Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X



Psychological Trauma and the Reconstruction of Identity in The Kite Runner

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Article Details:

Received on 20 Nov, 2025

Accepted on 27 Dec ,2025

Published on 29 Dec, 2025

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Abstract

The paper is an exploration of the relationship between processes of psychological trauma and identity reconstruction in The Kite Runner (2003) by Khaled Hosseini using the theoretical framework of trauma studies, specifically on the processes of guilt, memory and redemption. The main character of the novel Amir observes the rape of his childhood friend Hassan in a Kabul alleyway and will not help, a wound of origin that threatens to shatter his identity and initiates a decades-long period of repression, shame and ethical paralysis. Using a qualitative textual analysis based on the trauma theories of Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman and Dominick LaCapra, this paper traces the ways through which the untouched guilt on Amir emerges as compulsive repetition, emotional avoidance, and fragmenting identities. The discussion also examines the way in which Hosseini implicates individual trauma into the larger system of Afghan national trauma, specifically, the ethnic and social disparities that initially place Hazaras under Pashtuns. The article considers the fact that Amir has returned to Afghanistan, where the Taliban rule is in place, and saved the life of Sohrab, the orphan of Hassan, to be a path in trauma facing and identity re-building which, although unfinished, proves the redemptive power of ethical action. The repetition of the image of the kite is examined as a polysemous image that codifies the main dialectic of loss and recovery, betrayal and atonement of the novel. This work is a contribution to the emerging scholarship which applies the theory of trauma to postcolonial and diaspora literature.

Keywords: psychological trauma, identity reconstruction, and guilt, and memory and redemption and The Kite Runner, Khaled Hosseini, and trauma theory and Pashtun-Hazara and kite motif.

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X



1. Introduction

Psychological trauma has emerged as a research discipline that has made significant impacts in interdisciplinary studies in the humanities, changing how scholars interpret literature, history and cultural memory. It takes the classicization of the theory of trauma in the 1990s to encourage the establishment of literary critics that fiction represents a privileged location of the retrospective practice and experience of experiences which are impossible to narrate (Ullah, 2016). The novels that explore historical violence, ethnic persecution, and personal betrayal are a particularly fertile ground to explore in this scholarly tradition the role of traumatic events in disintegrating identity and the role the subsequent labor of memory, guilt, and moral action can play (or can be incapable of playing) in restoring it. The Kite Runner (2003) by Khaled Hosseini is indeed the first novel written in English by an Afghan American writer, but it is also the reason why the novel attracted the continued interest of the critical community: it is a meshing together of a personal story of guilt with the full spectrum of traumatic experiences of the nation that had been destroyed due to its invasion, civil war, and theocracy (Yang & Chun, 2014).

The main character of the novel is an affluent Pashtun boy Amir, who was raised in Kabul in the 1970s and the protagonist whose life was forever changed as he witnesses the rape of his Hazara servant and childhood friend Hassan, but still does nothing. That one incident, what this paper calls the origin wound, leads to a series of psychological effects: repression, unconscious obsession with guilt, self-denial of affect, self-destruction and a gradual loss of identity continued over decades and continents. The subsequent journey of Amir back to Afghanistan under Taliban Rule, to save the orphan son of his cousin, Hassan, Sohrab, symbolizes the climactic attempt of the novel to face the problem of trauma or contribute to the improvement of it, which, despite its belated nature, rediscovers identity which once was destroyed by a betrayal of principles.

This research is important because it applies proven theory of trauma to a text that infuses personal and political in some instructive modes. In contrast to much of the canonical trauma literature, which has tended to focus on Western contexts like the Holocaust and the Vietnam War, The Kite Runner is a product of the experience of Afghan displacement and diaspora and is based on ethnic hierarchies, cultural norms of Islam, and the

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X



geopolitics of Central Asia as constitutive of the traumatic landscape (Ullah, 2016). In these ways, the novel broadens the lens of the trauma field since it illustrates that the processes of guilt, repression, and redemption are both culturally particular and involved in general psychological processes.

This paper will claim that the trajectory of Amir in The Kite Runner executes a paradigmatic cycle of trauma, fragmentation, and partial reconstruction of self identity, guilt is the main psychic engine, memory the medium through which the trauma past is reasserted, and redemptive action of rescuing and adopting Sohrab is an incomplete but significant reintegration to the fractured self. The exegesis also argues that the kite motif that recurs throughout the novel works as a polysemous signifier that encodes the dialectic of loss and healing that drives the psychological process of Amir. Placing this reading in the context of the underlying frameworks of the theory of trauma as unclaimed experience by Cathy Caruth, the model of recovery by Judith Herman, and the distinction between the idea of acting out and working through as introduced by Dominick LaCapra, the paper fits into the increasingly large literature that acknowledges the specific ability of postcolonial and diaspora fiction to reveal the psychological landscape of trauma and identity (Ullah, 2016), (Askarova, 2022), (Sharma, 2024).

2. Literature Review

1.1 2.1 Trauma Theory and Literary Representation

Theoretical considerations necessary to the discussion of literary trauma take their foundation in a literature which began to develop out of psychoanalysis, neuroscience, and cultural criticism in the late twentieth century in the effort to define how experience overwhelm can be unintegrated into the normal consciousness. Cathy Caruth contributed to the development of the influential formulation of trauma as something that is not fully integrated during occurrence but is reexposited late in life as flashbacks, nightmares, compulsive repetition and the development of what she calls an unclaimed experience (Ullah, 2016). This model has proven to be popular in literary criticism since it sheds light on the formal aspects of trauma texts such as their fragmentation, non-linear time and the inability to resolve them as the result of a failure by the psyche to assimilate the event of origination. The study of trauma in fiction has shown that traumatized events come indirectly with flashback and nightmares and compulsive repetition, producing structural

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X



forms used in narration that reflect disordered temporality of the traumatized mind (Latif, 2026).

