

Deconstructing Father-Son Relationships in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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Abstract:

The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini is a riveting tale of loyalty, betrayal, courage, devotion, guilt and redemption. The novel follows the narration of the protagonist, Amir whose one decision dictates the rest of the course of his life and the novel. The novel for the most part deals with male characters and their relationships with each other. This paper aims to study, analyze and examine the different pairs of fathers and sons in *The Kite Runner* with the help of deconstruction. Deconstruction in simple terms can be understood as breaking something in smaller parts whereby in pursuit of finding the meaning of the text, the contradictions and internal oppositions are studied. The relationship between fathers and sons takes up an important place in the novel. Amir and Baba's father-son relationship serves as a foil to other fathers and sons. The complexity of relationships is depicted through Amir's insecurity regarding his relationship with his father and his desperate attempts to gain his love and affection. The relationship between Amir and Hassan and Ali suffers in Amir's quest to attain Baba's admiration.

Keyword: Father-son relationship, intricacy of relationship, empathy, love and affection.

Introduction

Amir states at the beginning of the novel, *The Kite Runner*, "I became what I am today at the age of twelve". This sets about the tone of the novel with readers anticipating the action in the plot. We are introduced to the main protagonist as well as the narrator of the novel Amir, who is shown to have a deep friendship with his Hazara servant, Hassan. Both the boys grew up together motherless with their fathers as their only family. The father-son relationship between Amir and Baba is not the same as the relationship between other pairs of fathers and sons in the novel. Aristotle, the great Greek philosopher said "Man is by nature a social animal". Man cannot live in isolation; he needs to have interactions with fellow beings for living a life. The bonds of interdependence cannot be broken by man. For psychological and social well-being, humans require the approval, support, and presence of their family and friends. Family dynamics and bonds are crucial in determining a person's well-being throughout his or her lifetime. The absence of a caring and compassionate family can lead a child astray and make him do inappropriate things in the name of attention-seeking behavior. Amir like every human being craves love and affection from his only family, his father. He has had no one to seek solace and comfort since his

childhood. He always looked up to Baba and wanted him to be more invested in his life. Baba was always busy with his business, hosting parties or in his study room sparing very little time for Amir.

The **central relationship in the novel of Baba and Amir** that intrigues the readers till the end is not the typical father-son relationship. From the beginning of the novel, we see Amir struggling to gain the love, affection and attention of his father. Amir always thought deep down that his father hated him because “he had killed his beloved wife”. He always felt envious when Baba spent his time with other people. For instance, when Baba was busy with the construction of the orphanage, Amir “hated all the kids he was building the orphanage for, sometimes I wished they’d all died along with their parents” (Hosseini 16). That is a very vile thought for a child who wishes doom on other children so that his father would only focus on him. This thought of Amir emphasizes the point that Baba was emotionally and sentimentally absent for his child, always busy with other things.

Baba did not approve of Amir’s behavior and hobbies and always felt disconnected from him. Amir was very different from Baba in terms of his personality, behavior and interests. He often berated himself for it and wondered “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”. (Hosseini 17). The saying “like father, like son” does not hold true for this father-son pair. Amir had no interest in playing soccer as Baba had. Instead, he

preferred being cooped up in his room reading. Amir let alone being a decent soccer player could not even be a passionate spectator of the game much to Baba’s dismay. Baba has been introduced as a “force of nature”, “a towering Pashtun specimen” with a booming personality that commanded attention when he walked into a room. Amir looked up to him, various people admired him for his philanthropy. He was a big-hearted benevolent man. In terms of Amir’s character and personality in Baba’s eyes, he was weak and cowardly, which is strengthened by Amir’s emotional outbursts at various events. For example, Buzkashi tournament where Amir saw the chapandaz tossed and hurled in the air lying motionless in the pool of his own blood, he began to cry and cried all the way to his home. Amir confides to the readers that he would “never forget Baba’s valiant efforts to conceal the disgusted look on his face as he drove in silence” (Hosseini 19). Another example is when Baba and Amir were fleeing Kabul, Amir felt car sick and by the look on Baba’s face, Amir knew “he saw my car-sickness as yet another of my array of weakness- I saw it on his embarrassed face” (Hosseini 96).

The German novelist Franz Kafka in “Letter to His Father” shares the same sentiments that Amir felt on being judged by Baba for his actions. Kafka wrote “What was always incomprehensible to me was your total lack of feeling for the suffering and shame you could inflict on me with your words and judgments”. Kafka and Amir both had fathers who wanted them to behave in a certain manner and anything

deviating from that brought out their judgment and contempt.

