt. His later journey toward redemption through rescuing Sohrab is an act of post memorial reckoning—an effort to transform familial silence and transgenerational shame into narrative expression and moral accountability.

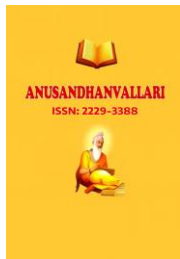
Amir's storytelling serves as both witness and therapy, transforming traumatized memory into shared narrative and restoring ethical balance across generations. Sohrab, as the grandson of Baba and son of Hassan, inherits a legacy of exclusion, violence, and betrayal. His persistent silence after his trauma signifies the inadequacy of language to fully convey inherited suffering; it becomes a form of resistance rather than passivity. Hirsch's notion that post memory is most powerfully expressed through silence finds deep embodiment in Sohrab's character, whose presence forces Amir to confront generational guilt and begin healing through narrative. The novel itself functions as a post memorial object—created from painful memory but directed toward emotional restitution and future moral duty. Even the closing kite scene symbolizes a redemptive echo of past love, converting silence into shared hope. Further, the Afghan diaspora in America intensifies this condition of post memory, turning exile into a psychological as well as spatial displacement. Expatriates like Baba and Amir nostalgically preserve idealized memories of Kabul, mythologizing the past to evade its pain. Only when Amir returns to Afghanistan, physically revisiting the site of trauma, can he achieve ethical witnessing and post memorial healing—turning inherited silence into redemptive remembrance.

Various forms of violence are represented in *The Kite Runner*, and these depictions can be examined not only within the framework of literary analysis but also through the lens of theories of violence. While the novel is a work of fiction, it draws inspiration from real events and from the author's personal experiences, making it a valuable text for interdisciplinary study. For readers unfamiliar with Afghanistan, the narrative resonates through its intersections with media portrayals of the country, offering recognizable references such as the prohibition of kite running, the stoning of adulterers, and the longstanding conflict between Hazaras and Pashtuns. These core issues anchor the text in realities that non-Afghan audiences may identify with through prior knowledge or exposure to global news.

Hosseini situates his characters within a troubled geography and history, foregrounding the legacies of violence and trauma that have shaped Afghanistan and its people. In doing so, he fictionalizes the difficulties faced by Afghans, while also drawing on his own experience of exile and displacement after fleeing Afghanistan. The narrative emphasizes both suffering and resilience, offering glimpses of hope for the characters as well as for Afghanistan itself (Charlie B 2014). Hosseini's representation suggests the possibility of a better future, even in the face of enduring hardships, and serves as a reminder of the decades-long struggle of Afghans living amid violence and instability (Hower 2003).

This representation of collective struggle aligns with Jeffery Alexander's concept of cultural trauma, which "has no geographical or cultural limitations" (Alexander 2004, 27). Despite leaving Afghanistan as a teenager and spending much of his adult life in the West, Hosseini continues to grapple with the cultural trauma of his homeland, reflecting both his personal connection to Afghanistan's turbulent past and the shared experience of displacement and instability among its people.

Hosseini depicts the lived realities of women in a patriarchal society that often reduces them to instruments of reproduction. Toward the conclusion of the novel, he underscores the significance of overthrowing the Taliban, suggesting that only with their defeat can Afghan society begin to experience restoration (Walter 2007). As in his earlier work, violence emerges as a central theme, articulated through multiple incidents. The narrative begins with the story of Mariam, a girl born out of wedlock, whose illegitimate status determines the trajectory of her life. Her mother, employed as a servant in the household of a wealthy man with two wives, becomes pregnant after a sexual relationship with her employer. When the affair is exposed, he denies



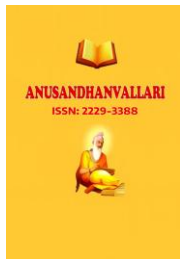
responsibility and accuses her of seduction, which leads to her expulsion from the household. Mariam and her mother are consequently forced into life on the margins, isolated from social and familial support.

Following her mother's suicide during Mariam's adolescence, she is compelled into marriage with a significantly older man while still under the legal age of consent. Throughout her life, Mariam's illegitimate birth remains a source of stigma and trauma in a rigidly patriarchal culture. This marginalization culminates in her execution by stoning for the murder of her abusive husband. Hosseini thereby illustrates the systemic denial of support and protection for illegitimate children, who are labeled *harami*—a derogatory term denoting those born outside of marriage. Within Taliban ideology, *haramis* are not only socially unwanted but also viewed as religiously illegitimate, symbolizing the intersection of gender oppression, cultural stigma, and institutionalized violence in Afghan society.

Violence again is a prominent theme in this novel. The issue is represented, and various aspects of the issue known mainly in Afghan society are portrayed. However, the represented violence in the novel does not solely belong to Afghan society. The violence through the novel is an issue in any countries and cultures in which human rights are less protected and places that uphold patriarchy. This novel invites a feminist reading as the issue of equality is the central question the author tackles. In the absence of human rights and equality, Maryam and many girls like her suffer, including another main character, Layla. It is not only women who suffer due to the absence of those fundamental human rights, but also the male characters; Layla's lover is an example.

