

# “from the certainty of turmoil [to the] turmoil of uncertainty<sup>1</sup>”: Articulating Childhood Trauma in Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*

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**Abstract-** Often castigated for their Eurocentric tendencies, trauma studies offer a rather universal paradigm that can be adapted to culture-specific contexts once their idiosyncratic characteristics are taken into consideration. With the most disturbing traumatic experiences relegated to the domain of the unsaid, traumatic events and their effects remain within the confining shackles of taboo and societal norms that inhibit victims from relating the incidents they have endured. Literature provides an alternative method to gain access to these testimonies. This paper aims at exploring the issue of child abuse and its traumatic effects upon the victims through a close reading of Khaled Hosseini's novel, *The Kite Runner*. Highly controversial and sensitive in nature, this phenomenon remains shrouded in silence. The fictional mode constitutes thus a substitute realm that allows the thorough examination of this question and paves the way towards the identification of the causes behind this deviant practice and the eradication thereof.

**Index Terms-** Child abuse, traumatic experience, post-traumatic stress disorder, witnessing, guilt

## I. INTRODUCTION

Venturing into Khaled Hosseini's fictionalized Afghan abyss of terror is likely to arouse in the reader an acute sense of “compassion fatigue<sup>2</sup>”. Indeed, relegated to the role of a bystander in this dystopian realm “where angels fear to tread<sup>3</sup>”, the latter is likely to fall prey to “vicarious traumatization<sup>4</sup>” due to the frustrating discrepancy between the highly realistic aspect with which the novel is marked and the “learned helplessness<sup>5</sup>” with which the reading experience is characterized. Witnessing the agonizing atrocities committed against children as narrated in *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini's 2003 debut novel, the reader is likely to be haunted by the harrowing images of child abuse featured therein. This paper thus constitutes an attempt at redemption, in the protagonist's fashion, a pursuit of atonement for the passivity of the onlooker by partaking in the diagnosis and analysis of the traumatic experiences endured by Amir, Hassan, and Sohrab, the major characters in the narrative. Indeed, the “unspeakability” of their plight further indicates the urgency of voicing their predicament and the alarming situation in a country that has a “lot of children...but little childhood” (Hosseini 318). This endeavor is premised upon a close reading of Hosseini's text in light of the tools provided by neo-critical, psychoanalytical, reader-response, and trauma theories. An interdisciplinary approach is therefore adopted as the envisaged literary analysis is informed by a variety of disciplines with the view of gaining novel insights into the book's attempts at defying the “irrepresentability” of childhood trauma. Indeed, the paper traces the lives of three traumatized Afghan boys, unveils the effects of these distressing experiences upon their psyches, and examines the coping mechanisms and healing strategies adopted to overcome them. This article aims at providing an in-depth examination of the enigmatic nature of the traumatic experience and its psychological repercussions upon child victims by scrutinizing the ordeals to which Hassan, Amir, and Sohrab have been subjected. Indeed, the peculiar aspect marking the individual experiences of each of these fictional characters serves as a reminder of the fact that trauma escapes overgeneralizations and manifests itself in miscellaneous forms rather than predefined universal patterns as it is highly intimate in essence as stressed by Caruth in her introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Indeed, the latter emphasizes the necessity of “responding to traumatic stories in a way that does not

<sup>1</sup> The title is inspired from the protagonist's mounting anxiety regarding the intricate situation in which his nephew is trapped. Indeed, the latter can neither survive within Afghanistan's “certainty of turmoil” nor easily adapt to life in the United States and adjust to American culture (Hosseini 356).

<sup>2</sup> According to the *Encyclopedia of Trauma and Traumatic Stress Disorders*, “secondary traumatization is also referred to as vicarious traumatization and compassion fatigue, and it affects those who care for people who have been directly traumatized. Examples of individuals who may experience secondary traumatic stress are medical responders, therapists, and others who seek to help the person who suffered a primary traumatization” (28).

<sup>3</sup> This is an allusion to Forster's 1905 novel, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*.

<sup>4</sup> The term “vicarious traumatization” is often used interchangeably with the terms “compassion fatigue”, and “secondary traumatization”.

