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Sohrab's Trauma and Psychological Struggle in *The Kite Runner*

Abstract

This research highlights the impact of war zone on a child victim's psyche by taking into account Khalid Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* in the light of Thomas Joiner's 'Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicide Behavior'. The novel is set in three different places; Afghanistan, America and Pakistan, over a span of a few years, from 1975 to 2001. It deals with Amir, Hassan and Sohrab being the major characters in the novel. Readers are introduced to Sohrab in the second half of the novel, who happens to be Hassan's son and half nephew to Amir. The main focus of this research is to critically analyze Sohrab's character, to breakdown the events that led up to his attempt at suicide; and his slow and gradual recovery process towards the end of the novel. Joiner's theory comprises of three common traits found in people who are inclined to committing a suicidal attempt or have committed it, these include; the feeling of alienation, the feeling of being a burden and the acquired capability to fatal self-harm. Sohrab's character is explored in accordance with the aforementioned three points by keeping in view his actions and words that give a hint towards the whirlpool of emotions and feelings he might be psychologically struggling with. This is because of the traumatic experiences he went through while in Afghanistan before he was rescued, which includes losing both parents at the hands of the Taliban, him being sold to them, getting abused by them both psychically and psychologically, whereas the Taliban defend their atrocious acts in the name of Islam and self-defense. Towards the end a very slow and gradual wellbeing in Sohrab's character is noticed with the change of his environment.

Key Words: Alienation, Emotions, Recovery, Suicide, Traumatic experiences

1. Introduction

The Kite Runner is Khalid Hosseini's debut novel, published in 2003. Hosseini is an Afghan-American writer as well as an activist. This novel of his ventures upon the troubled relationship of two boys Amir and Hassan, boys whose fate is tied with each other as they grow up in Afghanistan and are revealed to be much more than that, carrying with themselves the blood of kinship as well. The novel deals with quite a handful of topics that are sensitive and at times soul crushing. It depicts the picture of the Afghanistan during the political upheaval and the rise of the Taliban. Due to which the face of Afghanistan changed, people lost their right to life, liberty and property. Moreover the plot has been excellently knitted together even though it spans over a few years and places but it keeps the readers up on their feet end engaged at every turn.

The story of the novel begins with Amir recalling an event that happened twenty-six years ago. Amir was a young boy at that time and that event left on him, a mark, never to be erased. He lived in Afghanistan with his Baba and two servants, Ali and his son Hassan. Both of them were Hazara which is an ethnic minority. Things fell apart for him after the Afghan King was overthrown. Hassan is the one who always saved Amir from the harsh behaviors of the society for keeping friendship with a Hazara. Sadly Amir fails to do so when Hassan is raped by a boy Assef during chasing after a kite in the 'Kite Running Tournament'. Both the friends drift apart after this event because Amir is taken over by guilt. He decides that they should move away from each other and so, blames Hassan for the theft of his watch. Both part their ways, grow up and get married. Amir and Baba leaves for the US, Baba dies and Amir gets to know through a friend of Baba that Hassan was Baba's son. Moreover he informs Amir that Hassan

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had married and has a son Sohrab who is taken away by Taliban after they shot both his parents dead. Baba's friend Rahim Khan requests him to rescue Sohrab to which Amir agrees. His guilt has never left him and he sees this as an opportunity to be good again. He goes to rescue Sohrab, an orphan child who is sexually abused and psychologically disturbed so much so that he tries to kill himself. He lives but returns to life very slowly. The story ends at his smile.

Sohrab's character is analyzed through the interpersonal-psychological theory of suicidal behavior (Joiner, 2005) which proposes that an individual will not die by suicide unless s/he has both the desire to die by suicide and the ability to do so. This research aims to find out with reference to Sohrab's character, what is the desire for suicide, and what are its constituent parts? What is the ability to die by suicide and in whom and how does it develop? Moreover how does it affect Sohrab?

1.1 Research Objectives:

This research has the following objectives;

1. To explore suicide and its aspects and developments
2. To analyze Sohrab's character, his psychological development and the desire for suicide

1.2 Research Questions:

Following are the research questions of this study;

1. What is the desire for suicide, and what are its constituent parts?
2. What is the ability to die by suicide and in whom and how does it develop?
3. Moreover how does this desire affect Sohrab's character in the novel?