Another priceless framework has been supplied by the distinction made between acting out and working through by Dominick LaCapra. In acting out, the traumatized subject becomes stuck in a compulsive repetition of the past, and can neither develop a critical distance to the wound; working through, the subject is able to engage with the traumatic memory in a process of mourning, recognition, and reintegrating but does not erase the trace of the origination event (Ullah, 2016). Literary work can indeed, as some scholars also have proposed, act as a tool of working through, providing not only characters, but readers as well, with a symbolic space within which to deal with unassimilated pain, articulate it and resolve it in part (Henry, 2006), (Jani, 2026). It has also been demonstrated that the trauma portrayal in postmodern and postcolonial works is dependent on disjointed forms, rotating visions, and figurative visuals to express the discontinuous awareness of the survivors (Sharma, 2024).

The three stages of model of trauma recovery articulated by Judith Herman: safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection have also greatly informed the process of literary analysis. Herman cites that the process of recovery is impossible to start before the survivor has developed a feeling of physical and mental security, and then the long hard task of recalling and mourning can take place, finally resulting in a renewed interaction with the social world. Researchers have always discovered that narrative performances, testifying and textual mourning are the required processes to perform identity rebuilding and redemption of the past (Henry, 2006). The ability of storytelling to act as a means of working through trauma has been observed in various literary traditions, both neo-slave African American and postcolonial fiction, and it has been hypothesized that the connection between telling and healing is essential and not accidental (Jani, 2026), (Ali et al., 2024).

1.2 2.2 Guilt, Memory, and Redemption in Trauma Narratives

Guilt regards a unique place in the list of trauma reactions. Although fear, helplessness, and horror tend to be linked with the immediate experience of being subjected to traumatic violence, guilt is felt most intensely in the context of moral failure: when the subject feels that he or she has crossed an ethical line, has not defended a vulnerable party,

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X



or has even been a beneficiary of another person's misery. The phenomenon of survivor's guilt, initially developed in research on Holocaust survivors, has turned out to produce a very destructive particular kind of psychic stress, which manifests in usually self-blaming, low self-esteem, and inability to enjoy or connect to others. Trauma, guilt and body secrets research has shown that individual and collective identity is disrupted, which poses a challenge to self-perception, and community relationships in ways that are permanent (Henry, 2006). Guilt is often used as the emotion in literary portrayals connecting the traumatic experience to further identity crisis in the protagonist, which propels the story to the mechanisms of avoidance, hollowing and the attempts to make things okay again.

A memory in the context of narration of traumas is never a disinterested store of the past but an active and even hostile presence that influences the correlation of the subject to himself and the world. Scholars of trauma have also settled upon the fact that the assumption of guilt and silence only sustains transgenerational and cultural trauma and impairs personal and historical relationships (Pedrosa, 2019). The involuntary recall of traumatic memories, a phenomenon suggested in clinical literature as intrusive recollection are one of the distinguishing characteristics of post-traumatic stress and have been fully addressed in the analysis of literature as a form of structure interfering with the linear narrative and compelling to face the past. Trauma characters often form what has been called psychic tombs around unprocessed trauma memories to generate symptoms of flashbacks, hallucinations, and language gaps that indicate the presence of the unprocessed wound (Pedrosa, 2019). The research in memory in fiction has repeatedly indicated that recollections and addressing the past empower characters to reform fragmented identities and attain psychological health, as well as receive redemption (Nefnouf, 2023).

The notion of redemption, in the context of trauma, has to be narrowed down. Redemption is not merely a thorough blanking out of the past of the traumas but, instead, a process where the subject admits his trauma, knows he has failed in his moral duties, and takes steps that, although cannot restore the initial trauma, he can build a new morality with the world. Mechanisms that have been identified to help characters to come to face with the past, find redemption, and rebuild identity are storytelling, communal rituals, and language reintegration (Pedrosa, 2019). It has been demonstrated that identity

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X



reconstruction can be achieved by courage to recover the painful past, and the incorporation of fractured narratives to gain psychological independence (Mati, 2025). In the pre-critical tradition, redemption is not a catharsis but a continuum, an unfinished process, which is instead a working through and not a getting over in relation to the indelibility of the traumatic trace, despite the possibility of peaceful, moral, and mental recuperation.

Various theorists have shown that identity in trauma discourse is never certain but in continual negotiation with the forces of memory and survival (Zahraa, 2026). The latter observation is specifically pertinent to diasporic and postcolonial texts, in which the subject displacement of the home country creates an extra dimension on top of the fragmentation of identity. The characters that are cut off of their own cultural and geographical backgrounds are forced to work not only with their personal hurt of the past, but also with the trauma of communities, thus making the redemption process more difficult and rich (Бахадировна, 2026), (Geweely, 2026). Postcolonial trauma research has found that trauma, memory, and postmigration narratives in diaspora literature show that displacement exacerbates pre-existing psychological trauma, leaving identity-construction as a particularly challenging issue (Бахадировна, 2026).