<sup>5</sup> In keeping with the paper's central theme, the term “learned helplessness” is figuratively used to refer to the reader's frustrating incapacity to actively intervene in the fictional realm. Despite its fictionality, the novel stirs its readers into swift action and sensitizes them to the paramount importance of putting an end to the humanitarian crisis in a country blighted by obscurantism. According to the *Encyclopedia of Trauma and Traumatic Stress Disorders*, the term literally designates the “imposed feeling of incapacity and inevitable failure that initially occurs when individuals seek to act in some normal way, but they are (or feel that they are) coerced or otherwise prevented from attempting actions which they are fully capable of performing” (162).

lose their impact, that does not reduce them to clichés or turn them all to versions of the same story” (3). The first part of this research paper is devoted to the exploration of “circumscribed post-traumatic stress disorder<sup>6</sup>” and the paramount importance of forgiveness and reconciliation in the healing process as exemplified by Hassan’s experience. The second section tackles the question of witnessing as a traumatic event while shedding light on the post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms it engenders, namely, self-blame and remorse as illustrated through Amir’s case. The last segment sheds light on the issue of “sequential traumatization<sup>7</sup>”, and the self-defense mechanisms adopted to overcome the burden of survival by opting for Sohrab as a case study.

## II. Summary

Addressing this issue requires the provision of a summary of the story. Amir, the narrator of the novel, is the son of a self-made affluent Pashtun<sup>8</sup> businessman whose wife dies in childbirth. Amir, the protagonist, finds solace in the company of a Hazara<sup>9</sup> boy, Hassan, the son of Ali, the family servant and childhood friend of Baba, Amir’s father. Enduring the pangs of maternal deprivation because of his mother’s elopement upon his birth, Hassan finds refuge in Amir’s friendship and the boys become inseparable. Hassan’s loyalty to his playmate is further proven in a highly indicative scene where he threatens Assef, a sadistic bully, with his slingshot to protect Amir against his gratuitous hatred and uncalled-for violence. Amir’s frailty, sensitivity, and literary inclinations provoke his father’s increasing concern, annoyance, and indignation. In a desperate attempt at gaining his father’s approval, the protagonist strives to win the kite tournament, a competition that holds a great importance for Afghans and constitutes an integral part of their customs and traditions. Hassan, a peerless kite runner, vows to help Amir fulfill his dream. The latter ends up winning the tournament but the kite has to be retrieved as it testifies to the winner’s victory and serves as proof of his prowess and valor. Hassan volunteers to fetch it. He is caught by Assef who decides to deprive him and Amir of the kite that symbolizes their success as a punishment for their previous attempts at self-defense that prevented him from harming Amir. Hassan refuses to betray his friend’s trust and adamantly rejects Assef’s offer to give him the kite in return for his freedom and safety. Amir overhears their conversation and refrains from intervening lest he should be hurt. Assef ends up raping Hassan in an attempt at subduing his defiant spirit and reclaiming sovereignty after being challenged by Hassan’s threats. Guilt-ridden, Amir fails to relish in the long-awaited moment of paternal approval. He dodges any potential interaction with Hassan and ends up planting some of his birthday presents in Hassan’s room with the view of getting rid of him once he is accused of theft. To Amir’s surprise, Hassan admits that he has committed theft and Ali, his father decides to quit the job and move to Hazarajat. His confession is preceded by an intimate moment of disclosure after which the father decides to leave with his son while paying a deaf ear to Baba’s desperate attempts at convincing him not to abandon his second family. Upon the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Amir and his father flee to Pakistan then to the United States where they start a new life. Amir finishes his education. His father is stricken by a fatal cancer. Amir falls in love with Soraya Taheri. His father passes away shortly after their marriage. Amir becomes a published novelist. The couple struggles with infertility. One day, he receives a phone call from an old family friend, Rahim Khan, asking him to come to Pakistan. Once there, Amir finds out that Hassan is his half-brother, an illegitimate son to Baba. He also discovers that Rahim Khan knows about his failure to intervene to help Hassan who has always been there for him. Rahim Khan informs Amir that his nephew, Sohrab, is the only survivor of a family tragedy committed by Taliban terrorists. Indeed, in an attempt at defending his master’s house from being looted by Talibs, Hassan is killed along with his wife who tries to defend him. Sohrab is sent to a dismal orphanage. Rahim Khan urges Amir to save Sohrab but the latter is reluctant to go to Afghanistan. Then, he sets off on a journey to Kabul along with Farid, the driver. Once in the orphanage, Amir finds out that his nephew has been kidnapped by a Talib and that the man in question would be present at an adultery stoning in a stadium in Kabul. The one who executes the punishment is the Talib holding Sohrab captive. Amir asks for an appointment with him. Once there, he discovers that his nephew has been sexually abused by the Talib and his men. The Talib is none but Assef, a pervert sadist who takes pleasure in revealing his identity to Amir and boasts about raping the child the way he raped his father. Assef promises to free Sohrab and his uncle if the latter manages to defeat him. Pleading Assef to have mercy on his severely-wounded uncle, Sohrab realizes that the only way to save Amir is by using his slingshot and aiming at Assef’s eye. Amir and Sohrab escape the Talibs and flee to Pakistan. Once there, Amir starts considering adopting his nephew. Unfortunately, the legal procedures are very complex. Suspecting that he might be taken to an orphanage once more, Sohrab commits suicide. He survives but retreats into a realm of silence and detachment. They travel to the United States where Sohrab remains aloof from his surroundings till a kite tournament insufflates life within his tormented soul.

