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# A Study of the Use of Fables and Written Works to How the Ability of Words to Harm and Heal as Depicted in the Kite Runner

Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* depicts the lives of two Afghan boys who grow up in the turmoil of invasion, heartbreak and war. Amir, the protagonist and narrator of the story, is Pashtun and Hassan, a Hazara boy, is Amir's servant with a cleft lip. Despite being separated by different ethnic and social backgrounds, the boys share a close friendship. However, the afternoon of a kite-fighting tournament in 1975, leads to circumstances that neither boy can foresee, an event that traumatises their lives. Afterwards, Amir struggles to find his place in the world, filled with guilt and regret. When the Russians invade Amir and his father, Baba, have to flee from Afghanistan to America. Amir eventually realises he must return to a war-torn Afghanistan in redemption of his sins. But Afghanistan has changed and will never be the same. From a foreign perspective, *The Kite Runner* positions the reader to gain insight of the history and injustices of Afghanistan, from the downfall of the monarchy and the oppression of the Hazaras, to the invasion of the Russians and the assumed control of the Taliban. Many symbolic elements of the story reflect the history of Afghanistan. In particular, the element of storytelling is used by Hosseini to symbolise the oppression of the Hazaras, who are illiterate. The bond between Amir and Hassan is strengthened by their love of stories and literature. Amir reads to Hassan and together they create stories, including one where they are 'Amir and Hassan: Sultans of Kabul.' The juxtaposition between Amir and Hassan as characters is a technique used by Hosseini to construct the image of injustice in Afghanistan, and how the power of stories can bring both harm and healing in times of turmoil. In *The Kite Runner*, the power of the written word is used with prejudice by Amir against Hassan, but he eventually begins to amend for this by rescuing Sohrab, Hassan's son, from the clutches of the Taliban. Powerful stories can position people to understand how injustice occurs, how it can be carried out, and how it may be eventually resolved.

Books and storytelling are integral aspects in the lives of Amir and Hassan; it serves as the bond between the two boys, but also affirms their differences. Amir, a Pashtun and son of Baba, a wealthy man with a renowned name, is literate; he can read, write and understand complex words. Hassan is a Hazara and son of Ali, both servants in Baba's household. Unlike Amir, Hassan is illiterate, unable to read and write, a fate decided by being born Hazara. "That Hassan would grow up illiterate like Ali and most Hazaras had been decided the minute he had

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been born, perhaps even the moment he had been conceived in Sanaubar's unwelcoming womb – after all, what use did a servant have for the written word?" (Hosseini 26) However, what Hassan lacks in literacy, he compensates for in natural intelligence, a gentle nature and courage, unlike Amir, who is not respectful in his position over Hassan and abuses his privileges as master. The crafting of stories between Amir and Hassan does not seem to be harmful – imagining themselves as 'Amir and Hassan: Sultans of Kabul', Amir's short story about tears turning into pearls, Hassan's dream about the monster in the lake, and Amir reading to Hassan from the *Shahnamah* – but Amir often used the power of the written word against Hassan, ridiculing him for not understanding certain words. It is the power that Amir holds over Hassan that brings harm to their relationship and ultimately leads to Amir's act of cowardice when he does not rescue Hassan from being sexually assaulted. "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 73) Amir's jealousy over the care his father gave Hassan was the catalyst of his betrayal, and Amir came to believe that Hassan was a worthy sacrifice to gain his father's love. Amir truly believed that Baba preferred Hassan to him as son. "Self-defence has nothing to do with meanness. You know what always happens when the neighbourhood boys tease him? Hassan steps in and fends them off. I've seen it with my own eyes. And when they come home, I say to him, 'How did Hassan get that scrape on his face?' And he says, 'He fell down.' I'm telling you, Rahim, there is something missing in that boy... 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." (Hosseini 21 – 22) Amir is considered weak in the eyes of Baba, unlike Hassan who is honest in everything he does. Hassan's integrity and courage are what Baba admires, and according to Amir, Baba does not love him because he is a coward.

The *Shahnamah*, described as a tenth-century epic of ancient Persian heroes, features the tale of 'Rostam and Sohrab'. It is Amir and Hassan's favourite story. It follows the tale of Rostam, a warrior, who mortally wounds his nemesis, Sohrab, in battle only to discover that Sohrab is his son. In *The Kite Runner*, the fates of Amir and Hassan symbolically reflect the tragedy of 'Rostam and Sohrab'. After not rescuing Hassan from his attackers in the alley, establishing him as a thief and then discovering that they were brothers, Amir believes that his cowardice and actions against Hassan were what led to his death, not being shot in the back of the head by the Taliban, "I follow the barrel on its upward arc. I see that face behind the plume of smoke swirling from the muzzle. I am the man in the herringbone vest." (Hosseini 221) An opportunity for redemption and healing presents itself to Amir though, rescuing Sohrab, Hassan's son, from the clutches of the Taliban. Sohrab, a symbol of all the terrible things that happened to the

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characters and Afghanistan, creates a picture of hope. Thus, the power of stories ultimately brings harm to Hassan; Amir abusing his literacy skills over Hassan's illiterate status and Amir's jealous nature over Hassan's sense of wisdom. Healing is brought to this injustice through Sohrab, whom Hassan named after the Persian tale of 'Rostam and Sohrab', when Amir rescues him to amend for his sins against Hassan.

