Running with Guilt: Amir's Atonement in *The Kite Runner*

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Atonement and assumption of responsibility pose important issues in society. Once they have committed a sin or perpetrated a misdeed, individuals tend to displace their guilt towards other parties, thereby neglecting their own roles in the affairs. They discard responsibility, hoping to cleanse themselves with cowardly means, most of which exacerbate feelings of guilt. In the end, the failure to confront guilt only intensifies their culpability. In Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner*, Amir begins as such a person instilled with nothing but cowardice. He displays mastery at displacing the blame and hiding from the ugly face of truth; however, by the resolution of the plot, Amir realizes the error of his thoughts regarding forgiveness. He matures physically and more importantly psychologically from a spineless boy to a strong-willed adult. Amir eventually comes to the epiphany that running from the guilt of the past is not an acceptable way to combat his guilt. Instead, he must fearlessly accost it. Only when he conquers guilt and faces the truth does Amir discover that he can begin to correct his mistakes and perform penance for his past actions.

Amir, the protagonist of the novel, lives in a war-torn Afghanistan in the house of his father, whom he calls Baba. He is not confrontational or violent in nature, and he prefers to spend his leisure by reading and writing. Amir lives relatively comfortably because the members of his family are wealthy Pashtuns, the dominant ethnicity in Afghanistan. On the contrary, Baba's servant Ali and Ali's son Hassan do not enjoy the same degree of freedom as they are Hazaras, followers of the Shi'a branch of Islam who are oppressed in their country. Hassan is illiterate, so he is not able to read and write with Amir. Although it seems that they are divided along all aspects of culture and class, Shafiq Shamel asserts that Amir and Hassan are connected by only one thing: the shared experience of reading the *Shahnamah*, an ancient text that Amir reads aloud to Hassan (Shamel 184). The use of language indeed plays an important role in the exposition of the novel because the literacy barrier further divides the two youths.

Amir and Hassan possess an intricate but strained relationship, evinced by Amir's description, "Hassan and I fed from the same breasts. We took our first steps on the lawn in the same yard. And under the same roof, we spoke our first words. Mine was *Baba*. His was *Amir*" (11). Amir foreshadows the people to whom he and Hassan will be loyal for the rest of their lives. Amir always tries to please Baba, but his efforts are largely in vain. He also struggles to conquer the guilt that pursues him after his betrayal of Hassan during the kite fighting tournament.

The novel commences with Amir looking back on his adventures, indicating that the quest for self-knowledge is actually a flashback of what has already happened. The utilization of a flashback contributes to the motif of the cyclical nature of time. Regarding this cycle, Amir states that it is "wrong what they say about the past, about how you can bury it. Because the past claws its way out" (1). Judi Hayes also supports the view that time is cyclical when she declares that people "go through cycles trying to figure out" their identities (Hayes, "Living"). Amir discovers on his journey that events recur as time progresses. He learns of the inevitable repetition of history and the uselessness of trying to hide his past sins.

The reader's first impressions of Amir actually come from the words of Baba, who tells Amir that "there is one sin, only one. And that is theft. Every other sin is a variation of theft" (17). Baba refers to the Ten Commandments and declares how only one is necessary. Behind Amir's back, he tells Rahim Khan, Amir's surrogate uncle, "a boy who won't stand up for

himself becomes a man who can't stand up for anything" (22). According to Baba, Amir's flaw is that he fails to defend himself at pivotal moments. The rift between father and son splits further when Baba states to Rahim Khan, "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" (23). In a way, Baba appears to be Amir's foil because the former is courageous, whereas the latter is cowardly. The former played aggressive soccer during his childhood, while the latter indulges in poetry. The former sees the world strictly "in black and white" (19), while the latter ponders over things. All of Baba's words, nonetheless, will soon prove prophetic as Amir will need to apply his knowledge and stand up for something dear to him.

Amir and Hassan, despite Hassan's servant status, have developed a close friendship through the years. Although both show compassion and affection toward each other, their relationship is incredibly fragile because of the discrepancy in social status. Hassan remains forever loyal to Amir. For instance, when Amir asks Hassan if Hassan would ever lie to him, Hassan replies, "I'd sooner eat dirt" (54), which is indicative of his faithfulness to Amir. Hassan wakes Amir every day to go to school; while Amir is driven to school in his father's Mustang, Hassan remains home to clean his room and prepare his meals. The motif of continued subservience heightens Amir's betrayal of Hassan during the kite running tournament and intensifies the contrast between the characters of Amir and Hassan.

