

Heartstrings and Hardships: Relationships in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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Abstract

The Kite Runner was the first novel to be published in English by an Afghan American writer, Khaled Hosseini, in 2003. Alice Munro, a Canadian short story writer, inspired him. Hosseini penned this novel after seeing a news headline about the Taliban banning kite flying. The novel won the South African Booker Prize in 2004. Hosseini continued to captivate audiences with his subsequent novels, including *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Mountains Echoed*. This paper explores the complex interplay of relationships in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, focusing on how love, loyalty, betrayal, and redemption shape the characters' lives and highlight broader socio-political themes. By analysing these relationships, the study sheds light on Hosseini's commentary on the resilience of the human spirit amidst adversity, providing insight into the emotional and moral landscapes that define *The Kite Runner's* narrative.

Keywords: Betrayal, Father-Son Dynamics, Friendship, Guilt, Redemption, Relationships.

Relationships are the intricate threads that weave the fabric of our lives, forming the foundation of our experiences and interactions with others. A relationship is a dynamic interplay of emotions, thoughts, and actions shared between individuals. Trust, communication, and mutual respect are the cornerstone of healthy relationships. Through moments of joy and sorrow, triumphs and challenges, relationships offer a sanctuary where we find solace, support, and understanding. They provide us with a

mirror through which we can see ourselves reflected and a lens through which we can view the world. Whether with family, friends, romantic partners, or colleagues, relationships shape our identities, influence our perspectives, and enrich our lives profoundly. As we navigate the complexities of human connection, we discover that the true essence of a relationship lies not only in what we give or receive but in the depth of connection, empathy, and love that we share with others.

There are many ways to describe this novel, but Hosseini calls it a love story. It is not a conventional love story, however. "It is the story of love between two friends who are also servant and master; the sins of commission and omission that tear the friendship apart; and the loyalty and altruistic love that survives despite everything. It is also the story of the love between father and son, husband and wife, and parent and child. The novel takes place across generations and continents, offers adventure, and provides a fresh look at the country and Culture of Afghanistan" (Rebecca Stuhr 25).

In Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner*, family relationships are central in shaping the characters' identities, choices, and destinies. Set in Afghanistan against a backdrop of political turmoil, the story follows Amir, the privileged son of a wealthy businessman, and his complex relationships with his father, Baba, his best friend, Hassan, and Hassan's father, Ali. Through these relationships, Hosseini explores themes of loyalty, betrayal, redemption, and the enduring bonds of family.

At the heart of the novel is the relationship between Amir and Baba. Despite their biological connection, their bond is strained by Amir's desire for Baba's approval and his feelings of inadequacy. Baba, a strong and morally upright figure, struggles to understand his son's sensitive nature and artistic inclinations, which clash with his values of bravery and strength. This disconnect drives much of their tension as Amir grapples with resentment and Baba with a sense of disappointment.

The father-son relationship is a central theme in *The Kite Runner*, shaping the characters' lives and driving much of the narrative. At its core, the relationship between Amir and Baba is the focal point, depicting both the complexities and dynamics of paternal love, expectations, and redemption. Amir, the protagonist, grapples with the weight of his father's expectations throughout the novel. Baba, a wealthy and respected businessman in Kabul, embodies the traditional Afghan values of strength, honour, and

bravery. He expects his son to exhibit similar qualities, often expressing disappointment in Amir's perceived weaknesses. This pressure to live up to Baba's standards leaves Amir feeling inadequate and fuels his desire for validation and acceptance.

A gripping and emotional story of betrayal and redemption, *The Kite Runner* had me simultaneously thrilled and moved. It tells the story of Amir and Hassan, the closest friends, as good as brothers, and also experts in kite flying. The two young boys live in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, and this year, they will try harder than ever to win the local kite-fighting tournament—a popular Afghan pastime and this is Amir's one hope of winning his father's love. However, just like the kites battling in the sky, war comes to Afghanistan, and the country becomes a perilous place. (Charlie, B)

Conversely, Baba's affection for Amir is evident despite his shortcomings. He provides for his son materially and tries to instil moral values in him, albeit through tough love. Baba's sacrifice for Amir's future, such as fleeing Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion, demonstrates his deep-rooted love and desire for Amir's well-being. "Money; Baba would have never thrown me a party like that if I had not won the tournament" (101).