Hosseini explicitly asserts his intention to explore politics through his fiction (Stuhr 2009, 106). However, his focus transcends politics, addressing broader social issues and pervasive violence, as seen in this novel, where he endeavors to "breathe life, depth, and emotional subtext into the two-dimensional image of the Afghan woman in a burqa walking down the street" (Mustich 2008). Hosseini recognizes that he cannot transform the world miraculously, but he understands that critical issues can be represented and reframed through narrative discourse. Fiction thereby becomes a vital medium for the writer to provoke awareness or at least offer a voice to the subaltern. This perspective builds an argument that Hosseini intends to make readers conscious of the lived realities of individuals in certain parts of the world and amplify their suffering: most of the characters in his works are Afghan nationals—either residing in Afghanistan or displaced individuals seeking asylum and safe existence in Western nations.

Amir also perceives Hassan as an outsider, but in a fascinating way—someone defined by a pleasant aesthetic that appears foreign yet appealing. To the narrator, Hassan's presence symbolizes the beauty of the unfamiliar, someone crossing geographic and cultural borders with warmth. His "flat, broad nose" becomes a recurring physical feature, symbolic and significant, highlighting both admiration and stigma. This descriptor functions as a marker of ethnic distinction; while the narrator recognizes the Hazaras by such features, this act simultaneously risks endorsing discrimination. Alternatively, this emphasis on physicality may aim to counter prevailing norms by validating what the dominant group—Pashtuns—ridicules. Thus, the narrator transforms Hassan into an emblem of resistance, symbolizing all Hazaras who endure such mockery. This reading appears stronger since the narrator, haunted by trauma and guilt for betraying Hassan, narrates as a form of healing. Yet, in doing so, he privileges external characterization over internal complexity. The fixation on the Hazara man's appearance illustrates a deliberate inversion—the narrator redefines what is deemed "ugly" as extraordinary. Amir's disnarration of Hassan's inner self reveals how appearance takes precedence, even as this choice functions to subvert majoritarian prejudice. Such disnarrated details (Prince 1982, 147) become pivotal in constructing the story's moral and emotional core, suggesting that the narrator's emphasis on character depth must surpass superficial description.



Amir's inability to process his traumatic yearning for paternal affection becomes a central obstruction in his life. Throughout his solitude, jealousy nurtures within him, born of his father Baba's partiality. As a child, Amir longs endlessly for his father's companionship, but Baba, distanced by grief and temperament, rarely fulfills his parental role. The death of his wife during Amir's birth leaves Baba emotionally scarred. Though he never directly blames Amir, the child internalizes this guilt. Moreover, Amir's character conflicts with Baba's ideals of masculinity, while Hassan embodies the traits Baba admires. Amir recalls moments of exclusion: Baba's words—"Go on, now... This is grown-ups' time. Why don't you go read one of those books of yours?"—encapsulate the emotional barrier between them (Hosseini 2003, 4–5). Amir, seated outside the door listening to laughter inside, internalizes isolation as destiny. The narrator unambiguously portrays Baba as a man available to all except his own son. This neglect engenders a deep emotional void—Amir becomes acutely aware of his unmet need for care, interpreting Hassan's closeness to Baba as threat. The phrase "grown-ups' time" turns metaphorical, symbolizing Baba's habitual withdrawal and Amir's silenced existence. This emotional alienation, a subtle yet profound form of direct violence, cultivates resentment that will shape Amir's psyche and his attitudes toward Hassan.

In *The Kite Runner*, violence operates with equilibrium, afflicting both male and female characters; the narrative thus transcends a gendered reading. Representations of violence stem from Afghan socio-cultural structures. Soraya's past, for instance, shadows her reputation within the Afghan diaspora in the United States. Cultural codes persist across geographies, ensuring that trauma and judgment travel with the characters. Baba remarks guardedly to Amir, "all I've heard is that there was a man once, and things... didn't go well" (131). The ellipsis signals the unspeakable nature of female transgression within Afghan social norms. Premarital relationships condemn women to lifelong shame marked by "no suitors" (Hosseini 2003, 131), symbolizing their social death. This exclusion reflects explicit structural violence shaped by patriarchal codes—women's value hinges upon chastity, and deviation leads to ostracism. The narrator's passive stance, mirrored by Baba's silence, underscores male complicity and cultural continuity even abroad. Thus, displacement does not dissolve the moral geography of Afghanistan; the same hierarchies persist within exile.

The narrative framework highlights that the very sources of trauma can also foster healing. Certain figures, like Assef, remain unchanged, embodying unalterable cruelty; others, like Amir, evolve. Amir's transformation culminates in moral restoration when he embraces Sohrab, a Hazara child, into his Pashtun household, symbolically rectifying his earlier wrongs. When General Sahib queries how one explains the adoption to society, Amir asserts, "you will never again refer to him as 'Hazara boy' in my presence." This declaration epitomizes his ethical awakening, collapsing inherited prejudice through compassion and atonement.

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