Immediately prior to the kite tournament, Hassan tells Amir of a dream he had. In the dream, the family was at a lake, but no one dared to jump in the lake to swim because there was a monster "swimming at the bottom, waiting" (59). Amir, claiming that there was no monster, jumped in the lake and proved himself correct. Hassan's dream can signify many things, but it sets up the framework for Amir's future self-revelation. Dreams collectively serve as important symbols in the novel. At this point in Amir's figurative journey, he has not yet experienced guilt; therefore, he is ignorant of the monster at the bottom of the lake. As he solemnly acknowledges later, there truly is a monster.

The kite running tournament was intended to symbolize a moment of success for Amir and Hassan, but instead, it represents the perpetual destruction of the boys' relationship, and its outcome becomes the source for Amir's overwhelming guilt. The relationship between the two boys never lacked tension. As Edward Hower points out, the kites symbolize freedom but more importantly the "fragility of the relationship" between Amir and Hassan (Hower). The flimsiness of the string and the frailty of the fabric itself represent the strains in the friendship. Expectedly, Amir cuts down the last kite, leaving his kite as the winner. Hassan volunteers to run down the falling kite for Amir as proof of their victory. Once again, his servitude shows through when he states that he will run down the kite "a thousand times over" (67). This phrase is actually a motif in the novel, and in addition to emphasizing Hassan's devotion, it supports Hayes' assertion that time is cyclical. The significance of this phrase becomes even more evident by the end of the novel.

Hassan, being a master kite runner, finds the kite but is subsequently found by a gang of boys, the leader of whom is Assef, the neighborhood bully. Assef, like Amir, is a Pashtun, except he is exceptionally hubristic and ethnocentric. He mercilessly rapes Hassan while Amir watches furtively. As Amir watches the rape, he observes that Hassan's eyes held "the look of the lamb" (76). He goes on to explain that it is the "look of acceptance in the animal's eyes" just a second before it is slaughtered for sacrifice (76). The lamb is an archetypal symbol of innocence and purity; thus, the defiling of the lamb represents the corruption of innocence. Meanwhile, Hassan still holds the victorious kite, refusing to surrender it to Assef. He remains loyal to Amir in this

way. The character of Hassan shines most in this scene in respect to Amir's because ironically, Hassan's virtue peaks in this scene relative to Amir's cowardice. Hassan is most courageous here, while Amir is most timid here. The reader can certainly observe a contrast between Hassan's running *to* the kite and Amir's running *from* Hassan. Amir recalls, "I ran because I was a coward. I was afraid of Assef and what he would do to me… I actually *aspired* to cowardice" (77). This connects to the concept of Hassan's loyalty to Amir and Amir's loyalty to Baba. Hassan figuratively runs to Amir when he runs to the kite; Amir literally escapes from the scene and into Baba's arms. Amir hopes to win Baba's pride at any cost, even at the expense of Hassan. He cogitates, "Maybe Hassan was the price I had to pay, the lamb I had to slay, to win Baba" (77). Arley Loewen elaborates on the significance of this quotation when he writes, "Amir knows he is no champion. He is fully aware of his shameful betrayal, but he cannot confess it. He denies it" (Loewen). In a sense, Amir has performed a variation of theft: He forever steals Hassan's innocence and dignity.

Amir acknowledges the existence of his guilt, but he refuses to take responsibility for it. He ponders over Hassan's dream about the monster in the lake. He relates that he "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…I was the monster" (86). Rather than confronting the assumed guilt, though, Amir decides to run away from his sin. He runs to Baba's arms and cries, thinking, "In [Baba's] arms, I forgot what I'd done. And that was good" (79). To try and cleanse himself of the event, he asks Baba if he "ever thought about getting new servants" (89). When Baba adamantly refuses to even consider the possibility, Amir resorts to desperation. He finally tries to rid himself of Hassan and Ali by placing his own watch and some money under Hassan's mattress. Amir tells Baba "what [he] hoped would be the last in a long line of shameful lies" (104). He steals the truth from Hassan. Hassan unsurprisingly confesses to the thievery – he continues to be faithful to Amir – but Baba forgives him and Ali; however, Hassan and Ali decide to leave of their own accord. Judi Hayes writes that "although Baba quickly forgave Hassan of the wrong he took upon himself, even though he had done no wrong, Amir's action robbed the boys and men of the opportunity for their relationship to be restored" (Hayes, "In Search" 85). Indeed, this is the second variation of theft that Amir has committed.

To further hide from his sin, Amir runs away with Baba from Afghanistan to the United States. He attempts to escape the truth of the past by immigrating to another country. Amir thinks of the United States as "a river, roaring along, unmindful of the past. I could wade into this river, let my sins drown to the bottom, let the waters carry me someplace far. Someplace with no ghosts, no memories, and no sins" (136). This metaphor indicates that Amir is ashamed of the past; although he acknowledges the existence of his sin, he does not assume responsibility and displaces it. The "river" classically represents rebirth and maturity, hinting at the self-knowledge Amir will eventually acquire. Arley Loewen claims that "in America, Amir begins a new life in a place where he could bury his shameful memories" (Loewen). The United States, therefore, symbolizes a potential haven for Amir and Baba. Nevertheless, as Amir had stated before, the past will always claw its way out no matter where it is concealed. The attempt to bury the truth proves fruitless each time.