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<sup>6</sup> According to the *Encyclopedia of Trauma and Traumatic Stress Disorders*, this concept “is synonymous with what today is called “single incident” trauma, whereas complex posttraumatic stress disorder (CPTSD) refers to multiple or chronic abuse or trauma that leads to PTSD. The idea of “circumscribed” does not mean that an event was a minor event. On the contrary, the traumatic event could range from a relatively minor or distant event to one that is very intense and intimate, such as a rape, kidnapping, sniper attack, and so on” (71).

<sup>7</sup> The aforementioned source defines sequential traumatization as “Traumas that appear one after the other, such as a death in the family, which is immediately followed by a natural disaster. Multiple or “pile-on” tragic events are not only difficult for an individual to cope with but also take a long time to process and resolve. Furthermore, they can lead to symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that persist for those people who are vulnerable to developing PTSD and for those who are less vulnerable but are hit with many traumas at the same time” (234).

<sup>8</sup> Pashtuns “are the most populous ethnic group in Afghanistan, numbering approximately 7,5 million; for that reason, they sometimes are simply called Afghans” (Danver 559).

<sup>9</sup> According to the *Encyclopedia of the Peoples of Asia and Oceania*, “the Hazaras are a unique people living primarily in central Afghanistan, where they make up 9 percent of the population...They are physically unlike all other people of Afghanistan...They also constitute a religious minority in Afghanistan as Shii Muslims, while the majority of their fellow citizens are Sunni. These differences have led to significant discrimination for many centuries in Afghanistan” (272).

### III. "It was the look of the lamb"<sup>10</sup>: Forgiveness as Therapy

Hassan's traumatic experience does not merely represent the first traumatizing event in a series of assaults against children as featured in the novel. Opting for this specific incident in the first section of the paper is not driven by chronological concerns but rather by causality. Hassan's rape is the traumatic event that unleashes a series of misfortunes which end up affecting and altering the lives of his half-brother and son. Indeed, there are various hints foreshadowing his impending tragedy to build the readers' "horizon of expectations" in the Jaussian sense and help them anticipate the shocking incident. The soothsayer's episode is highly significant in this regard as his refusal to divulge any information regarding Hassan's future further confirms the reader's suspicions regarding what fate holds in store for the meek child. The detailed depiction of the fortune-teller's ritual of divination and response to the revelation forebodes imminent doom:

He takes Hassan's hand first, strokes the palm with one hornlike fingernail, round and round, round and round. The finger then floats to Hassan's face and makes a dry, scratchy sound as it slowly traces the curve of his cheeks, the outline of his ears. The calloused pads of his fingers brush against Hassan's eyes. The hand stops there. Lingers. A shadow passes across the old man's face. Hassan and I exchange a glance. The old man takes Hassan's hand and puts the rupia back in Hassan's palm. ( Hosseini 74)