However, Baba's favouritism toward Hassan, Amir's childhood friend and servant, exacerbates Amir's feelings of inadequacy. Baba's admiration for Hassan's loyalty and bravery intensifies Amir's jealousy, leading to betrayal and the eventual fracture of their relationship. The absence of a maternal figure further complicates the father-son dynamic in the novel. With Amir's mother deceased, Baba plays a dual role as both provider and nurturer, yet his emotional detachment leaves a void in their relationship. This absence of emotional intimacy fosters a sense of longing and estrangement in Amir, who seeks validation through his achievements and ultimately yearns for his father's approval: "I was not like that." Baba sounded frustrated, almost angry" (28).

As the narrative unfolds, the strained relationship between father and son reaches a critical juncture when Amir witnesses Hassan's brutal assault and fails to intervene. His guilt and shame further distance him from Baba as he struggles to reconcile his actions with his father's moral code. The theme of redemption emerges as a driving force in the latter part of the novel, as Amir embarks on a journey to atone for his past

transgressions and seek Baba's forgiveness. Following Baba's death and their exile to America, Amir finds solace and redemption in the opportunity to rescue Hassan's son, Sohrab, from a life of hardship and abuse in Afghanistan.

Through this act of selflessness and sacrifice, Amir not only honours Hassan's memory but also confronts his demons and earns Baba's posthumous approval. The novel's closing scenes, with Amir flying a kite with Sohrab, symbolise the restoration of their father-son bond and the fulfilment of Amir's quest for redemption.

The portrayal of male friendship is central to the narrative, showcasing its complexities and enduring bonds. The relationship between Amir and Hassan is a poignant example of friendship tested by societal divisions, personal betrayals, and redemption. The story's heart is the friendship between Amir, a privileged Pashtun boy, and Hassan, his loyal Hazara servant and best friend. Despite their social status and ethnicity differences, the two boys share a deep bond forged through shared experiences, kite flying, and storytelling. Their friendship offers a glimpse into a more innocent time in Kabul, where class distinctions and ethnic tensions have yet to divide them fully. "Hassan and I fed from the same breasts. We took our first steps on the Same lawn in the same yard. And, under the same roof, we spoke our first words" (19).

However, the purity of their friendship is marred by Amir's cowardice and betrayal. When Assef, a neighbourhood bully, brutally assaults Hassan, Amir witnesses the incident but chooses to prioritise his safety over intervening to help Hassan. This moment of betrayal haunts Amir, causing a rift in their friendship and leading to feelings of guilt and shame. Parallel to Amir and Baba's relationship is the bond between Amir and Hassan, the son of Baba's loyal servant, Ali. Although not related by blood, Amir and Hassan grow up as inseparable friends. However, their friendship is marred by societal and class divisions, with Hassan occupying a subordinate role as both a servant and Hazara, an ethnic minority. Despite their differences, Hassan's unwavering loyalty and selflessness towards Amir starkly contrast Amir's actions, highlighting the complexities of friendship and betrayal.

As the story unfolds, the friendship between Amir and Hassan undergoes further strain as secrets and lies come to light. Amir discovers that Hassan is not only his friend but also his half-brother, resulting from an illicit affair between Hassan's father, Ali, and

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Amir's father, Baba. This revelation adds another complexity to their relationship as Amir grapples with his sense of identity and familial loyalty. Despite their challenges, the bond between Amir and Hassan endures, albeit in a fractured state. Hassan remains fiercely loyal to Amir after enduring years of hardship and injustice. His unwavering devotion serves as a reminder of the enduring power of friendship, even in the face of betrayal and adversity. "Think of something good," Baba said in my ear. "Something happy. Something good. Something happy. I let my mind wander." (120)

Ultimately, the true strength of their friendship is revealed through acts of redemption. After years of self-imposed exile in America, Amir returns to war-torn Afghanistan to rescue Hassan's son, Sohrab, from the clutches of the Taliban. In doing so, Amir risks his life to atone for his past mistakes and honour his beloved friend's memory.

However, we were kids who had learned to crawl together and had no history.

Ethnicity, society, or religion was going to change that either.

I spent most of

The first twelve years of my life playing with Hassan. (32)

Through Amir and Hassan's journey, Hosseini explores the complexities of loyalty, betrayal, and the bonds that bind us. Despite their hardships, their friendship is a beacon of hope amidst the darkness of Afghanistan's turbulent history.

Dream that someday you will return to

Kabul to revisit the land of our childhood. If you do, you will find

An old faithful friend waiting for you.

May Allah be with you always. Hassan. (207)

The relationship between Baba and Hassan is complex and multifaceted, shaped by societal expectations, familial dynamics, and individual personalities. Paraphrasing their relationship involves delving into the intricacies of their interactions, emotions, and their impact on each other throughout the novel.

