

Use of Symbolism in Khalid Hosseini's novel The Kite Runner

Mona Batra

Asst. Professor of English, Pt C.L.S Government P. G. College, Karnal (India)

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ABSTRACT

Symbols and metaphors play an important role in Khalid Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner*. They are used as visual representation to reinforce and put emphasis on important stages and development of the book. As we readers witness major events of Afghan history and socio-political events such as the fall of the glorious days of Afghan monarchy, Soviet invasion and rise of Taliban, through the eyes of two Afghan boys Amir and Hassan, we notice that symbolism becomes a distinctive feature. The pomegranate tree, the slingshot, the bear, the cleft lip--- highlight particular key moments in the story. Gradually as the lives of these two boys begin to fall apart, partially because of the political upheavals in Afghanistan and partially because of their own choices, symbolism becomes a powerful tool in the hands of Hosseini who uses it to the fullest to reveal moral weaknesses and working of human psyche.

1. The Pomegranate Tree

The tree symbolises Amir and Hassan's friendship as well as their brotherhood. The red colour of the fruit signifies blood relation between the two boys. The tree stands in an abandoned cemetery on a hill near baba's house. Under the tree, the boys have spent many of their summer days together. Often they would climb up the tree and eat the fruit. Also, Amir would read stories to Hassan under the tree. The two had also permanently inscribed their names on the tree "Amir and Hassan, Sultans of Kabul". The tree was like their happy spot, their safe place, and a place of comfort for the motherless boys. The tree is also the place where Amir had ended his friendship with Hassan. After the bitter incident with Aseef when Amir visits the tree, he sees Hassan reading a book under the tree. Burning with anger, frustration and guilt, Amir throws some rotten pomegranate at Hassan's chest, hoping that he would react and hit him back, relieving him of his guilt. Deep in his heart Amir knew that Hassan had seen him hiding in the alley when Assef was raping him. But as usual, Hassan remains silent. He in fact smashes the fruit over his own forehead to prove his loyalty towards Amir, making him feel terrible again. When Amir goes back to Afghanistan, Raheem Khan gives him the letter which Hassan had written for him. It said, "The tree has not borne fruit in years."

2. Kites

Kites are undoubtedly an important image in *The Kite Runner*, and for Amir they act both as a symbol of his childhood happiness and his betrayal of Hassan. Whenever Amir tries to remember something happy from his childhood, he immediately thinks of his carefree days when he would fly kites with Hassan in Afghanistan.

Flying kites is what Amir enjoyed most as a child. It was the only way that connected him fully with Baba. Baba himself was once a champion kite fighter. On one occasion boys from from the neighbourhood had gathered for a kite flying tournament. Baba and Raheem Khan sat on the roof to watch the game. Amir was so nervous that he almost wanted to quit the tournament because of the terrible dream he had the night

before about a monster in the lake but Hassan did not let him do it. He tells him "there's no monster" which made Amir feel a little better. Finally he won the tournament. He saw baba yelling and clapping on the roof.

Amir was so happy at that he felt he had finally won Baba's love and his approval for which he had waited so long. In his quest to redeem himself in Baba's eyes and his desire to win Baba's affection he became totally blind to Hassan's rape. He watches from around the corner and doesn't interrupt. This is the most dramatic scene in the novel and also sets the story in action. Amir's decision moulds rest of his life. Whereas on one hand, Kites represent end childhood innocence as Hassan bleeds like the sacrificial lamb. On the other hand, kite fighting tournament brings out the aggression of human nature. The violence involved in kite fighting corresponds to Hassan's rape and end of his friendship with Amir. The Kite also become a symbol of guilt and betrayal when Amir allows Hassan to be raped in front of his eyes. After this incident, Amir does not fly kite until the end when he is with Sohrab, Hassan's son.

At another level kites are also symbol of political freedom of Afghani people. Kite flying was a much popular activity in Afghanistan during the 70's but it was banned later by Taliban in 1996.