1.3 2.3 The Kite Runner in Critical Discourse

Since its publication in 2001, The Kite Runner has developed an impressive amount of critical scholarship, including trauma studies, postcolonial theory, psychoanalysis, and cultural criticism. Initial research revolving around the treatment of guilt and redemption as the major thematic axis that the novel follows treats the story of Amir as a coming-of-age narrative based of sin, atonement and moral development (Yang and Chun, 2014). Using the trauma theory and close reading, Yang (2014) illustrated how the personal trauma of sin to self-redemption and the collective racial and national conflicts within the country were woven together in the novel, predicting the theme of coming-of-age of sin, guilt, and redemption, but illustrating the racial conflicts and national pain in Afghanistan (Yang and Chun, 2014).

Later scholarship has elaborated the psychoanalytic and traumatising aspects of this reading. Ullah (2016) provided an analysis of The Kite Runner and Earth and Ashes by Atiq Rahimi through the trauma literary theory and analyzed how Afghan fiction resists the

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X



ongoing amnesia effect by portraying war trauma and its effects on communities, the ways in which characters dealt with trauma, flashbacks and coping strategies based on historical records (Ullah, 2016). In his study, Sharma (2025) examined the intricate role of trauma, memory and identity with a focus on the psychological and emotional development of Amir and how the novel defines the role of memory as a factor of haunting and curing, stating that the attempt by Amir to discover redemption also reflects an attempt to recover and repair his fractured identity (Sharma, 2025). The emergent-self concept that developed by Abbas et al. explored the effect of trauma within the psychosocial context, with the emphasis on the problem of psychological violence that results in social oppression, identity development, and disenfranchisement of the characters, proved that trauma influences collective and personal identity formation (Abbas et al., n.d.).

Studies of the nature of guilt dynamics particularly in the novel have been most enlightening. Tsai (2018) used survivor guilt as one of the key processes, examining the way the hassan assault as a childhood incident plays out in the life of Amir and serves as the focal point of all further relations and ethical decisions guiding them in their lives (Tsai, 2018). Following the opposite, guilt and redemption, as two poles of the moral path of Amir, Kumar and Fathma (2026) traced the trajectory of the main character that changes from fear of passive observation to the bravery of active actions (Kumar and Fathma, 2026). To examine the theme of betrayal, guilt, and redemption regarding the novel, Khan et al. (2022) used the biblical metaphor about the sacrificial lamb, suggesting that Hassan plays the role of the sacrificial individual whose suffering helped Amir to awaken at a later stage (Khan et al., 2022).

Childhood trauma has also been critically discussed in the novel. Respecting the novel, Ben Hamouda (2018) has thought that childhood trauma is represented in the book as transition between the definite turmoil to the uncertain turmoil, the book traces how the psychological space of Amir transforms as he grows out of the regulated violence of his Kabul upbringing into the turmoil of uncertainty of his exile (Hamouda, 2018). Faruki and Swain (2024) examined how the novel portrays childhood trauma and how childhood experiences of betrayal and violence permanently transform the maturing psyche and cause avoidance and self-punishment patterns, which persist into adulthood (Faruki and Swain, 2024). The psychological aspect of trauma has also been examined through the

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X



prism of color symbolism, with researchers showing that Hosseini uses chromatic imagery as an extraprojective means of conveying a range of guilt, fear, and longing (Akkafi et al., 2026).

1.4 2.4 Ethnic Hierarchies, Collective Trauma, and Postcolonial Identity

A developing literature has placed The Kite Runner in the context of the collective trauma and interethnic conflict. Nayebpour and Varghaiyan (2020) discussed the unsolved ethnic conflict in the novel and studied how the Pashtun Hazar hierarchy is a structural variant of violence that leads to not just the personal loss but also the collective trauma inculcated in the very concept of the Afghan nation (Nayebpour and Varghaiyan, 2020). The ethnic stratifications presented in the novel have been interpreted as a critique of the caste-like structures that doom Hazaras to be subjected to perpetually and in which violence against Hazara bodies becomes lawful and the individuals who perpetrate a given act of violence exempt from social repercussions (Nayebpour & Varghaiyan, 2020), (Saeed, 2015).

Postcolonial trauma scholars have found numerous physical and psychic ways that historical trauma can be passed on, leaving an indelible mark on the body and mind of the oppressed (Latif, 2026). This observation directly translates to The Kite Runner where Hazara experience of systematic discrimination is a sort of inherited trauma shaping identity generationally. The novel shows how war, displacement and culture shock add to the trauma that individuals are facing, forming compounding wounds that cannot be treated easily (Kaur & Atreya, 2026), (Ifowodo, 2016). In studies of war trauma and refugee minds, living with and experiencing political violence has created a unique kind of traumatic subjectivity; hypervigilance, mistrust, and anticipating the loss at all times (Kaur and Atreya, 2026).

Personal and societal trauma as witnessed in the novel have proved to make the redemption path difficult. Not only is the burden of guilt attached to Amir entirely a personal psychological weight but the weight is incorporated into the ethnic and class fabric of the Afghan society and, in a way, created by the same. The ability of the hierarchy to make Hassan invisible and nonexistent, and his subsequent act of rescue compels him to break through the boundaries of that hierarchy in both personal and symbolic ways (Sangar, 2026), (Eapen and Christie, 2026). The study of scholarship has shown that the silence and narrative ethics in The Kite Runner work as enlightenment to how the

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X



complicit silence turns into testimony which become a form of resistance to both personal and collective trauma (Mr. & Dr., 2026).