Baba had certain expectations from Amir and he expressed his desire for him to win the yearly Kite Flying Tournament in no clearer words “I think maybe you’ll win the tournament this year. What do you think?” (Hosseini 49). This little comment fueled Amir’s desire to win the tournament and show Baba once and for all that his son was worthy; “this was his chance to become someone who was looked at, not seen, listened to, not heard”. The anticipatory victory led Amir to believe that his days of living as a ghost would finally be over.

“I led myself dream: I imagined conversation and laughter over dinner instead of silence broken only by the clinking of the silverware and the occasional grunt. I envisioned us taking a Friday drive in Baba’s car to Paghman...We’d go to the zoo to see Marjan the lion, and maybe Baba wouldn’t yawn and steal looks at his wristwatch all the time. Maybe Baba would even read one of my stories. I’d write him a hundred if I thought he’d read one. Maybe he’d call me Amir *jan* like Rahim Khan did. (Hosseini 49).

The hope and desperation to gain his father’s love and praise, lets Amir forget the line between right and wrong and he lets Aseef assault Hassan. He could not bring himself to stop Aseef from raping Hassan because it could have costed him the blue kite which was a key to Baba’s love, affection and admiration. “Nothing was free in this world. Maybe Hassan was the price I

had to pay, the lamb I had to slay, to win Baba” (Hosseini 73). Being aware of the enormity of his actions, Amir lives in guilt almost all his life suffering from insomnia and nightmares. Amir snapping at Hassan and behaving aggressively with him result from his insecurity in being unable to get Baba’s affection. Amir wanted Baba all to himself and wished he had a scar similar to Hassan's so Baba would feel sympathy for him –“it wasn’t fair. Hassan hadn’t done anything to earn Baba’s affections; he’d just born with that stupid harelip” (Hosseini 40).

Rahim Khan, Baba’s friend and business partner was more like a father figure to Amir than Baba was. He would tell Amir stories from their childhood and Amir felt hurt because he was always learning things about Baba from other people. Rahim Khan understood Amir more than Baba did and showed him fatherly affection and attention. Rahim Khan would often address Amir as “Amir *jan*”, a term of endearment that Baba hardly ever used. Rahim Khan volunteered to read Amir’s story when Baba did not as much as feigned interest to read it. Rahim Khan gave positive feedback to Amir and appreciated his work. Being admired and appreciated for his writing Amir wished that Rahim Khan was his father. For Amir, Rahim Khan was like a fatherly figure, attentive and considerate of his interests and fulfilling the emotional void left by Baba.

What we see of Baba is through the confined lens of Amir’s understanding but taking the full picture into the view we see Baba was torn between two halves – Amir

and Hassan. Amir was the legitimate half who enjoyed the wealth and prosperity of his father, received education and was known as his father's son whereas Hassan the illegitimate son worked as a servant for his legitimate child was denied education and always had his future as a servant only. The divide between Amir and Hassan is evident in their place of dwelling. Amir lived in Baba's house who "had built the most beautiful house in the Wazir Akbar Khan district, a new and affluent neighborhood in the northern part of Kabul...A broad entryway flanked by rosebushes led to the sprawling house of marble floors and wide windows. Intricate mosaic tiles covered the floors of the four bathrooms. Gold- stitched tapestry lined the walls, a crystal chandelier hung from the vaulted ceiling" (Hosseini 4). In the same boundary stood Hassan's house: "the servant's home, a modest little mud hut where Hassan lived with his father" (Hosseini 5). There is an abyss between Amir and Hassan's life. Baba could not show his love and affection to Amir knowing he can't do the same for Hassan. That is why Baba comes across as emotionally distant and impatient with Amir. Baba provided all that money could buy to Amir but he could not give him the fatherly love which is priceless. Baba took efforts to involve Hassan when he planned outings with Amir and asked Hassan to go along with them, brought him kites same as Amir and got him birthday presents. In his little ways, Baba showed his care and consideration to Hassan. Living under the same roof it was excruciatingly painful for Baba to not be able to love his own child or

call him his own. Amir is unable to see the inner conflict of Baba since Baba's internal emotions were in contrast to his tough exterior. We see Baba being very furious when Amir suggested getting new servants. The mere thought of mentioning getting new servants by Amir makes Baba lash out at him and he warns him "I've never laid a hand on you, Amir, but you ever say that again..." (Hosseini 78). There is an underlying warning in these words of Baba. He got so furious that Amir could have such thoughts of getting rid of Ali and Hassan. Ali who has been Baba's friend, a brother to him for forty years and Hassan whom he fathered. Other than these, they were faithful and hardworking servants never slacking in their works. There was no reason to utter such words by Amir other than to get rid of Hassan who was a constant reminder of his betrayal and guilt. Amir thought getting Hassan to leave would lessen his guilt, like out of sight out of mind but we see Amir carrying that guilt, that nightmare even to America.