1.3 Problem Statement:

This research paper explores the affects of death wish or desire for suicide on human beings. Sohrab's character in Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* serves as the primary source of data for this research.

1.4 Research Methodology:

This study is a qualitative research and by using the technique of close textual analysis, my study reflects on Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* through the concept of Thomas Joiner's 'Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicide Behavior'. I have chosen Sohrab's character to explore the psychological development of his character through the course of the novel and the effects of death desire on his development.

2. Literature Review

The novel offers multiple interpretations and perspectives such as sociological, political, ethnic, moral and psychological etc. Many researchers have mentioned about the struggle and trauma that the protagonist, Amir, went through such as in *Articulating Childhood Trauma in Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner* the author is focused on exploring PTSD, 'forgiveness and reconciliation' and a 'self-blame and remorse' where as a small portion is dedicated to Sohrab's 'self-defense mechanisms'.

Another article named *A Study of Amir's Psychological Change in The Kite Runner*, as the title states is focused on Amir's psychological turmoil. It is explained by using 'Erikson's psycho-social development theory'. Different stages and steps are explained from the feeling of doubt to guilt and then from jealousy to self-accusation and finally the devotion and sympathy that Amir feels in rescuing Sohrab. Whereas, in *Amir's Anxiety and Motivation in Khalid Hosseini's The Kite Runner* the author yet again is devoted in unfolding Amir's feeling of anxiety and motivation. The paper goes into detail about the plot of the novel and the setting, Amir's internal and outer conflict, then it proceeds to delve into the types of anxiety he experienced and finally about his motives such

as that of 'safety and security need' and his need of 'belongingness and love' through Sohrab. Lastly, *Translating Trauma in Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner* by Sara O' Brien. Her essay keeps in view the real life events that had occurred in Afghanistan 'during the mid-1970s' and has explained the novel through it. It explains the role of different characters in the novel through whom the political upheaval can be traced and identified.

Though there are many studies found regarding the character of Amir and Hassan, but there are not enough in-depth studies on the analysis of Sohrab's character and his psychological interpersonal struggle. So this gap becomes the main objective and focus of this article, that is, to keep in view the psychological struggle and actions of Sohrab and explain these through Thomas Joiner's 'Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicidal Behavior' (2005). This Theory explains that a person will not commit suicide unless that individual is capable of doing so and has the desire to do so. This has to do with two psychological drives that are the 'Social Alienation' and 'Thwarted Belongingness'. These two lead up to 'Acquired Capability' which means that the feeling or the desire of death is acquired from the social environment or the surrounding a person is exposed to which haunts an individual even after he has been removed from that toxic and abusive environment. This is what exactly happens with Sohrab in the novel. He develops this 'Death Drive' through several social and individual issues that he is faced with.

3. Textual Analysis:

The first question, who may desire to commit suicide, is answered by Joiner via his theory that a person who holds two specific psychological states in his/her mind simultaneously and for a long period of time, s/he develops death desire. The two states being: "perceived burdensomeness" and "sense of low belonging or social alienation". If we analyze Sohrab's character, he has suffered at the hands of his own countrymen and has held both of these psychological states for a very long period of time. Although thanks to Amir's intervention, Sohrab is able to escape from the gruesome clutches of Assef and the rest of the Taliban, the events prior to his rescuing have left him psychologically shaken up. He finds himself in a total social disconnection. This is evident in the way he does not verbally communicate when confronted. For instance when Amir asks him if he was okay with staying back while Farid was gone, all Sohrab did was that, "he shrugged and said nothing." (Hosseini 269)

Another instance is when Farid tells Sohrab about picking him up at a later time, the boy "wandered to the window" (Hosseini 266) So when Sohrab did respond to Amir whether he wanted to play cards, Amir was not expecting to be answered. It is evident in his words, 'I didn't expect him to answer, let alone play. He'd been quiet since we had fled Kabul. But he turned from the window and said, "The only game I know is panjpar (Hosseini 267)." This explains that Sohrab only spoke up when he saw something (cards in this case) being familiar but more importantly associated to a safe and harmless experience, he even continues to play the game for a while to indulge in the conversation with Amir about Hassan.