3. Method

This paper makes use of textual analysis of The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini (2003) based on the theories of literary trauma studies. The main line of analysis is a theory of Cathy Caruth that defines traumatic experience as unclaimed and focuses on the lateness, the repetitive, and non-linear nature of the memory of a trauma and its inability to be represented linearly (Ullah, 2016). This framework can be complemented by the conceptual difference Dominick LaCapra introduces between acting out and working through that is used to give a vocabulary to differentiate the compulsive re-enactment of the traumatic past and the more productive, albeit painful, process of mourning, acknowledgment and reintegration that allows the psychic renewal (Ullah, 2016). A three-step theory of the recovery process of trauma offered by Judith Herman-safety, remembrance and mourning, reconnection is yet another theoretical framework of organization that is used to track a psychological path of Amir that is followed throughout the story of the novel.

The analysis approach will be close reading which is a hermeneutic process that constructive pays attention to the particular language, imagery, narrative structure, and symbolism arrangements of the text to produce the interpretive insight into the thematic and psychological text. Trauma analysis, especially, is best conducted by close reading since it enables the critic to focus on the formal aspects of the text, i.e. fragmentation, repetition, ellipsis, figurative language, that reflect, and project the disorganized intellect of the traumatized subject. The essay concentrates on the most relevant passages and moments that most closely relate to the themes of guilt, memory, identity fragmentation, and redemption, such as: (a) the alleyway scene where Amir is a witness of his own Hassan being attacked; (b) the following scenes of guilt underlies and self-self-sabotaging actions; (c) Amir going back to Afghanistan and confronting Assef physically; (d) his bond with Sohrab and the kite-running scene that is seen in the end of the novel; and (e) the kite motif in the novel, which appears on several occasions throughout the novel in the course of time.

This discussion falls in the larger critical discourse of the trauma as portrayed in The Kite Runner and captured in the academic literature. The article relies on various sources peer

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X



reviewed based on applying trauma theory, postcolonial criticism, psychoanalysis to the novel, and cultural studies (Yang and Chun, 2014), (Sharma, 2025), (Abbas et al., n.d.), (Tsai, 2018), (Ahmad and Saeed, 2022), (Mahmood et al., 2025). In the synthesis of these critiques and an original close reading, the study would result in a thorough account of the psychology behind the process of trauma and identity constructions in the text.

4. Findings

1.5 4.1 The Originary Wound: Witnessing Hassan's Assault

In The Kite Runner, the most traumatic scene is the one when Amir, 12 years old, who is delighted with the victory in the kite-fight tournament, pursues Hassan, who runs to a blind street, and is surrounded by Assef, a Pashtun bully, and his companions. What Amir observes (the sexual assault of Hassan) and what he fails to do in his response (nothing) are the mulcting point of the novel on which all the psychological edifice is built. The accuracy with which this scene is depicted highlights the brutality of the event as well as the ethical paradox of Amir just spectating what was going on. Hosseini establishes Amir as a witness but not participant, a setup which creates the very particular kind of trauma that will mark his future life: not victimhood trauma but witnessing-but-doing-nothing trauma. Research has shown that this experience of witnessing-without-intervention gives rise to a kind of survivor guilt that is especially corrosive (Tsai, 2018). Such an experience of childhood in the story is reviewed by Tsai (2018), who makes a psychological burden the key that penetrates all other relationships and choices. Amir is not a simple memory of the attack; it is inside him, reoccurring as involuntary images of the readiness to submit to its fate, the frightened expression of the lamb, the blue kite, the blue stain on the trousers of Hassan, which swamp his memory like a traumatic directive. This observational experience of trauma, according to the scholars, turns the witness into an implicated subject whose silence turns into a kind of complicity (Askarova, 2022), (Mr. & Dr., 2026).

What makes the difference between the traumas that Amir and an ordinary bystander experience is the aspect of choice. He observes what is going on. He can run to save, but riskily, as he can say No. He does not. He runs. This deliberate choice changes the traumatic experience into a thing that took place to him into an experience he helped to create in which he did not act. The resultant guilt is thus not that of a generalized guilt of a survivor randomly preferring to avoid harm to the victim, but that of the focused guilt of

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X



the moral actor who has decided to follow self-interest rather than protect another vulnerable being. The novel, therefore, shows the ways personal trauma may be self-inflicted by moral failure, which is a less addressed but equally psychologically devastating aspect of trauma (Kumar and Fathma, 2026), (Khan et al., 2022). The personal trauma of Amir is linked to the political war of race and nation in Afghanistan because it is specifically the use of the ethnic hierarchy that makes Hassan a legitimate target of Pashtun violence (Yang and Chun, 2014).

1.6 4.2 The Architecture of Guilt and Repression

During the period following the alleyway scene, Amir develops a complex psychic building of guilt and repression which predetermines his identity over the following 20 years. He reacts right away, by seeking to distance himself of Hassan, denying him the chance to be alone with him and eventually plots the exile of Hassan in the home by leaving money and watch under his bed. Such steps, instead of relieving the guilty burden, compound it to the point where the action of one betrayal leads to an additional one, and so on. The psychological process involved in this workplace is exactly what LaCapra defines as acting out the obsessive repetition of the trauma pattern according to which, because the subject is not able to work with the initial trauma wound, he recreates its structural key in different situations (Ullah, 2016).

Several expressions of this guilt-driven behavior have been pointed out in scholarship. The silence that surrounds the understanding of his failure to pass the test of courage that Baba best regards defines how Amir relates to his father in the depths of his personality. The feeling that he will never, ever earn the approval of Baba, (which actually comes before the assault but is foreshadowed by the assault) causes Amir to strive to derive validation by winning the kite tournament and punishes himself through self-sabotaging and cutting himself off at the same time. The emergent-self model suggested by Abbas et al. shows that the formation of Amir as an individual is distorted by the psychological violence of his traumatic experience, which creates the model of a divided self in want of recognition and the belief of unworthiness (Abbas et al., n.d.).