The use of language is crucial in any story; it develops tone and style and decides the narrative point of view. In *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini uses a first person narrative in order to develop the personal story of Amir, his tone attributable to his personal characteristics. The combined use of the English and Farsi language allows the reader to connect on a more personal level with Amir, giving a sense of heritage to his character. "If the story had been about anyone else, it would have been dismissed as *laaf*, that Afghan tendency to exaggerate..." (Hosseini 12) As a child Amir's tone is lyrical, illustrating the naivety of youth, and develops a darker and morbid sense of self-evaluation as he becomes an adult, "sometimes my entire childhood seems like one long lazy summer day with Hassan, chasing each other between tangles of trees in my father's yard, playing hide-and-seek, cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians..." (Hosseini 24) The sense of freedom Amir felt as a child with Hassan conveys the notion of innocence that both held. However, after Hassan is attacked, their innocence and sense of naivety is stolen. The style of the text is structured by the genre of bildungsroman – the development from childhood to adulthood of a character whose personality is shaped by an experience. *The Kite Runner* is formed using a three-part structure, beginning with Amir's childhood, then his experience in America and his return to Afghanistan. As a narrator, Amir provides the reader with personal insight into different events and characters. However, he is limited in understanding and forms a biased perspective as a character, "and that's the thing about people who mean everything they say. They think everyone else does too." (Hosseini 51) In Amir's opinion, Hassan is honest, but believes he uses it in a selfish manner with expectations of others. As an adult narrator, Amir becomes more mature but remains cowardly in his actions towards Hassan. His change in tone, less portentous and more considerate, gives his character a sense of growth from the time he was a child. "We had both sinned and betrayed. But Baba had found a way to create good out of his remorse." (Hosseini 278) After rescuing Sohrab from the Taliban, Amir visualises more of his father in him than he did as a child, and discovers more about himself personally. Overall, Amir's use of language and role as narrator illustrates that harrowing issues such as war cannot be appreciated until it is made personal.

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History can be woven into stories, and history may also inevitably become its own story. When reading *The Kite Runner*, this notion is acknowledged by the mention of Amir and Hassan's mothers, who are respectively dead and estranged. Amir, who has a troubled relationship with Baba, has similar character traits to his mother who died in childbirth. He believes he killed his mother and that Baba blames him. Amir would often avoid his father by reading his mother's books. "That was how I escaped my father's aloofness, in my dead mother's books." (Hosseini 19) However, Amir's love of literature and becoming a writer is what brings healing to his and Baba's relationship, as Baba realises that writing stories helps Amir connect to people, particularly with Soraya whom he later marries, and he becomes proud. "'Liar.' I lifted Baba's blanket. 'What's this?' I said, though as soon as I picked up the leather-bound book, I knew... 'I can't believe you can write like this,' Soraya said. Baba dragged his head off the pillow. 'I put her up to it. I hope you don't mind.' I gave the notebook back to Soraya and left the room. Baba hated it when I cried." (Hosseini 159) When Amir discovers Baba has read one of his stories, he accepts that, despite his hardness in character, Baba finally appreciates and loves him for who he is. The mentions of Sanaubar, Hassan's mother, are portrayed like folk-lore or fairytales, as if she had existed and then did not after she was condemned with a dishonourable reputation. "While my mother haemorrhaged to death during childbirth, Hassan lost his less than a week after he was born. Lost her to a fate most Afghans considered far worse than death: She ran off with a clan of travelling singers and dancers." (Hosseini 6) The stories of Sanaubar create harm for Hassan, especially when he is bombarded by soldiers who have claimed to have "taken her". The misdeeds of Sanaubar are eventually exonerated by Hassan when she returns years later as an older woman seeking forgiveness and taking care of Sohrab.