Caught by a bully whose solely motivated by an unquenchable thirst for power, Hassan falls prey to "child-on-child sexual abuse". Obsessed with maintaining his image as an invincible leader, the sadistic child feeds his deflated ego by humiliating the boy who has challenged his authority while attempting to save his friend. He gives free rein to his outspoken Hitlerian tendencies that find their target in the Hazara community, a marginalized ethnic minority group. Stressing that ethnic cleansing is the "final solution" to "purify" the land of the Pashtuns, Assef's sexual abuse of his peer is an attempt at asserting his absolute domination and authority over the helpless child. His perverted fantasies and racist views are concretized in this act of sexual violence. Though deemed sinful by his friends who refuse to actively partake in his plan, Assef's sexual assault is guided by a staunch belief in the inferiority of Hassan whom he regards as a mere "donkey" (Hosseini 75). Paying no heed to the child's emotions and dehumanizing his victim, the monstrous aggressor objectifies the helpless boy whom he perceives merely as a tool with which to mark his territory and regain his position which has previously been challenged by the boy's resistance to intimidation and threats. In addition to its racist nature, the juvenile's crime takes on another dimension, one that further aggravates the victim's torment. Indeed, the sexual offence is witnessed by Wali and Kamal, Assef's accomplices. Hassan's sense of violation is further accentuated through their contribution in the rape by holding him firmly to allow the "Ear Eater", as Assef is nicknamed, to feed his "sense of manhood" as he perceives the assault as proof of his masculinity (Hosseini 42). It should also be noted that through Amir's gradual revelation of the circumstances in which Hassan's rape occurs, by assembling the fragmented account of the unsettling event, the reader not only discovers that the protagonist has secretly witnessed the crime but also that Hassan is fully aware of the fact that the friend for whom he selflessly put his life at stake has not attempted to save him. The immediate emotional effects of the incident upon the victim vary therefore between shame, embarrassment, helplessness, disappointment, and distrust. In keeping with the very etymology of the word trauma<sup>11</sup>, the rapist's crime not only affects its victim psychologically but also physically damages him. Indeed, the verbs used to depict his gait, now impeded by injury, highlight the severe physical harm inflicted upon him by the pervert "sociopath":

He began to say something and his voice cracked. He closed his mouth, opened it, and closed it again. Took a step back. Wiped his face. And that was as close as Hassan and I ever came to discussing what had happened in the alley. I thought he might burst into tears, but, to my relief, he didn't, and I pretended I hadn't heard the crack in his voice. Just like I pretended I hadn't seen the dark stain in the seat of his pants. Or those tiny drops that fell from between his legs and stained the snow black.  
"Agha sahib will worry," was all he said. He turned from me and limped away. (Hosseini 78)

Hassan, the eponymous kite runner, soon collapses into a depressive state as he starts manifesting symptoms of circumscribed post-traumatic stress disorder. Indeed, upon being sexually abused, Hassan grows detached from his immediate surroundings. He intentionally dodges any potential confrontation with Amir, the passive accomplice in his victimization. Escapism through oversleeping is his major defense mechanism against the bitterness of what he has endured. Indeed, their previous routine is turned upside down and the serenity of their childhood is lost within the escalating tension of disappointment, betrayal, and guilt. Hassan gradually starts recovering and regaining his former routine. Trying to approach Amir, he is met with constant rejection as the latter is trapped in self-blame and remorse. The strong bond between the playmates gradually dissolves and eventually the ties are severed after Hassan's departure upon being falsely accused of theft. Offered a panoramic view of Hassan's life, the reader is likely to deduce that he has managed to overcome his plight and undergo a thorough process of healing. There are various hints at his recovery. Indeed, this is to be inferred from Rahim Khan's description of his happy marriage and his wife's admiration for him as she seems to hold her husband in great esteem: "She was a shy woman, so courteous she spoke in a voice barely higher than a whisper and she would not raise her pretty hazel eyes to meet [his] gaze. But the way she was looking at Hassan, he might as well

<sup>10</sup> The title of this section is based on the recurrent use of the lamb motif by the protagonist to depict Hassan's resignation as he likens his gaze to that of a lamb (Hosseini 76).