The symbol of repression in the novel is quite subtle. Amir cannot forget what has happened to Hassan, he cannot forget. What happens to him to be repressed is not the memory itself but the emotional and moral intensity of the memory, the awareness of

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X



being involved in the suffering of Hassan. What is important about this difference is that it implies that the memory of the traumatic experience exists at the surface of consciousness even as a full range of implications is repressed by a defensive system of rationalization and denial. Research has demonstrated that those mechanisms of repression do not help in the long run, necessitating confrontation and collective memory work (Mati, 2025). Amir warns himself against believing that Hassan was a Hazard, that it was not his role to attack Hassan, and that his later betrayal of Hassan was but a step in self-defense. Nevertheless, the mere reversion of the repressed underlies these rationalizations: the face of Hassan, the blue kite, the laughter in the alley (Ahmad and Saeed, 2022), (Mahmood et al., 2025).

The migration to America, rather than healing the trauma, merely offers it a new geographical location in which to continue. Eloped to California, Amir gets married, becomes a writer, creates an apparently steady life but it becomes obvious in the novel that this stability is built on a psychic fault line. His work as a writer, in a critical way, can be enjoyed as a blind effort to come to terms with the traumatic past in a narrative style- a sense that connects him to the large literary tradition where narrative serves as a work-through of the past. The applications of storytelling in the novel have been discussed as a process by which the characters in his novel seek to encapsulate those experiences that cannot be expressed directly (Nayebpour, 2018). Nevertheless, the artistic practice that Amir has begun is not a fully formed tool of therapy yet because he is yet to address the place of guilt head-on; his narratives do not go into the wound but are around it (Singh et al., 2025), (Lijin and Kansal, 2026).

1.7 4.3 Memory as Haunting: The Persistence of the Traumatic Past

In the book The Kite Runner, memory is not a passive storehouse, but a force, active, intrusive and does not recognize the limits Amir has created between the past and present. The novel takes the form of a retrospective narration where the adult Amir is narrating about his childhood at a distance in time but this distance is always shattered by the resurgence of traumatic memories that drag the story and the narrator back into the past. A psychological approach used by Ahmad and Al Saeed (2022) shows that memories haunt not only in a sense that they remind the subject of what has happened to him in the past but also the present is directly transformed by this haunting to create a stratified

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X



temporality of past and present interacting in a mutually contaminating relationship (Ahmad and Saeed, 2022).

It is the primacy of memory as the constitutive power of identity which begins with the first line of the novel--I became what I am today at the age of twelve. Amir does not state that something happened to him when he was twelve, but that he grew to be what he is. The traumatic experience is not a component of his biography, but is the nexus point of his identity, the event that his identity has been built upon. This phrase echoes the fact that according to Caruth, trauma makes the subject what it is: an irreconcilable, alien presence in the psyche, at once constitutive of identity and impossible to assimilate (Ullah, 2016). It has been noted that traumatic memories can be both haunting and healing when the subject is capable of actively participating in them as opposed to passively experiencing its intrusions (Sharma, 2025).

The type of haunting being presented by Amir is noteworthy due to its ability to be described in sensorial terms and be linked to particular material objects and images. The blue kite, the pomegranate tree, the eyes of the lamb, the scar on the lip of Hassan, these images are repeated over and over again throughout the novel as what would otherwise be considered a traumatic signifier: material remains of the past with an affective resonance many times beyond the meaning their description suggests. The deployment of chromatic imagery and color symbolism as an externalization of inner states of the psyche, with blue and red playing a specific role as symbols of innocence lost and violence observed, have been examined by scholars as a way of analysis in Hosseini (Akkafi et al., 2026). Such imprints lasting over time indicate trauma is represented not in any verbal or conceptual memory but in the sensory and affective registers that cannot be organized according to narrative or is in line with existing neuropsychological knowledge of traumatic memory (Sharma, 2024).

The novel is also a manifestation of what could be termed as the contagion of traumatic memory through relationships. The silence of his past tinges the happiness of His marriage to Soraya, the silence of guilt warped his relation with Baba and the knowledge of a secret guilt that the former manages to preserve his social status within the ethnic hierarchy that allowed Hassan to become a victim, damages his communication with the community of Afghanistan diaspora. In this sense, memory is not an individual phenomenon but a

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X



relation phenomenon that defines the quality and potential of human association in a manner that goes much deeper than the individual psyche (Akshayashree & Jaisre, 2025), (الباحث & الباحث, 2026).

1.8 4.4 The Return to Kabul: Trauma Confrontation and Moral Reckoning

The action of Amir returning to Afghanistan, when Rahim Khan calls him and promises him vaguely that there is a way to become good again is the turning point in the novel as Amir starts to act out instead of working through. This journey is the second phase of recovery, which Herman defines as remembrance and mourning in which a survivor purposely ventures in the traumatic terrain in an attempt to face the avoided. The return is a literal and figurative one: Amir travels to a literal Kabul that has been ravaged by Talibanism, but also travels back in time to the place and moment of his initial betrayal, more importantly, by entering the emotional and moral space that he has spent the last twenty-six years escaping.