"Hassan is not going anywhere" is repeated twice by Baba to make his point clear to Amir and maybe to reassure himself. The least Baba could do was keep Ali and Hassan in his house so that he could at least have Hassan in front of his eyes. The only time we see Baba breaking down was when Ali and Hassan were leaving. Not when he was leaving all that he built back in Kabul or when he was diagnosed with cancer. The separation from his childhood friend of forty years and his illegitimate child brought Baba to tears and even pleading to stop them from leaving.

Baba's transition to a modest lifestyle in America, where he had to work a low-paying job at a gas station, was exceedingly challenging. Before, he had been wealthy, hosted parties every weekend, and was well respected. The change of place from Kabul to America brought on a change in Baba's behavior towards Amir as well. Baba felt guilty of his rich privileged life back in Kabul because Hassan could never be a part of it. When that wealth is no longer there his guilt diminishes. With Hassan in Afghanistan and thousands of miles separating them, Baba could freely show his love to Amir. In Baba's dying years, he is able to communicate with Amir more openly and express himself more freely. Even though he was forced to flee his country and live as a refugee in another, Baba passes away joyful and content, feeling proud of Amir and that he was able to develop a good relationship with at least one of his children.

Baba and Amir's relationship develops over time. It did not have a good start to it but gradually they grew closer. The relationship between a father and son is not linear, it changes as the time goes by. Dr. DC Williams in the essay "The life cycle of father-son relationships" (2010) claims that father-son relationship moves in stages. He used the acronym IDEAL for the evolving stages namely: Idolizing, Discord, Evolving, Accepting and Legacy. We see the relationship between Amir and Baba going through all these stages. Dr. Williams' hypothesis gives us the insight on how the relationship between Baba and

Amir evolves and shapes throughout the novel.

Baba and Hassan, the father-son, where the son was unaware of his real biological father all his life. Baba made it a point to provide to Hassan in his little ways without being too obvious about it. Baba hired the same nursing woman who had fed Amir for Hassan and reminded the two boys that "there was a brotherhood between people who fed from the same breast, a kinship that not even time could break" (Hosseini 10). These words hold a strong sense as Amir and Hassan were half-brothers, by uttering these words Baba wanted both his children to have a strong bond with each other just like how real brothers have. Baba never missed Hassan's birthday and always asked him what he wanted for his special day. Hassan being too modest would never express a wish and so Baba himself chose his gifts. One major gift that Baba gives Hassan is plastic surgery to correct his cleft lip. A gift that would last him forever. Baba would never discriminate between Amir and Hassan. He would buy Hassan identical kites as Amir. Amir while narrating the story confesses of being jealous over this. Baba always made it a point to ask Hassan to accompany them whenever he took Amir out for activities. And sometimes we see Amir making excuses so that Hassan would not join them and spoil his alone time with Baba. Hassan and Baba are similar in character compared to Amir and Baba. Both of them are brave and strong men who stand up for what they believe is right. Baba is ready to take the bullet to save a woman's honor and Hassan stands up against Assef and other boys who

tease Amir. Seeing Baba's affection and admiration for Hassan often led Amir to treat him badly by snapping at him or making fun of his ignorance. Baba is inconsolable when Ali and Hassan decide to leave for Hazarajat after Amir's watch is discovered in their cottage and Hassan accepts of stealing. Baba who time and again educated Amir about "theft being the unforgivable sin" forgives Hassan in a blink of an eye because his love for Hassan is more than his principles. He does not want him to leave his household. Baba could never out rightly show love and concern to Hassan but by his small acts, he made sure to bring happiness to Hassan. The thought of losing Hassan brought Baba to plead and cry for them not to leave. Their relationship and acquaintance ends the day Ali and Hassan leave Baba's house. Baba and Hassan never got a chance to establish a certain relationship other than that of master and servant.