3. The Bear

According to local legend, Baba apparently wrestled a black bear and has scars on his body to prove it. Amir imagines this incident "countless times". It tells us how towering a figure baba is to Amir that he could not separate baba from the bear all his life. Later in the novel when Amir is in the hospital in Pakistan, he has a hallucination in which he sees a man whom he assumes to be Baba, fighting a bear. But when the dust settles, and he takes a good look at the person fighting the bear, it turns out that he is not baba but Amir himself. This indicates that Amir had now attained the same strength and courage of his father. Like his father and Hassan, he had learnt to stand up for those he cared about.

4. The cleft Lip

Hassan's cleft lip is the most prominent feature on his face. His cleft lip stands for his inferior status in the society just like any other Hazara. It also shows his poverty which separates him from Amir and rest of the boys. His family does not have enough money to fix this deformity. Baba who is Hassan's biological father often insists on paying for his surgery. Later Assef splits Amir's lip when he beats him, a permanent scar much like Hassan, his half brother, for the betrayal and the wrong he had done to him.

5. The Lamb

Both in Christianity and Islam, the Lamb signifies the sacrifice of the innocent. Amir describes both Hassan and Sohrab as innocent lambs waiting for their turn to be slaughtered. When Hassan is raped by Assef, he resembled the innocent lamb which they kill during the Muslim celebration of Eid-UI-Adha which honours Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac to God. Hassan seems resigned to his fate like the sacrificial lamb showing acceptance and understanding in the wet eyes

Sohrab too looks like a lamb standing next to a Aseef. Assef and his goons had applied mascara on so just as it is applied on the lamb before slitting its throat. Both Hassan and Sohrab are innocent victims figuratively sacrificed by being raped. But their sacrifices have very different meaning--- In Hassan's case, Amir sacrifices him for the kite. But in Sohrab's case he comes forward for his rescue from sexual abuse.

6. Slingshot

In the novel, the slingshot is not just a toy in the hands of a young boy Hassan but also a weapon that symbolises war against injustice, exploitation, inequality and oppression in the society. In their childhood, Amir and Hassan were often harassed by a neighbourhood bully, Assef. In one particular incident, Amir is cornered by Assef and his gang who attempt to beat him for taking a Hazara as a friend. At this point, Hassan comes for Amir's rescue and threatens Assef with his

slingshot, saving him from the trouble for the time being. Later Sohrab also attacks Aseef with a slingshot to protect Amir. The slingshot in the hands of two generations, Hassan and Sohrab, to attack the common enemy, Assef and protect the same person, Amir is a quite significant and important symbol in the novel.

7. America

Chapter 11 of *The Kite Runner* begins with "Baba loved the idea of America" (Hosseini, 2004; 125). On one occasion Baba had told Amir that there were "only three real men in the world". He'd count them off on his fingers—America, Britain and Israel. The rest of them—they are like "gossiping old woman." (Hosseini, 2004; 125). America is a powerful symbol in the novel which stands for freedom and self discovery. For Amir, America meant being free from guilt ridden past that had plagued him after traumatic incident back in Afghanistan. America was 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 somewhere far." (Hosseini, 2004; 136). In America, Baba was also able to escape his own sins of confronting his own guilt of Hassan being his illegitimate son. Amir says, "For me, America was a place to bury my memories. For Baba, a place to mourn his" (Hosseini, 2004; 129).

8. Conclusion

The novel's complex plot evokes our sympathy for its characters who are victims of fate and circumstances. Unique to Hosseini is his artistic craftsmanship to blend images and symbols with the story while maintaining the right balance between emotional sadness and optimism. Sohrab hitting Assef with the slingshot is symbolic of triumph of weak and exploited over high and mighty, very much similar like David and Goliath Biblical story. A great deal of charm of the novel lies in Hosseini's ability to draw parallelism between the symbols and scenes. He carefully intertwines within the text objects, speeches and even dreams to convey a moral message and deepen his characters.

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