The trip to Afghanistan is organized in the form of gradual deprivation of the fortifications of Amir. Every discovery—that Hassan was his half-brother, that Hassan is dead, that the Taliban official who has claimed Sohrab has been the man who raped and killed Amir—pulls the stone wall around his block of repression to a breaking point. The discovery of kinship is especially disastrous as it is a post post facto shifting of the significance of the initial wound: Amir not only betrayed his friend and servant but his brother, which does not take away but adds to the guilt the additional burden of an abandoned brother. This stratifluent revelation has been argued by scholars to show that trauma and the accumulation of past events to acquire moral weight over time results in a confrontational inevitability that is not only more urgent but also more excruciating (Singh et al., 2025).

The most dramatic moment of trauma confrontation in the novel is the physical confrontation with Assef in the Taliban official house. Amir, who has led his whole life in flight to violence, now acquiesces to it voluntarily--nay, nearly volunteers to it. The scholars have inferred as atonement in the beating that he takes at the hands of Assef, using it to counterbalance the elements of violence that he has perpetrated on Hassan, a physical penance that compensates the moral level between the two (Khan et al., 2022), (Kumar and Fathma, 2026). Notably, Amir laughs as he is being beaten, which has been understood as psychic catharsis of decades of pent-up guilt-a moment of catharsis when the hitherto

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X



repressive order is finally broken and the subject, ironically, is in a way emancipated by the very pain he has been so afraid of. The fight with Assef has been viewed as the breaking point where Amir becomes not an observer, but an active moral agent, which proves that further redemption becomes impossible without this shift (Vijayah, 2026), (Eapen & Christie, 2026).

The extraction of Sohrab out of the hands of Assef is not just a plot device, but symbolic re-staged and re-edited version of the primordial scene. In one place Amir spends his time in an alley looking on as a child is victimized, in the second place, Amir goes into a room and has to battle, although at great personal cost, to save a child at the hands of the same rapist. The parallelism in the structure is meticulous and calculated and it codifies the main thesis of the novel regarding redeeming: since the original betrayal cannot be recovered, it can be countermeasured by the act of moral boldness that will redeem, not necessarily the past, but, at any rate, the prospect of a better future. This movement of silence to testimony, of complicity to resistance has been interpreted as a type of ethnography of the self where the moral development of the protagonist cannot exist in a vacuum of action without bearing witness and taking action (Mr. & Dr., 2026), (Sangar, 2026).

1.9 4.5 Sohrab and the Possibility of Redemption

The orphaned son of Hassan, Sohrab, plays the role of a character with a multifold determination in this novel as a symbol of redemption, bequest, and the chance to break the circle of trauma. He is, most directly, the embodiment of the chance that Amir has to make peace: by sparing Sohrab Amir spares, metaphorically, the Hassan he was unable to save; by taking Sohrab in, he recognizes the kinship he refused and reestablishes the familial kinship broken by betrayal and by social prejudice. It has been suggested by scholars that Sohrab is not just a second chance but a reflection of the face in which Amir has to face the effect of his past (Singh & Srivastava, 2026), (Singh & Naqvi, 2025).

The rehabilitative process, nevertheless, is hindered by how immersed in trauma Sohrab is himself. Assef has sexually abused the child to whom he has given up, he has been orphaned and the regime of the Taliban has tested him, cruelly, methodically; he is withdrawn, suspicious, given to dissociative silence. His suicide attempt after Amir momentarily retreats his adopted promise symbolizes the most terrifying portrayal in the novel of the power of the ruin of broken trust--a recurrence of the betrayal by his father

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X



into the generational cycle that started the cycle of guilt that Amir started. Studies on childhood trauma in the novel have highlighted how childhood encounters with violence and separation result in irreversible psychological harm, which is difficult to heal (Faruki & Swain, 2024), (Hamouda, 2018). The inherited nature of trauma in Hosseini fiction has been deconstructed as an ordinance whereby trauma of one generation is passed on to another by means of refusiveness, displacement, and the breakdown of safeguarding affiliations (Akshayashree and Jaisre, 2025).

The novel, therefore, puts the test on redemption within the sphere of Amir-Sohrab. It is gradual, agonizing and obvious, incomplete. Sohrab is not readily won over by Amir; his trust is not easily kept. One of the final scenes in the novel, a moment where Amir is running a kite with Sohrab in a park in San Francisco and senses, as he has never sensed before, the ghost of a smile on the face of the boy, has been interpreted by the scholars as an act of hope that cannot lose in sentimentality or fake resolution (Rithika, 2025), (Singh & Naqvi, 2025). Vijayah (2026) followed the post-traumatic development in the novel whereby he suggested Amir had undergone a radical qualitative and yet incomplete psychological change in which the experience of engaging with trauma created not a regressive post-traumatic but a qualitatively different version, which is more morally awakened, more empathetic, more connected (Vijayah, 2026).

Even the lack of completeness of the redemptive arc is important. The novel is not crowned by a happy healing of wholeness but by a tentative, frail gesture, a half-smile, a kite flying in the wind, that recognizes the reality of the lost even as it recognizes the possibility of the possibly gained. This non-linear form demonstrates an advanced concept of trauma recovery as a process and not an event and it is consistent with the theoretical perspective of working through trauma not eradicating the trace of the wound but shifts the relationship of the subject to it (Sharma, 2025), (Singh et al., 2025). The way the novel itself introduces the concept of redemption depicts that of not a state immediately attained but rather a daily activity, a practice of ethical attentive and moral boldness (Brian & Monanti, 2026), (Eapen & Christie, 2026).