<sup>11</sup> Campbell and Mason define trauma as "a Greek word that means a "wound", a "lesion", or an "injury", and it comes from the verb "to pierce" or "to penetrate" (171).

have been sitting on the throne at the Arg” (Hosseini 205-206). This testifies to the fact that Hassan has managed to overcome the suffering induced by the assault as traumatized children who fail to overcome the traumatizing event often confront relationship issues as adults and fail to establish sound, permanent ties with their partners. His son’s remorse at having been forced to harm his aggressor sheds light on Hassan’s success in starting afresh after the traumatic incident. Indeed, Sohrab’s remorseful lamentation of the damage he has caused to Assef emanates from his father’s teachings. The latter instilled love, forgiveness, and tolerance in his child. He warned him against the pitfalls of enmity, grudge and hatred as he taught him that “it’s wrong to hurt even bad people. Because they don’t know any better, and because bad people sometimes become good”, a message that outlived the father and that the traumatizing experience Sohrab endured did not manage to erase (Hosseini 318). The recurrent use of the Biblical allusion in which Hassan is associated with “the lamb” and the Koranic allusion in which he is metaphorically likened to Ismail, Ibrahim’s son who offered himself as a scapegoat following God’s commands, go beyond the idea of scapegoating and sacrifice. The utter resignation displayed in his response to Assef’s rape as an “absent witness”, a victim upon whose psyche trauma is inscribed before being prepared to receive it, is transformed through the redeeming force of reconciliation, acceptance, and forgiveness (Alford 2). Indeed, far from eliciting sympathy, Hassan emerges as a dignified figure, a Christ-like hero, a savior who manages through altruism, and loyalty to ensure the triumph of love over hatred and reach reconciliation unlike his friend, the Judas-like figure of the traitor who betrays his friend and descends into self-flagellation.

#### IV. “There is a way to be good again<sup>12</sup>”: Witnessing, Guilt, Redemption

Witnessing trauma is itself a highly traumatizing experience that damages the witness’s psyche and is likely to have long-lasting psychological effects that are challenging to cure. Present at the crime scene, Amir is torn between the urge to assist Hassan, and his fear for his own safety. Privileging the latter over the former, he ends up refraining from saving his friend, a decision he regrets, a turning point that ushers in a radical shift in his life. The child’s inner turmoil and self-blame is translated through the following confession:

I ran because I was a coward. I was afraid of Assef and what he would do to me. I was afraid of getting hurt. That’s what I told myself as I turned my back to the alley, to Hassan. That’s what I made myself believe. I actually aspired to cowardice, because the alternative, the real reason I was running, was that Assef was right: Nothing was free in this world. Maybe Hassan was the price I had to pay, the lamb I had to slay, to win Baba. Was it a fair price? The answer floated to my conscious mind before I could thwart it: He was just a Hazara, wasn’t he? (Hosseini 77)

Probing into Amir’s family circumstances and personality is likely to unravel the different factors contributing to that paralyzing sense of fear with which he witnesses his friend’s rape. Indeed, the boy has always been envious of his playmate for receiving his father’s attention and admiration, the privilege he has always aspired for. Despite being the family’s servant and belonging to an ethnic minority that is socially deemed to be inherently inferior, Hassan has always enjoyed Baba’s fatherly affection. Seeking his father’s approval in vain, Amir’s kite tournament trophy, the kite, is the sole means of winning his father’s heart, a goal he desperately tries to achieve despite the dire consequences. It’s only upon returning home with the kite that the child discovers the gravity of the incident. Indeed, upon meeting Hassan for the first time after the assault, Amir’s attention is focused on the kite, the object that stands for the possibility of earning his father’s approval. This is highlighted in his reaction when he sees him: “He had the blue kite in his hands; that was the first thing I saw. And I can’t lie now and say my eyes didn’t scan it for any rips. His chapman had mud smudges down the front and his shirt was ripped just below the collar. He stopped. Swayed on his feet like he was going to collapse (Hosseini 78). It is only upon gradually assimilating the shocking event that Amir starts losing interest in everything that used to fascinate him and fails to relish in his father’s pride. The child finally realizes the magnitude of his loss as trauma is but a “belated” experience in the Caruthian sense. Hassan’s withdrawal from his life creates a sense of void and emptiness that alters his self-perception. The child’s post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms are manifested in his chronic insomnia, loss of interest in the activities he used to enjoy before the incident, avoidance of any contact with Hassan whom he considers to be his own victim, shame, embarrassment, along with an overwhelming sense of guilt that prevents him from leading a normal life as he is haunted by the traumatic event and trapped in a maze of negative self-perception. This state of unrest and anxiety is illustrated through Amir’s obsessive brooding over his memories with Hassan and the sharp contrast he establishes between the latter’s genuine kindness and abnegation and his own passivity. This idea is expressed through his reinterpretation of Hassan’s pre-tournament dream, as he identifies himself as the monster in the nightmare:

I thought about Hassan’s dream, the one about us swimming in the lake. There is no monster, he’d said, just water. Except he’d been wrong about that. There was a monster in the lake. It had grabbed Hassan by the ankles, dragged him to the murky bottom. I was that monster. That was the night I became an insomniac. (Hosseini 86)

Devising a plot to get rid of the unsettling presence of his victim, a constant reminder of his misdeed, Amir succeeds in dispatching Hassan and his father but fails to erase the traumatizing memory. Plagued by a traumatizing past, the protagonist’s attempts at wiping off the harrowing images of the traumatic incident prove inefficient as they keep resurfacing through flashbacks that betray his inability to overcome the disturbing memories he has tried to repress and the qualms of conscience with

<sup>12</sup> The title is inspired from Rahim Khan’s attempt at urging Amir to atone for his misdeed by saving his nephew (Hosseini 226).

which he is constantly seized as a child, an adolescent, and an adult. According to Cathy Caruth, "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (Caruth 4-5). Amir seems to fit within this definition of the pathology as he remains haunted by the traumatizing images associated with the rape episode. In fact, he is possessed by a recurrent image of bloodstains which he visualizes even when they do not exist. He even insists on witnessing the slaughtering of the sheep on Eid day as it is reminiscent of the incident in terms of the associations he establishes between the bloodstains on the grass and Hassan's bleeding after the assault, between the scapegoat, and Hassan. This is clearly indicated in this excerpt where he tries to fathom the reasons behind his insistence upon attending the slaughtering of the sheep despite its repugnant aspect:

I don't know why I watch this yearly ritual in our backyard; my nightmares persist long after the bloodstains on the grass have faded. But I always watch. I watch because of that look of acceptance in the animal's eyes. Absurdly, I imagine the animal understands. I imagine the animal sees that its imminent demise is for a higher purpose. This is the look . . . (Hosseini 76-77)

Offered the chance to redeem himself and make amends, Amir sets out on a journey of healing and salvation, a mission that constitutes his sole refuge against the burden of the past. The hazardous trip of atonement culminates into a highly symbolic scene of purgation and relief. Indeed, when confronting Assef and falling prey to his ruthless aggression, Amir starts laughing frantically. Masochistically rejoicing in suffering for the misdeeds he has committed, Amir seems to relive the traumatizing event but also its sequel, the one which he had failed to finalize in the past. Assef's attack provides him with the opportunity to reenact the incident and compensate for what he did not manage to achieve. In this regard, Sohrab functions as his father's substitute. Paradoxically, the pain Assef inflicts upon him becomes liberating:

He had knee-high boots with steel toes that he wore every night for his little kicking game, and he used them on me. I was screaming and screaming and he kept kicking me and then, suddenly, he kicked me on the left kidney and the stone passed. Just like that! Oh, the relief!" Assef laughed. "And I yelled 'Allah-u-akbar' and he kicked me even harder and I started laughing. He got mad and hit me harder, and the harder he kicked me, the harder I laughed. They threw me back in the cell laughing. I kept laughing and laughing because suddenly I knew that had been a message from God: He was on my side. He wanted me to live for a reason. (Hosseini 284-285)

The protagonist's reconciliation with the past is thus achieved and the brothers are reunited despite Hassan's death. Indeed, the permanent scar on Amir's lip, a wound he receives while defending his nephew against the pedophile Talib, is reminiscent of his late brother's harelip. The two seem to reach oneness at the moment he accepts his past and decides to adopt Hassan's son. The latter's psychological wounds are far deeper than his uncle's.