Amir's first experiences in the United States are largely unpleasant ones due to the remnants of his betrayal of Hassan. Evidence of the futility of Amir's plan to bury the past manifests itself in the form of changes in his mental stability. It appears especially in a dream, wherein Amir watches an execution. At the last second, the protagonist recognizes that he is watching himself execute Hassan. The author stresses the significance of dreams when he

includes this highly symbolic dream. Because Hassan *is* actually shot by the Taliban later in the novel, Amir starts to take the blame upon himself for what happens to his friend. This is Amir's first stage in accepting the guilt as his own. Then, when Baba mentions Hassan's name in their apartment in the U.S., "a pair of steel hands" close around Amir's windpipe "at the sound of Hassan's name" (134). Clearly, Amir is deeply troubled by the thought of Hassan, but he seems more ready to confront his guilt than he did at the beginning of the novel.

Many years later, when Amir starts to believe that he has been successful at concealing his guilt, Rahim Khan disrupts his fantasies by calling him and telling him that "there is a way to be good again" (192). That way is to rescue Sohrab, Hassan's son, from the hell of a warring Afghanistan. Amir realizes that he must return. He notes, "I was older now, but maybe not yet too old to start doing my own fighting" (227). This recalls Baba's prophetic words in the first chapter, when Baba, now dead, claimed that Amir won't stand up for anything. Amir is finally able to prove Baba wrong by doing his own fighting.

When he arrives at his house in Kabul, Amir feels ready to embrace his past sins. He sees that the house has crumbled since the Taliban arrived. He regards the place as one of "fallen splendor" (262). His former home is, of course, a symbol of the past; however, it is more importantly one of refuge and safety. The sight of the dilapidated home foreshadows the upcoming danger that Amir must face in order to atone for his sins. Still, Amir does not surrender his mission to rescue Sohrab. He remarks, "I don't want to forget anymore" (263), indicating that he is now willing to confront the pieces of the past that have haunted his conscience for so long. The concept of forgetting ties in to the cyclical nature of time, since Amir brings back the past by returning to Afghanistan.

Amir soon finds Sohrab in the hands of Assef, who now serves as a powerful Taliban official. The climactic showdown between Amir and Assef, during which the formal is critically beaten, represents Amir's redemptive process. As Amir is beaten by Assef, he recalls, "My body was broken – just how badly I wouldn't find out until later – but I felt *healed.* Healed at last" (289). Assef symbolizes the literal collective evils and sins of Amir's past, so having been thoroughly beaten, Amir is healed from the pain of the past. He does not fight back. Instead, he takes the beating as a means of forgiving himself and paying the punishment for his sins. As Loyal Miles believes, Amir can only atone for his sins when he is "completely surrounded and physically beaten by the literal ruins of his past" (Miles). Immediately after this, Amir wakes in a hospital, and a doctor enumerates his injuries. The doctor comments that "the worst laceration was on your upper lip" (297). Hassan was born with a similar type of scar on his lip. Figuratively, therefore, Amir has paid penance and has become Hassan, the pure, righteous individual. He forgives himself and is ready to apply his newfound knowledge.

After Amir atones for his sins and forgives himself, he executes the actions that Baba had thought he could not: He stands up for what is right. He wonders "if that was how forgiveness budded, not with the fanfare of epiphany, but with pain gathering its things, packing up, and slipping away unannounced in the middle of the night" (359). Once the pain of guilt is gone, forgiveness can be attained. The most striking example of Amir's application of knowledge is when, upon returning to the United States, Amir's father-in-law calls Sohrab a "Hazara boy." Amir immediately stands up to the man and declares assertively, "You will never again refer to him as 'Hazara boy' in my presence. He has a name and it's Sohrab" (361).

At the end of the novel, Amir and Sohrab participate in a kite running contest, during which Amir says to Sohrab, "For you, a thousand times over" (371). Contrary to the first contest, Amir is now the one running the kite for Sohrab; he has become virtuous like Hassan had been

all his life. The last line of the novel reads, “I ran” (371); however, this time, Amir runs *toward* the kite, not away from it, symbolizing his successful pursuit of redemption.

Overall, Khaled Hosseini’s novel *The Kite Runner* demonstrates how redemption can be achieved only when people summon the courage to confront their past sins. It takes a great deal of strength for Amir to forgive himself, but he finally does so after the beating by Assef, the paragon of his haunting past. In the end, despite the broken ribs and the punctured lung, the knowledge gained along the journey is “a thousand times over” more valuable than the beating was harmful.

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