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X



1.10 4.6 Ethnic and Class Hierarchies: The Pashtun-Hazara Divide as Structural Trauma

The Kite Runner is also one of the most unusual books in its insistence on the structural aspect of trauma; the form of individualized suffering as internalized and in important ways generated on the basis of greater systems of ethnic and class domination. Not only does the Pashtun-Hazara divide serve as a backdrop to the personal drama of the novel, but it is also a formative part of that drama in that it defines the circumstances of both trauma and its resolution, the forms in which the latter may be enacted, and the ways of their resolution. Nayebpour and Varghaiyan (2020) examined the issue of ethnic conflict in the novel that remained unsolved and how it has achieved a social space where violence against the bodies of Hazara is not only tolerated but even anticipated (Nayebpour and Varghaiyan, 2020).

The status of Pashtuns versus the Hazaras is introduced in the early days of the novel in which Amir describes the social structure of Kabul with Hazaras at the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy and to which discrimination, derision, and violence are the order of things. Hassan is loyal, intelligent, and brave, but his loyalty, his cleverness, and his courage are overshadowed by his Hazara identity, his being a valid object of exploitation. The attack in the alley is not, therefore, simply a case of personal meanness, but it is a manifestation of structural violence a manifestation of the domination that the dominant ethnic group has over the subordinate. The novel has been discussed as analyzing the multiaccentual child discourse and the crossing of the border as a way of children internalizing and replicating ethnic and class hierarchies in their society in ways that do not always ensure a full understanding of their consequences (Saeed, 2015).

The guilt of Amir tangles with the structural aspect of the trauma in significant respects. It is more than a failure of personal courage when he does nothing on behalf of Hassan, but it is a downfall that is not merely facilitated, but even justified by the very ethnic ideology he has been brought up with. The voice in the head of Amir that tells him he is just a Hazara is not his but that of a social order that as a boy had taught him, since the dawn of time, that Hazara life was less valuable than Pashtun life. This identification does not exonerate Amir of individual obligation- the novel demands to insist that people are still responsible even in existential systems of meaning but it does help us to see how individual trauma is

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X



influenced by the group systems of meaning. As the scholars have shown, in The Kite Runner, the concept of symbolic violence is embedded in the social fabric, which predetermines the manifestation of cruel acts on an individual scale as manifestations of more significant structural inequalities (Sangar, 2026).

The Taliban rule that replaces the government towards the second part of the novel is the maximum expression of the Pashtun-Hazara dimension. The ethnic ideology which in the past had existed based on the social custom and unofficial discrimination is embedded under the Taliban law and enforced by the spectacular violence. The killing of Hazaras in Mazar-i-Sharif, the smashing of the Bamiyan Buddhas and personal atrocities of people like Assef were the logical conclusion of a regime that has never recognized the humanity of Hazars. This means that his redeeming requires not only a singular sense of guilty to Amir returning to Afghanistan but also a national decision to address the guilt of his own nation, a national fight that will make his personal redemption have a political and moral value (Kaur & Atreya, 2026), (Ifowodo, 2016). The studies on the war as lived experience in the writings by Hosseini revealed that the novel is a vivid illustration of how the personal and the political aspects of the trauma cannot be separated, and personal suffering is always encompassed in greater historical and structural forces (Kaur & Atreya, 2026).

1.11 4.7 The Kite as Motif: Loss, Innocence, and Recovery

The most obvious and versatile symbol of the novel is the kite which, in its recurring themes embedded in appearances, spells out the entire gamut of meanings related to trauma and innocence, loss and recovery. In its first introduction, the kite has been related to happiness, to a game, and to the friendship between Amir and Hassan: boys play with their kites together, and Hassan is the kite runner of Amir the one who plays and collects the lost kites of losers. Kite-fighting and kite-running is staged as a manifestation of a pre-traumatic innocence of wholeness and connection broken by the happenings in the alley.

The blue kite Amir wins in the competition turns into after the beating, a polluted article, an material reminder of the moment when victory transformed into disaster. The triumph of Amir is impossible to imagine without the sufferings of Hassan since it is namely his quest to get the blue kite that prompts him to get into the alley where Assef is waiting. The kite thereby codes the main irony of the novel; and that the greatest event in the childhood of Amir is the event where he commits his greatest moral sin. The change of kite to carnage

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X



in the novel has been examined by scholars who argue that the motif of kite follows the way of child innocence and the traumatizing experience of human brutality (Rithika, 2025). The kite in this reading is a symbol of the lost wholeness of the pre-traumatic self-wholeness that once shattered by trauma can never be completely recovered, but can be lensed through the redemptive process of memory and confrontation and moral action.

The reintroduction of the kite into the novel through the final scene (Amir buys a kite to play with Sohrab in San Francisco) is a curved line. Kite-running in America is, like kite-running in Kabul, a recommendation of a meaning and a place; only that here the recommendation is a recommends-not an exploits-not a betraying; here the relationship is one of guardian-child, of nurture out of nothing, of restoring possibility; here, once again, the kite is not linked to victoriousness but to the unsteady, provisional effort to renew trust and bond. The diacetic discourse of redemption in the novel has demonstrated the deployment of modulated register of hope in the final kite-running scene whereby the visuals of flight and recovery are suspended with the realization of everything that is lost (Mahmood et al., 2025). In this final act, the kite serves as an image of the redemptive imagination itself- of the human ability to change the signs of loss into the means of recuperation, whatever partial and tentative might be the recuperation itself (Rithika, 2025), (Singh & Naqvi, 2025).

There is also a kite motive working on the national allegory level. Even Afghanistan, the country, in itself is a kite which was once living and complete but was lowered by the power of invasion, civil war and theocratic violence. At the allegorical level, when Amir tries to take the kite to Sohrab, it is an effort to recover and redeem the Afghan tradition, which has been lost to political disaster. This interpretation can be substantiated by the constant correlation of kite-flying to the Afghan culture and identity as well as by the symbolism this final scene of kite-running has as the gesture of cultural and personal rediscovery (Yang & Chun, 2014), (Nayebpour, 2018).