Baba, a wealthy and influential Pashtun, is a father figure and employer to Hassan, a Hazara servant boy who is also his biological son. Despite being half-brothers,

their relationship is characterised by stark differences in social status, privilege, and power dynamics. Baba, driven by traditional notions of masculinity and honour, struggles to openly acknowledge his paternal connection to Hassan, fearing the judgment of society and the tarnishing of his reputation. However, beneath the veneer of indifference lies deep-seated guilt and a genuine affection for Hassan, evident in moments of vulnerability and tenderness.

Hassan, on the other hand, idolises Baba and remains fiercely loyal to him despite enduring discrimination and mistreatment as a Hazara. His unwavering devotion and selflessness exemplify his willingness to sacrifice for Baba's honour, as demonstrated during the fateful kite-flying tournament. Despite facing betrayal and abandonment, Hassan continues to embody integrity and compassion, serving as a moral compass for Baba and the narrative at large. Their relationship is further complicated by the presence of Amir, Baba's biological son and Hassan's childhood friend. Amir's jealousy and insecurity create rifts within the familial dynamic, leading to acts of betrayal and resentment that reverberate throughout the narrative. Baba's favouritism towards Amir exacerbates the tension between the two brothers, fostering feelings of inadequacy and estrangement in Hassan.

Baba and Hassan's relationship undergoes significant evolution and revelation as the story unfolds against political turmoil and personal redemption. Baba's eventual acknowledgement of Hassan as his son, albeit privately, signifies a belated recognition of paternal responsibility and emotional connection. Conversely, Hassan's tragic fate catalyses self-reflection and redemption for Baba and Amir, prompting them to confront their past mistakes and seek forgiveness. "I remember he said to me, 'Rahim, a boy who will not stand up for himself becomes a man who cannot stand up to anything. I wonder, is that what you have become?'" (210).

Ultimately, Baba and Hassan's relationship epitomises the complexities of love, loyalty, and sacrifice in the face of societal expectations and personal flaws. Through moments of heartache and reconciliation, they navigate the tumultuous landscape of family, identity, and redemption, leaving an indelible mark on each other's lives and the narrative tapestry of *The Kite Runner*. "Good," Baba said, but his eyes wondered. "Now,

no matter what the Mullah teaches, there is only one sin, only one. And that is theft. Every other sin is a variation of theft. Do you understand that?" (25).

The relationship between Amir and Soraya is a central theme that evolves throughout the novel, portraying the complexities of love, redemption, and cultural expectations in Afghan society. The family theme extends beyond blood ties to include the relationship between Amir and Soraya, whom he marries later in the story. Soraya becomes Amir's source of love and support, offering him a chance at redemption and forgiveness for his past mistakes. Through marriage, Amir learns the importance of honesty, forgiveness, and acceptance in building a strong familial bond.

Amir is drawn to her beauty and grace when he first meets Soraya at a flea market in Fremont, California. He is captivated by her presence and finds himself irresistibly attracted to her. Their initial interactions are shy and tentative, reflecting the cultural norms and expectations that shape their behaviour. Despite these barriers, their connection deepens as they discover shared experiences and a mutual understanding of the burdens of guilt and redemption.

Amir and Soraya's bond becomes more vigorous as their relationship progresses, transcending physical attraction to encompass emotional intimacy and support. Soraya becomes Amir's confidante, providing him with a safe space to confront his past and face his mistakes. In turn, Amir offers Soraya companionship and unwavering support as she navigates her struggles and aspirations.

One of the defining moments in their relationship occurs when Soraya reveals her past to Amir, confessing her youthful indiscretions and the shame it brought upon her family. Despite the cultural stigma attached to her actions, Amir accepts Soraya without judgment, recognising her strength and resilience in overcoming adversity. This moment of vulnerability strengthens their bond and solidifies their commitment to each other. Throughout the novel, Soraya is a source of inspiration and guidance for Amir as he embarks on a journey of redemption and self-discovery. Her unwavering faith in him empowers Amir to confront his past and seek forgiveness for his sins. In return, Amir becomes Soraya's rock, offering her unconditional love and support as she confronts the challenges of living in a foreign land and reconciling with her past.

