

**The Concept of Guilt and Redemption and the Resonances of Biblical,
Mythological and Literary Characters in
*The Kite Runner***



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Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* is a modern classic that appeals to readers across continents, gender, religions and regions. Its universal themes such as love, friendship, betrayal, guilt and redemption are spell binding to the reader.

A lot of research work has already gone into the above themes, in addition to the exploration of the children as part of children's literature and the effects of terrorism under the Taliban in Afghanistan. My paper is an attempt to look into various Relationships and bonds that echo the characters from Bible, Mythology and Literature while looking into the concept of guilt and redemption in *The Kite Runner*. In order to dwell upon the aspect of redemption through suffering, it is necessary to raise pertinent questions regarding betrayal-- the sin, and redemption--through suffering and atonement.

Redemption

While the common meaning of redemption is "the action of regaining or gaining possession of something in exchange for payment, or clearing a debt", the etymology can be traced back to mid-14c., "deliverance from sin," from L. redemptionem (nom. redemptio) "a buying back, releasing, ransoming," noun of action from pp. stem of redimere "to redeem, buy back," from re- "back" (see re-) + emere "to take, buy, gain, procure".

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, redemption is the price paid for a sin, it could be a guilt offering or a sacrifice. In the Old Testament of the Bible, one comes across various sacrifices and offerings. The person who is guilty or who has committed sin deserves death but in his place the sacrifice of an animal who becomes the scapegoat is accepted. The idea of redemption thus is the sacrifice of another life to buy back the life of the guilty. The same is exemplified in sacrificial death of Jesus Christ in place of mankind.

The guilty in the novel:

Baba:

In the novel, while most tend to focus on Amir as guilty of betraying his childhood friend who was more than kin, his father is equally guilty. Baba who has ‘stolen’ Sanouber, the wife of Ali is guilty of both adultery and betrayal of the trust of his most devoted servant. When Sanouber gives birth to Hassan, he is forever tortured by the fact that he cannot publicly acknowledge Hassan. Torn between the filial feelings for Hassan and guilt in relation to his servant who adores him, either out of remorse or love he sets about showering Hassan with extra care, gifts on numerous occasions, and, the ultimate gift of the surgery for Hassan’s cleft lip. That is his only way of atoning himself.

However, Baba is also guilty of hypocrisy as he preaches to son Amir about ‘stealing’ while he actually stole Ali’s wife. While Baba tried to an extent in redeeming his own self, he is helpless in being forced to leave a son in the political storm of impending doom and destruction. As a person of the older generation he could not overcome the Pashtun- Hazara divide, the master-slave gulf. Though he tried his best to alleviate Hassan and Ali’s misery in the recesses of the home, it was only to a very limited extent.

He is forever plagued by the guilt of his sin and dies a painful death of carrying the truth of his deception and hypocrisy into his grave. Between the father and the son, the son emerges as a person who made successful attempts for the real propitiation of his own sin.

Amir

Amir’s guilt is more complex: It needs to be understood in the nature of the bond between Amir and Hassan. Love for Hassan as a childhood friend and playmate also makes them as soul mates. It resonates the friendship between David and Jonathan in the Bible. David and Jonathan were separated out of Jonathan’s father King Saul’s jealousy of David. When they had to part ways because David’s life was in danger at the hands of his King Saul, the emotional breakdown of Jonathan and David is classic. Jonathan loved David as his own soul (1. Samuel 18: 1,3). David considers Jonathan’s love as more than of a woman because Jonathan who should be jealous of David and feel a threat from David’s growing popularity and success truly rejoiced in David. They make a pact of showing kindness and protecting their progeny. When Jonathan dies in a battle David’s anguish and agony is expressed:

*“Jonathan lies slain on your high places.
I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;*

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*very pleasant have you been to me;
your love to me was extraordinary,
surpassing the love of women.”(2. Samuel 1: 26. The Holy Bible)*

But unlike the classic brotherhood/ friendship of David and Jonathan, Amir’s relationship is dual. He is torn between love and hatred towards Hassan and interestingly his own father.

Ali’s early prophesy in the novel, however ironic to the readers, (after a complete volte-face--twice) is true: The bond between Amir and Hassan that goes through various nuances of affection, love, jealousy, bitterness to eventual betrayal of a bond that was so beautiful needs to be understood from its root cause.

The failure of such a promising relationship should be traced to Amir’s childhood. The loss of his mother had a profound and complex effect on Amir. While he felt that he was responsible for his mother’s death, he sought from his father the love that could be bestowed by a woman-his mother, yet at the same time he imagined that his father held Amir as a rival (for killing his wife during his birth).