Environment and backdrop has a vital importance in one's life. People have high chances of developing psychological issues when exposed to long term unfit and unhealthy situations, for instance those of war zones. *The Kite Runner* depicts a picture of deteriorated Afghanistan during and after war times. The Afghan king was overthrown and the Taliban had taken over. The power dynamic was completely changed. Taliban kept committing heinous acts in the name of religion, especially the killing of Hazara people. As ethnicity runs deep in Afghanistan, the Afghan Pashtuns have always hated the Hazaras. Amir refers to the killing of Hazaras as "Ethnic cleansing" (p.35) whereas for Assef it is as easy as to "take out the garbage" (p. 35). However, the atmosphere changes right back to a cold one the moment Amir puts his arm around Sohrab because it is said that, "he flinched. He dropped his cards and pushed away on the stool" (Hosseini 267). The past trauma has left him unhinged and as a reflex his mind is hyper alert the moment any physical contact is made even though Amir has not shown any signs of danger.

Sohrab's lack of interest in his surrounding can be perceived as alarming. Especially when Amir is informed by Farid that Betty and John Caldwell do not exist, in the midst of the turmoil he is described by Amir as sitting next to him and was busy "flipping through the pages of the old National Geographic" (Hosseini 269) It appears as if he does not want to be noticed and would rather blend into the background. Moreover, there are places and things that he associates with either good or bad. For instance the mosque is a place where he feels a sense of security, that he runs away from the safety of the hotel room towards Shah Faisal mosque. He feels alienated from the rest of the people and places but the mosque happens to be a safe haven for him. Another noticeable thing when

he feels agitated or anxious, he has his knees drawn towards himself, as if trying to hide away, a way of protecting himself and its evident when he tells Amir, "Have you ever been to Mazar-i-Sharif?" and has placed his chin "on his kneecaps"(Hosseini 276)

Sohrab's frail mind is unable to cope with what has happened to him as a result of which he believes that he himself is the one at fault and feels an immense guilt. He reaches out for its confirmation when he asks Amir, "Do you think Father is disappointed in me?"(Hosseini 278) This makes it obvious that the isolation which his mind has succumbed to has left him to drown in self-hatred. Although, Amir tells him that that is not the case at all and as a matter of fact his father would be proud of him for saving Amir's life but Sohrab's mind is not able to comprehend that. A child who has been a victim of abuse and no one to rely on has come to the conclusion that because he was part of it then that means he is also responsible for the horrendous act of molestation. He tells Amir that at times he is glad not to have his parents around because he feels "so dirty and full of sin (Hosseini 278)." Which is heartbreaking that being a sufferer he feels like a sinner, and his words start to make sense as to why he tries to seek refuge at the mosque. It appears as if he is confessing his sins. He proceeds to explain that "the bad man and the other two... they did things to me."(Hosseini 278) Throughout his breakdown and burst of emotions Amir is there to comfort him and tries to pull him close but Sohrab keeps recoiling but Amir keeps persisting and his promise of "I won't hurt you"(Hosseini 281) to Sohrab is an assurance that the boy has been deprived of for too long.

With the element of alienation also comes the **feeling of burdensomeness** that the victim has perceived for himself. This perception of his is based on his past experience of being taken in by the orphanage and thrown into the serpent's pit. So it has made him prone to the feeling of abandonment which has led him to view himself as a 'burden', this is obvious when he drew his knees to himself, again, as stated before an act of agitation, therefore when told if he would like to go to America he nervously asks Amir that, "What if you get tired of me? What if your wife doesn't like me?"(Hosseini 282) He does not seem to realize nor see the effort that Amir has been putting in trying to help him achieve a better life but rather his mind is fogged up and caught up in his own misconceptions. It can also be noticed that as time goes by he becomes more unsure and uncertain of the unforeseen future.