Their relationship is also shaped by the cultural expectations and traditions that govern Afghan society. As a woman, Soraya is expected to conform to traditional gender roles and uphold her family's honour. Despite these constraints, Soraya defies societal expectations by pursuing her passion for teaching and advocating for women's rights. Amir, too, grapples with the cultural expectations placed upon him as a man, struggling to reconcile his desires with the demands of family and tradition. "Sit across from Soraya at the dinner table. Imagine what it would be like to feel her head on my chest, smell her hair. Kiss her. Make love to her." (164)

Amir and Soraya's relationship is a testament to the transformative power of love and forgiveness. They find redemption and healing through mutual support and understanding, transcending the barriers of culture, guilt, and shame. Theirs is a love that endures despite the trials and tribulations they face, offering hope and redemption in a world fraught with pain and suffering. "Soraya fell asleep with her head on my chest. In the darkness of our room, I lay awake, an insomniac once more. Awake. And alone with demons of my own" (340).

The relationship between Soraya Taheri and her father, General Taheri, is a significant subplot that sheds light on themes of tradition, gender roles, and the impact of past decisions on present relationships. Throughout the novel, their dynamic evolves, revealing layers of tension, affection, and mutual dependence. Soraya Taheri is introduced as a young woman with a tarnished reputation due to a previous relationship, while General Taheri is portrayed as a proud and traditional Afghan patriarch. Their relationship is initially depicted as mutual respect and obedience, with Soraya adhering to her father's expectations despite her desire for independence. General Taheri, in turn, is protective of his daughter and holds her to high standards dictated by societal norms. "My daughter, Soraya Jan," General Taheri said". (136)

The tension within their relationship becomes apparent when Soraya's past indiscretion is revealed. Despite General Taheri's disappointment and concern for their family's reputation, he ultimately stands by his daughter, showcasing a deep sense of familial loyalty and unconditional love. However, this revelation strains their relationship, leading to distance and discomfort. Throughout the novel, General Taheri's traditional values and patriarchal mindset shape his interactions with Soraya, often

limiting her autonomy and agency. Despite his love for his daughter, he struggles to reconcile his expectations with her desires for independence and self-expression. This conflict is emblematic of more considerable societal tensions within Afghan culture, where traditional gender roles and societal norms often clash with individual aspirations and desires.

Despite these challenges, Soraya and General Taheri's relationship reflects moments of warmth, affection, and understanding. Despite their differences, there are instances where they find common ground and support each other through difficult times. Their bond is further strengthened by their shared experiences as immigrants navigating a new culture and rebuilding their lives in America. Soraya's relationship with Amir, the protagonist, becomes a focal point as the novel progresses, further complicating her dynamic with her father. General Taheri's initial reluctance to accept Amir as a suitable match for his daughter reflects his adherence to traditional values and desire to protect Soraya from further scrutiny and judgment.

However, as their relationship deepens and Amir proves himself worthy of Soraya's love, General Taheri gradually accepts him as part of their family, showcasing his capacity for growth and adaptation. Soraya and General Taheri's relationship is a nuanced portrayal of familial love, tradition, and cultural expectations. While their bond is characterised by tension and conflict, it is ultimately defined by mutual respect, loyalty, and a shared commitment to family. Through their journey, Hosseini explores the complexities of Afghan society and the enduring bonds that unite individuals in the face of adversity.

"I hear she is a decent girl, hardworking and kind. But no khastegars, No suitors have knocked on the general's door since." Baba sighed. "It may Be unfair, but what happens in a few days, sometimes even a single day, can change the course of a whole lifetime, Amir," he said. (137)

Amir speaks these words to Sohrab at the novel's end while they are flying kites. Amir shows Sohrab some tricks his father Hassan used, and they sever a kite loose. Amir asks Sohrab if he would like him to run the kite for him. Sohrab nods yes. Amir replies, "For you, a thousand times over. I heard myself say" (351).

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The novel explores the impact of secrets and hidden truths on family dynamics. The revelation of Baba's secret past, his relationship with Hassan's mother, and the truth about Hassan's parentage fundamentally alter the character's understanding of themselves and each other. These revelations force them to confront the consequences of their actions and the legacy of their family's history, ultimately leading to moments of reconciliation and healing.

There are many ways to describe this novel, but Hosseini calls it a love story. It is not a conventional love story, however. It is the story of love between two friends who are also servant and master, the sins of commission and omission that tear the friendship apart, and the loyalty and altruistic love that survives despite everything. It is also the story of the love between father and son, husband and wife, and parent and child. The novel takes place across generations and continents, offers adventure, and provides a fresh look at the country and culture of Afghanistan. (Rebecca Stuhr 25)

The Kite Runner portrays family relationships as a source of strength and conflict, shaping the characters' identities and driving the narrative forward. Through the intricate interplay of familial bonds, loyalty, and betrayal, Khaled Hosseini crafts a powerful exploration of the complexities of love, forgiveness, and redemption in the face of adversity.

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