Another pair of Father-son in the novel is **Ali and Hassan**. Ali was not the biological father to Hassan but both of them remain unaware of this truth their entire life. Ali was a caring and considerate father to Hassan unlike Baba, and Amir often times felt jealous over their bond. At the time when gunfire sounds were jolting the streets of Kabul, Hassan and Amir were too afraid of it. Ali tried to pacify the two boys. Amir noticed Hassan crying and how Ali pulled him close and clutched him with tenderness. Amir is later seen as denying being envious of Hassan at that point. Ali is a concerned and protective father, after Hassan's assault we see him doing his daily chores and then sleeping after doing all that

was necessary. This made Ali worried and suspicious if something happened with Hassan on the day of the Kite Flying Tournament and to quench his worry he asks Amir about the same. After the theft incident, Ali learns what happened to Hassan in the alley. This knowledge makes Ali take the tough decision of leaving their work at Baba's household. In this heartbreaking and sacrificing act to not reveal the betrayal of Amir, Ali decides to leave and protect his son from him. To protect and prevent Hassan from any further mishap, Ali decides to leave the place despite Baba's pleadings. Ali puts the well-being of Hassan over anything else protecting him from physical and emotional damage in the future. The relationship between the two is a true example of what father-son relationship should be like where a father is ready to do anything to protect his child.

Hassan and Sohrab another father-son pair - share a very natural and organic bond. Hassan is a devoted father who listens to his son, spends time with him, reads stories to him, and plays with him. Most importantly he "taught him to read and write so he does not grow up stupid like his father" (Hosseini 190). Hassan also taught Sohrab how to shoot with a slingshot just like he did. Hassan was an invested father in his son's life and a constant companion to him like he was to Amir. All those activities Hassan did with Amir, now he did those with Sohrab. Taking him to see the monkey at Sher-e-Nau, walking to the cemetery and sitting under the pomegranate tree and reading him Shahnamah just like Amir read to Hassan in

their childhood. They are the true models of what a loving father-son relationship should be in the novel. They get to spend little time with each other before Hassan and his wife are murdered leaving Sohrab as an orphan with an uncertain future. On being rescued after his attempt to end his life we see Sohrab as a dejected being who has lost all will to live, always silent, unresponsive and detached. All that he wants is to go back to his old happy life in Kabul with his father, mother, Rahim Khan and sasa.

Amir and Sohrab, though these two are not biologically related but they fulfill the role of father and son for each other. For Amir, Sohrab is the child he could not have and for Sohrab, Amir is the only family (his father's half-brother), a fatherly figure. Both of them fulfill the emotional absence in each-others life. Sohrab has lost his parents and was living in an orphanage before being taken by Aseef where he is abused. The future for Sohrab if he was left in the same circumstances was bleak and full of emotional and psychological trauma. Amir to repent for his past mistakes takes the plunge to rescue him and to redeem the sins that Baba and he had done. Both of them, Baba and Amir had betrayed the people who were most loyal to them. Amir confronts Aseef in a battle where the last man to exit the room wins, thanks to Sohrab's trustworthy slingshot Amir wins the ultimate showdown. Sohrab saved Amir from being severely injured or maybekilled by Aseef and Amir saved Sohrab from a degraded life as a slave to Aseef. Sohrab was in a way Amir's second chance to makeup for his betrayal of Hassan. His

chance to be good again. In the last chapter of the novel, we see a response from Sohrab, who otherwise remains blank and silent almost lifeless after his attempted suicide. This reaction is because of a kite which becomes a reason of bonding between Amir and Sohrab. Kite Flying is the symbol of connection between Sohrab and Amir as much as it was for Baba and Amir and Hassan and Amir. The three generations are connected with their love for Kite Flying. The novel ends with a positive note with the hope that Sohrab will be healed in the future. The relationship between Sohrab and Amir will be happy and positive in the time to come.

Khaled Hosseini uses the emotional and complex bond between fathers and sons to highlight the importance of an empathetic fatherly figure. Hosseini himself commented that he considers "*The Kite Runner* to be a father-son relationship story, emphasizing on the familial aspects of the narrative". This admission "lends importance to the theme of father-son relationship in the narrative, and it assumes added significance due to the fact that it has been narrated with migration as its background with displacement, uprootedness, alienation playing a crucial role in adding new perspective on father-son relationship" (Gupta 2). The relationship between Baba and Amir is different from all other fathers and sons because Baba was emotionally unavailable for Amir, they lacked in showing their sentiments to each other. Other pairs of fathers and sons act as a foil to them and give their readers the lesson on how a little love could bring out the good in a person.

The only way to nurture any relationship is with care, affection and love. We see these missing in the central relationship of Baba and Amir in the novel and present in all other pairs. The universal familial and emotional aspects of the story help it resonate with the people all around the world and contribute to the popularity of Hosseini's works.

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