5. Discussion

The research results show that The Kite Runner is a work that implements a psychologically complicated and theoretically advanced image of trauma and identity reconstruction. The path that Amir takes- starting with the traumatic event of being a witness of violence and assaults, through decades of guilt-ridden and avoidant reactions, to

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X



the eventual encounter with the traumatic history and the provisional recovery of his self-identity- align with the models suggested by Caruth, Herman, and LaCapra; yet, also displays the aspects of the process of trauma that are unique to the cultural and political forces that might have influenced the development of the novel.

The analysis results in several main insights. To begin with, the novel shows that the trauma that is created as a result of moral failure the moral failure of the subject, or the moral failure of complicity the failure of the subject to take action leads an individual to develop a qualitatively different type of psychic distress than the trauma created by victimization. It is not the guilt of the innocent survivor but the guilt of the complicit witness, and this is what makes Amir different in all the aspects of his further psychological evolution. Therapeutic implications are also important: in the case of Amir, it is not only necessary to process a painful memory but also understand the moral responsibility and take some kind of a reparative action. This result is an addition to the literature on trauma theories, which has been inclined towards the aspect of victimhood instead of complicity as the main center of traumatic experience (Tsai, 2018), (Kumar & Fathma, 2026).

Second, the novel exposes the degree to which individual trauma is entrenched in and influenced by institutional wields of power. The Pashtun-Hazara relationship is not only the context of the assault; it is a factor which generates the preconditions of the assault, and turns a social world where the violence against the bodies of the Hazara is an established and routine state of affairs. The redemption of Amir, in its turn, entails not only a personal change but also the violation of the structural lines that made his initial betrayal possible, but its nature is that of an actual crime that involves Amir risking his own life in order to save a Hazara child and bring him to his Pashtun family (Nayebpour & Varghaiyan, 2020), (Sangar, 2026).

Third, the kite motif shows that the full range of the traumatic experience can be encoded into the literary symbolism as one recurring image. The kite is transcended through loss and contamination to redemptive reclaiming, and this journey of the novel occurs with an economy and resonance that would be hard to accomplish by direct narration, alone. The polysemy of a kite, its ability to represent at once joy, guilt, cultural identity, and redemptive hope, effectively makes it a useful symbolic vehicle in how trauma in the novel is addressed due to its complex temporality (Rithika, 2025), (Akkafi et al., 2026).

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X



Limitations of this study ought to be considered. The text to be analyzed is examined on the basis of one primary text and on the background of a particular set of theoretical frameworks; various theoretical approaches, such as feminist, Marxist or narratological, may provide different insights. Additionally, the close-reading methodology of the study, though suitable to the objectives of the questions being studied, fails to provide an understanding of reader-response dynamics and reception of the novel in diverse cultural settings. Further studies could fruitfully build up on this analysis by looking at how The Kite Runner represents trauma in comparison with other productions of the case of Afghan diaspora, or in the interactions between the novel representation of trauma and human rights and transitional justice discourses.

6. Conclusion

As this paper has shown, The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini presents a multi-layered and theoretically-inductive portrayal of psychological trauma and identity rebuilding. The novel is a lineage traced through the character of Amir that passes through the devastating effect of a youthful moral betrayal, through the decades of guilt-induced repression and avoidance of emotion to a final confrontation with the traumatic history that opens the prospect - tentative, fragile and clearly unfinished - of redeeming identity formation. It has been demonstrated that guilt serves as the main psychic mechanism of the trajectory developed by Amir, and it generates the cycle of avoidance and self-punishment that can be attributed to the concept of acting out, described by LaCapra (Sulo, 2016), (Sharma, 2025).

The Pashtun-Hazara hierarchy presented in the novel shows that the trauma of individuals is included in the mechanisms of ethnic and class dominance, making the explanation of the guilt and its redemption solely individualistic. The inability of Amir to save Hassan is predetermined by that social order, which makes Hazarda suffering unnoticed, and his redemption presupposes the violation of this order which is not only life threatening but also symbolically important (Nayebpour & Varghaiyan, 2020). The saving of Sohrab and the partially reinforced trust instigated in the trusting final kite running scene at the end of the novel affirm not an exerting erase of the past traumatic but a temporary, repeated exercising of ethical care and ethical bravery (Rithika, 2025), (Vijayah, 2026).

The kite, the novel's main motif of recurrence, codes the entire range of this urge - of pre-traumatic innocence, of guilt pollution, of the possibility of recovery via redemption - in

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X



such an economy and resonance as a pecully illustrative instance of the power of literary symbolism to convey so much that cannot be said directly. Moving across the skies of Kabul to the skies of San Francisco, the kite follows the pattern of diaspora, loss and temporary renewal which, however, characterizes the personal life of Amir and the realization of a community of displaced Afghans.

Finally, The Kite Runner illustrates that identity that is broken through traumatic experience can never be reassembled; it may be rebuilt, however, through painful, brave and incomplete actions of facing the past, accepting guilt and performing reparative acts of love. The novel is, therefore, not only a contribution to the literature of Afghan experience, but also to the wider knowledge in human experience of trauma, memory and conditions under which moral and psychological redemption is capable of being achieved. There is indeed a way of becoming good once again, however, as Rahim Khan promises, it is a way that moves through and not around the darkness of the traumatic past.

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