Amir has promised him that he will not be sent to an orphanage because of which he agrees with Amir on going to America. Amir's relief can be seen when he states that Sohrab squeezed his hand as an affirmation, "And he nodded. He nodded." (Hosseini 283) It looks like Sohrab is able to trust Amir and might be able to improve in his mental struggle but it all comes crashing down when he is told that he has to stay at an orphanage for a little while. Sohrab goes hysteric and is certain that he will get hurt even though it is a completely different country. This comes back to the recurring theme of him associating places and things with either good or bad and the orphanage falls in the category of 'bad' because of the past experience. His heart wrenching pleas of, "Please promise you won't! Oh God, Amir agha! Please promise you won't!"(Hosseini 298) are a sign of hopelessness and helplessness. This was the final blow that was needed for him to lose all senses of being part of the living. One of the main reasons being that his doubt of being a 'burden' has been proven right according to him and that his place for belonging is no more available. Joiner's theory explains this feeling is also known as '**thwarted belongingness**'.

All of this leads up to Sohrab's attempt at committing suicide, this happens when Amir receives news that brings hope, that it can be made possible for Sohrab to go to America with him when Amir sees the sight in the bathroom in front of him then all he can muster is to scream, "Screaming until I thought my throat would rip and my chest explode."(Hosseini 299) as Sohrab is rushed to a hospital. This attempt of trying to take his own life has been referred to in the theory as '**acquired capability**', it is explained as the feeling of overcoming natural fear of death and this is 'acquired' because of the circumstances that the person has been through. So this initial fear of death does not exist anymore. This is quite vivid in Sohrab's case because of all the psychological struggle and trauma that he goes through.

When Sohrab is finally able to speak again the first words he utters are, "Tired... Tired of everything"(Hosseini 308) He further explains how he wants his old life back, with his parents and that he wished Amir had left him there in the bathroom to die. His mental state has worsened and Amir notices this when Sohrab flinches away from his touch and also "remembering ruefully" the trust he had gained before breaking his promise. To the kid that mere words held so much weight that he had felt like his whole world had fallen apart once again and the only option suitable was to die. This can also be because he must have felt like it was something he could decide

for himself. Later on Amir admits that Sohrab had not agreed to his offer of going to America but nor had he declined it because the boy realized that, "he was just another homeless Hazara orphan. What choice did he have? Where could he go?"(Hosseini310)

Sohrab's mind was trapped with the demons inside himself which happened to be his thoughts. He had sought to isolate himself once more and opted for quietude but it was not the sign of calmness or "tranquility" but rather someone who has taken refuge in a "dark place" and he was more so "occupying space" rather than "living" with Amir and his wife Soraya. His silence is described in detail, the way it felt as if moved in a way "not to stir the air around him."(Hosseini 315) However, in one of Joiner's interview he has said that it takes a long while, at times years for people to connect back to the venerable ones and making sure that they are provided with what they need and Amir has stated that, "almost a year would pass" for him to "hear Sohrab speak another word" (Hosseini 310) but they were patient with him and Soraya had opted to wait for a "green light from Sohrab. Waiting"(Hosseini 320) The waiting at the end had turned out to be fruitful. Flying kites were able to bring back hope and that blank, lost look in his eyes as Amir states was replaced, "his eyes suddenly alert. Awake. Alive" (Hosseini 322) Sohrab is able to smile again and Amir says that, "It was only a smile, nothing more" but that was more than enough and compared it with the arrival of spring which is the symbol of a new beginning, for them it came baring hope, "Because when spring comes, it melts the snow one flake at a time" (Hosseini 324).

4. Conclusion

To sum up everything that has been mentioned so far, this article has looked into the character of Sohrab and analyzed his psychological struggle that has led to suicidal tendency through the aforementioned theory of Thomas Joiner. It is obvious that the societal environment which comprised of the atrocities carried out by the Taliban; especially against the Hazara people had driven Sohrab into the abyss of psychological turmoil, even after his escape from that life. This show how serious and life threatening mental struggle can be, to stay afloat and not to drown in that dark times.

This article has explored the feeling of alienation and burdensomeness felt by Sohrab which had led him to have the capability of lethally harming himself. That feeling of loss was so heavy upon him that even though he survived his attempt at taking his life he felt like he should not have made it through. However, there is a way to get better and it took an immense amount of waiting and patience from both Amir and Soraya but it was worth it, Sohrab was able to smile again, the ray of hope was evident in his smile.

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