In *The Kite Runner*, the role and integrity of women is portrayed through stories of the past, including Soraya, Amir's wife, who ran off with an Afghan man years before. Hosseini uses this as means to express the injustice of male dominance over women. Soraya expresses this injustice, "their sons go out to nightclubs looking for meat and get their girlfriends pregnant, they have kids out of wedlock and no one says a goddamn thing. Oh, they're just men having *nang* and *namoos* [pride and honour], and I have to have my face rubbed in it for the rest of my life". (Hosseini 164) Injustice for women in *The Kite Runner* is not completely resolved. Eventually, Soraya and Amir are married despite her past. Amir believes that he cannot judge her for her sins, "and in the end the question that always came back to me was this: How could I, of all people, chastise someone for their past?... I suspected there were many ways in which Soraya Taheri was a better person than me. Courage was just one of them." (Hosseini 151 – 152) Amir's past experiences in Afghanistan ultimately cause him to admire Soraya rather than despise her; her honesty and courage of her situation ironically reflecting his cowardice in his actions towards Hassan. A feminist perspective of Soraya's courage and honesty, over Amir's

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cowardice, could be perceived as a sense of power for Afghan women. Her genuine attitude regarding her past, and marrying Amir because of his admiration for this, is healing for her. When Baba and Amir flee to America, it changes their lives and leaves Baba yearning for what was – his status as a wealthy man and honourable reputation in Afghanistan. “I glance at him across the table... the smells of the gas station – dust, sweat and gasoline – on his clothes... He missed the sugarcane fields of Jalalabad and the gardens of Paghman. He missed people milling in and out of his house, missed walking down the bustling aisles of Shor Bazaar and greeting people who knew him and his father, knew his grandfather, people who shared ancestors with him, whose pasts intertwined with his.” (Hosseini 119 – 120) Baba continues to feel a strong sense of cultural heritage and connection to Afghanistan; America stripped this past from him. However, America offers hope for Amir and a new beginning. Thus, stories of the past can create justice for some, but injustice for many.

Even before the invasion of the Russians, Afghanistan was an oppressed country. The divide between the Pashtuns and Hazaras is evidenced in *The Kite Runner* by Amir and Hassan's friendship, the brotherhood between Baba and Ali, and the abuse both Ali and Hassan receive in public. Hazaras have characteristic Mongolian features, and both Ali and Hassan receive abuse for this, particularly Ali. “They chased him on the street, and mocked him when he hobbled by. Some had taken to calling him *Babalu*, or Boogeyman. ‘Hey, Babalu, who did you eat today... Who did you eat, you flat-nosed Babalu?’” (Hosseini 8) Ali had been a victim of polio at a young age, and walked with a stiff leg. People often create stories to provide answers to problems and ethical issues. In *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini addresses this issue through Amir's guilt over Hassan's fate, telling himself that Hassan was an appropriate sacrifice. When rescuing Sohrab from the Taliban, Amir is beaten up and ironically it is through this that he finds healing for what he did to Hassan. “Another rib snapped, this time lower. 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 the 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*.” (Hosseini 265)

In today's media, many stories and reports are addressed in response to the refugee crisis, wars and alienation. Hosseini constructs the character of Hassan to symbolise the injustices of Afghanistan; Hassan is raped by Assef, an older, wealthier boy and bully, and Afghanistan is ravaged by war, by both the Russians and the Taliban. Sohrab, Hassan's son, is a symbol to express the troubled nature of the country. From a reader's perspective, *The Kite Runner* is an

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allegory of the war in Afghanistan, a coming of age tale, with an ending filled with hope for a forgiving future. Within the novel there are several moments when Amir feels justified in his actions, but none as powerful as when he rescues Sohrab and senses that Hassan has forgiven him for his injustice. "I wondered if that was how forgiveness budded; not with a fanfare or epiphany, but with pain gathering its things, packing up, and slipping away unannounced in the middle of the night." (Hosseini 329) *The Kite Runner*, as a story of harming and healing, positions the reader from Amir's point of view to grow with him and experience the changes in his life. One element in the story, the cleft lip, comes full circle, with Hassan being born with the feature and Amir splitting his lip in the middle when he is beaten by Assef during his rescue of Sohrab. "*The impact had cut your upper lip in two, he had said, clean down the middle. Clean down the middle. Like a harelip.*" (Hosseini 273) This one element symbolises that Amir and Hassan's fates were inevitably bound and that Amir would find healing in their troubled friendship.

The power of stories and words can bring harm and healing in times of injustice. Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* expresses the injustices of war and how stories can create justice for some, but injustice for many. The friendship of Amir and Hassan suffers, jealousy and betrayal prevailing over their love for each other. The tragedy of their friendship, as symbolised by the tale of 'Rostam and Sohrab', reflects the tragedy of Afghanistan; their friendship was harmed by an act of impurity, and Afghanistan is ravaged by the act of war. Ultimately, Amir's rescue of Sohrab heals their relationship, symbolising the importance of doing what is right in the midst of conflict.

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