Amir’s love-hate relationship with his father is born out of his unrequited love. It is foreshadowed early in the novel through the boys favorite story "*Rostam and Sohrab,*" *the tale of the great warrior Rostam and his fleet-footed horse, Rakhsh.*" While contemplating on Hassan’s request’s for re-reading the poignant scenes of the climax in Rostam and Sohrab’s story, Amir wonders: "*Personally, I couldn't see the tragedy in Rostam's fate. After all, didn't all fathers in their secret hearts harbor a desire to kill their sons?*"

The traumatic loss of his mother and Baba being kind to Hassan makes him jealous. The few times the father and the son spend exclusively (sometimes through Amir’s contriving and lying about Hassan’s health) shows a Frankenstein longing and trauma. He wants his father all for himself.

However, the distance maintained by Amir’s father in a predominantly patriarchal is misconstrued by him and the fact that he does not the exclusivity with his father since Hassan is in most of the outings makes him possessive. It is further compounded by the fact that his father considers him a weakling. Both in physical stamina as well as emotional health. His father winces in pain that Amir cannot run swiftly for the kite like Hassan.

Amir is torn as a child between the loss of his mother’s love, the sternness of a father whose love is shared by the hazara boy Hassan who seems to have a special place in his father’s life and heart. Amir holds himself guilty of his mother’s death and the consequent loss for his father:

After all, I _had_ killed his beloved wife, his beautiful princess, hadn't I? The least I could have done was to have had the decency to have turned out a little more like him. But I hadn't turned out like him. Not at all.

Out of his intense desire to get closer to his father, Amir develops the habit of eavesdropping on Baba and Rahim Khan, and unfortunately, he hears his father: *I'm telling you, Rahim, there is something missing in that boy. "...He needs someone who...understands him, because God knows I don't. But something about Amir troubles me in a way that I can't express. It's like..." I could see him searching, reaching for the right words. He lowered his voice, but I heard him anyway. "If I hadn't seen the doctor pull him out of my wife with my own eyes, I'd never believe he's my son."* Once again, the readers will remember the pain of rejection that the 'baby' the hideous creature who could not be accepted by Victor Frankenstein the father, his creator instead of accepting was repulsed at his own 'son'.

The disappointment that Amir did not turn out to be like his father, his inability to play soccer or even be an interested spectator, is doubled by the pain that he loves poetry and shows his leanings of being a writer which are held in disdain by his own father. So he develops contempt for himself when he thinks: *"Real men didn't read poetry-----and God forbid they should ever write it! Real men-----real boys-----played soccer just as Baba had when he had been young."*

The emotional distance between the father and the son creates a gulf that widens and deepens on many occasions. While Rahim uncle reads Amir's story Baba shows absolutely no interest. When Baba plans for Hassan's birthday gift a surgery for his cleft-lip, Amir could not stand the feelings of jealousy, hatred towards Hassan which were born out of the feelings of being an loved, unwanted and less than worthy of the only parent, his father. In fact, one wonders if Amir's betrayal of Hassan is actually the outcome of the complex relationship and feelings that he has for his own father. It makes us susceptible to consider that Hassan upon whom his father dotes ultimately becomes the object of his subtle hatred.

The beginning of resentment

Thus, Amir's initial resentment grows into a strong hatred where he begins to cheat and play mean tricks on Hassan. When accosted for the first time by Assef, Amir disowns Hassan as a friend and considers him a servant. After the plastic surgery, when Hassan's physical features begins to show in a smile, in Amir's eyes, ironically the smile stopped. Hassan who was ready to do anything for Amir be it the running for the kites for him, or even laying down his life for Amir can actually read Amir's mind.

Amir's intense dislike stems out of the growing jealousy of Hassan as well as his longing for his father's undiluted attention and sympathy that makes him actually wish he had a similar 'stupid harelip' that would require a surgery.

The act of betrayal - the sin

Ultimately Amir's point of nadir comes when he watches stealthily and does not stand up for Hassan who is overpowered by Assef and raped. This was when Hassan was running home with the kite for Amir. The seeds of resentment eventually make Amir insinuate Hassan as a thief who stole

his own watch and money and push it under Hassan's pillow and yet Hassan takes the blame without refuting the accusations eventually seal Amir's guilt.

From a worm teased under a lens, Hassan became the sacrificial lamb. This was the price Hassan paid to make Amir the hero in his father's sight.

The betrayal of a friendship and a bond that ran deeper than blood sends chills down the spine of readers as we realize that children are capable of such crimes. This marks a corrosion in the friendship that ran deeper than a relationship of kinship and brotherhood.