#### V- "I'm so dirty and full of sin<sup>13</sup>": The Guilt of Survival

Unlike Amir and Hassan whose victimization is to be traced back to one major incident, namely, the rape, Sohrab's plight is not restricted to circumscribed post-traumatic disorder, it is rather sequential traumatization that defines his experience. Indeed, Hassan's son undergoes a series of highly traumatizing events that culminate in a suicide attempt aimed at sheltering himself against a cruel reality he can no longer endure. Zooming in on his life, the reader is likely to notice that Sohrab's tragedy does not start with the Talibs' perverted pedophilic practice of bacha bazi, a form of child slavery and prostitution, but rather before. Sohrab witnesses his parents' murder at the hands of Taliban terrorists. He endures the trauma of witnessing, loss, bereavement, but also that of survival. Indeed, he often mourns the loss of his family wishing to join them. Before his parents' murder, the child used to lead a serene life of tranquility in the peaceful haven Hassan and Rahim Khan created for themselves. The utter chaos and havoc that the Taliban regime introduced in their lives exceeds the boundaries of the family to encompass a whole culture. Sohrab is indeed a victim of cultural trauma as he fails to fathom the radical shift incurred by the forces of darkness, a major change that is to be felt at the microscopic level of his daily routine that vanishes with the triumph of barbarity. Sent to an orphanage, the child is soon kidnapped by Assef who exploits him sexually with his friends. The Talib distorts the child's identity, violates his intimacy, and shatters his self-esteem. This is clearly highlighted through the dance routine the Taliban members teach him in order to satiate their perverted fantasies:

Sohrab raised his arms and turned slowly. He stood on tiptoes, spun gracefully, dipped to his knees, straightened, and spun again. His little hands swiveled at the wrists, his fingers snapped, and his head swung side to side like a pendulum. His feet pounded the floor, the bells jingling in perfect harmony with the beat of the tabla. He kept his eyes closed. (Hosseini 280)

Sohrab's closed eyes are his sole defense mechanism, his only refuge against the harshness of the dire circumstances of his bondage. The boy's traumatization is further accentuated by witnessing the lethal combat between Assef, his aggressor, and Amir, the friend his father has always praised. Forced to intervene to prevent Assef from killing Amir, the child falls prey to another traumatizing memory. For him, harming people is equated with violating his father's

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<sup>13</sup> Upon being sexually abused, Sohrab starts feeling alienated from his own body which he perceives to be contaminated with the acts of violations exerted upon him by the Talibs (Hosseini 319).

teachings, the values he cherishes, the only remaining heirloom he has of his family. Engaging in a daily purgation ritual, the child perceives his body as the site of sin and corruption, a shame to his lost family. As he gradually starts regaining trust and accepts the uncle's attempts at helping him, the latter unwittingly triggers his relapse into depression. Trying to persuade the boy to temporarily stay at an orphanage in order to facilitate the adoption procedures, Amir steals away the last glimmer of hope left for the boy who anticipates the tragedy to be repeated once he is left to his own devices in an orphanage. Though he survives, he enters a phase of numbness, depression, and disconnection that is only aggravated as they move to the United States where he falls into utter silence, alienation, and lifelessness. The prospects of healing are associated with the kite, a relic of the halcyon days of Pakistan, a reminder of a golden past that can be retrieved, an object that succeeds in bringing light back to Sohrab's lifeless eyes.

## VI- Conclusion

This fictional account of the demise of a land is thus to be interpreted as a history from below of the devolution of Afghanistan and its descent into chaos. The plight of the children the novel depicts takes on a figurative dimension in addition to the literal one. Indeed, much like its traumatized children, Afghanistan is divested of its innocence. The land is violated, its future hijacked, and the deteriorating conditions in which its future generation is entrapped are ominous indicators of doom if swift measures are not taken to reverse the tide. The Healing processes through which the abused children go in the novel symbolically promise a possibility of healing, of moving beyond the trauma despite its devastating effects.

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