Guilt, the drastic result of betrayal

Guilt is a feeling of worry or unhappiness that one has because he has done something wrong or causing harm to another person. Guilt also occurs when a person realizes that he has compromised his own standards of conduct or has violated a universal moral standard.

Amir suffers from guilt on more than levels: the internal conflict that he failed to live up to his father's expectation and his own standard, and the existential guilt that is born out of the harm done to Hassan when he neither withstood Assef to rescue Hassan, his false pride and the facade he has to maintain as the winner of the blue kite which for which Hassan paid a costly price. Though he could disguise it from everyone else, even when Hassan's father pleaded to reveal what could have happened to Hassan, the sagacious Rahim Khan, who is almost like a godfather to Amir seems to have a full knowledge of it. Hassan became the sacrificial lamb for the Amir's sins of unrequited love, insecurity, jealousy, and betrayal of love, trust, friendship, kinship and brotherhood.

Despite the efforts of Hassan, Amir's guilt begins to take a toll on the relationship. Under the burden of a guilt and a truth that he cannot share even to Hassan's father, Amir withdraws into himself waiting for the school to re-open. The bonds of a special friendship, a relationship that grew out of a sense of adventure, and, an inexplicable devotion and loyalty from the Hazara Hassan to Amir is seemingly broken forever under the guilt that Amir suffers across seas.

His guilt continues to haunt him when he is across continents. He tries to assuage his guilt by proving to his father as a successful writer and takes care of him in his old age. But he has no way of atoning for his sin of betrayal of Hassan until Rahim Khan calls him on the phone to tell him that there is "**way to be good**", to redeem himself from his guilt.

Uncle Rahim Khan who is like a god-father to Amir tells him of the fact that he and Hassan are step-brothers. One is a legitimate son and the other is an illegitimate, unacknowledged son.

The atonement

When he heard from Rahim Uncle that Hassan was his half-brother and he is survived by his son Sohrab, Amir decided to risk his life by going back to Kabul. Despite the various hazards of trying to trace Sohrab, his troubles deepen when he he found out that Sohrab was being held at one Taliban

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official's house. His crucible test on going to get Sohra was in realising that the Taliban official was Assef, the guy who raped Hassan, while Amir stood by helplessly mute.

The only condition Assef agrees to let Sohrab go in exchange for a fight with Amir. While Amir gets beaten, he recollects the day he asked Hassan to punish him by throwing pomegranate at him which Hassan did not comply and so Amir was not punished.

When Assef beat Amir now he felt that he was redeemed because he needed to be punished for his sins. *"What was so funny was that, for the first time since the winter of 1975, I felt at peace. I laughed because I saw that, in some hidden nook in a corner of my mind, I'd even been looking forward to this. – My body was broken – just how badly I wouldn't find out until later – but I felt healed. Healed at last."* Hassan physical humiliation for which Amir did not stand up was a physical trauma for Hassan that is now evened out by the physical suffering at the hands of Assef. The physical suffering of Amir brought him release from the guilt of betrayal of Hassan.

Amir and Hassan's relationship is a little akin to the Isaac and Ishmael. Isaac becomes the willing sacrifice, and, Ishmael became the scapegoat for what Abraham and Sarah did. Here, however, Hassan both the willing lamb as well as the scapegoat. But neither of them knew that they were half-brothers. Despite their ignorance of this relationship, their childhood relationship and bond are endearing to the readers.

The story of Cain and Abel is also worth remembering here. If Cain's anger arose out of a subtle jealousy of the acceptance of Abels' offering, Amir's dislike that borders on jealousy is out of the distance that Hassan apparently brings in the relationship with his father and that Hassan has more qualities of a boy that his father longs for and appreciates. This rift widens with his father's inability to accept the so-called feminine qualities of Amir.

The initial friendship between the Pashtun Amir and Hazara Hassan later emerges as a brotherhood that stands the test of time. It is evident in the relationship between the posterity. However one-sided it appears to be in the beginning of the novel.

Truly despite everything Amir emerges as the hero for not only redeeming his own guilt but also his father's. David and Jonathan make a covenant between them where they swore to be kind and merciful to their progeny. And this prompts David who becomes the King to search for those of the household of Jonathan and make Mephibosheth, the lame and crippled son of Jonathan live with him in the palace and restore Mephibosheth's place and fortunes.

Amir was physically damaged, but he was able to recover and take Sohrab back to Pakistan. The fact that they do not have children of their own and his wife's readiness to accept Sohrab as their own child brings healing not only Amir but to many others.

Amir redeems himself and restores the relationship and kinship between himself and Hassan through 'Via Dolorosa' (the way of suffering, grief, pain and Cross.)

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