

## Sin, Guilt and Redemption: A Study of K. Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

Syed Jashim Uddin\*

### Abstract

*Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner can be evaluated in the light of theological ideas of sin, guilt and redemption. In the novel, the protagonist commits sin by undertaking activities contrary to the morally sanctioned principles which eventually give birth to a sense of guilt in him for which later, he seeks redemption. Amir, the protagonist, can be taken as a sinner considering his unfair and unjust treatment to his boyhood friend Hassan. He violates the parameters of reciprocal relationship between friends when he overlooks rape of Hassan by the gang and brings theft-allegation against him. After coming back to Pakistan to visit his father's friend Rahim Khan, he discovers that Hassan is his half-brother. He also comes to know about Hassan's son, Sohrab, who is held as a captive by the Talibans in Afghanistan. As a way of compensating the maltreatment he does to Hassan, Amir decides to go back to Afghanistan with a view to rescuing Sohrab from the Taliban's captivity. This article examines how Amir commits sin and how he gets his redemption.*

**Keywords:** Sin, Guilt, Redemption, Confession, God and Sacrifice.

### 1. Introduction

Though penned by a non-Christian, against the backdrop of predominantly Moslem Afghanistan, *The Kite Runner* is a novel which can be analyzed from the universal sin, guilt and redemption perspective. In the novel, *The Kite Runner*, Amir's sin and guilt can be seen as the embodiment of his socially and culturally bounded psychology. The protagonist of the novel, Amir, has committed a sin in the novel and the way he makes efforts to compensate for his sin by risking his own life paves the way of his redemption. This act of self-sacrifice is in clear compliance with the notion of redemption put forward by all major religions; namely Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism. In this

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\*Assistant Professor

Department of English Language and Literature (DELL), Premier University  
Email: sjuddin2002@yahoo.com

article, therefore, I will define the terms such as sin, guilt and redemption from a religious perspective and show how Amir commits sin in the novel and is redeemed. For Amir, Hassan is the cause of his guilt and his son Sohrab plays the role of the catalyst for his redemption.

For the relevance of my argument, an outline of the plot *The Kite Runner* is given. The novel is narrated in the first person. In a flashback, Amir recollects an event that happened twenty-six years ago, when he was still a child in Afghanistan. One day, Amir and Hassan, while playing, ran into three boys named Assef, Wali, and Kamal. Assef terrorized Amir for hanging around with a Hazara, but Hassan used his slingshot to stop Assef. The story skips to winter, when the kite-flying tournament occurred. Boys battled to see who could cut the string of the opposing kite in this event. When a kite's string got cut, players chased and reclaimed it. When Amir won the tournament, Hassan started running for the lost kite. Amir searched out Hassan and discovered him being trapped by the gang. While Wali and Kamal detained him, Assef raped him. Amir ran away and pretended he didn't know what happened. His attachment with Hassan tarnished. Amir was too mortified to face Hassan and evaded his company. At one point, Amir even suggested that his father should hire new servants. Baba threateningly reprimanded Amir and said that Ali and Hassan were their family. Later as they drifted apart, Amir is shattered by guilt, decided either he or Hassan must quit. Consequently, Amir maneuvered the theft plot. He hid his wristwatch and money under Hassan and Ali's bed. While accused, Hassan accepted the blame. Though Baba pardoned him, Hassan and Ali were too humiliated to stay. During their departure, Baba wept for the first time and they never saw Ali or Hassan again.

Many years later, while Amir is married to Soraya and lives in Fremont, California, he gets a call of Rahim Khan from Peshawar Pakistan. Meeting Rahim Khan, Amir learns about the destruction, violence of the Taliban rule in Kabul. In their subsequent meeting, Rahim Khan tells him that he is dying. Rahim Khan was in Baba's house alone, but when he became frail and lonely, he went looking for Hassan and found him living in a small village with his pregnant wife, Farzana. Hassan was unwilling to come until Rahim Khan disclosed him Baba's death. Amir was told that Hassan cried all night and in the morning, he and Farzana shifted with Rahim Khan. The couple, in due course, gave birth to a boy named Sohrab.

While Rahim Khan went to Pakistan on medical ground, the Taliban attacked Baba's house. They asked Hassan to surrender the house to them. When refused, they shot Hassan and Farzana. Rahim Khan asks Amir to go to Kabul and rescue Sohrab back to Peshawar. When refused, Rahim Khan discloses the secret: Amir and Hassan were half-brothers. Baba slept with Ali's wife Sanaubar. Ali was impotent and Hassan is Baba's son. Amir turns furious and runs out but later returns and says he would bring Sohrab.

He can hardly recognize the once familiar landscape around him. The war-torn, poverty stricken Kabul appears suffocating to Amir. Overcoming many challenges, Amir locates the orphanage where Sohrab is supposed to be but the director says that a Taliban official has taken Sohrab a month earlier. Amir is shocked to find that the custodian Talib is Assef. Sohrab appears wearing a blue silk dress and mascara suggesting that the man sexually abuses him. A cold-blooded murderer, Assef narrates Amir his mission to kill all the Hazaras in Afghanistan. Then he proposes that he and Amir would fight to the death without their guards' intervention. As Assef is heavily beating Amir to settle his unfinished business, Sohrab aims his slingshot at Assef's eye and begs him to stop. When he does not, Sohrab puts out his eye. Together, they run away with the help of a driver named Farid. The subsequent psychological dilemma in Sohrab is very remarkable. He feels filthy and sinful for his act. Amir, on the other hand, assures him a better life in America but the bureaucratic visa procedure to go to American makes him very frustrated and leads him to commit suicide. Anxious Amir prays for the first time in fifteen years. He survives. Amir tries his best to keep Sohrab happy in America. He takes part in kite running in America and is able to recreate his past. Thus, Sohrab has also got the opportunity to revisit his past through the kite running and smiled for the first time after many days.

## 2. Methodology

This is an empirical study in which the qualitative method has been applied with a view to expanding the argument. In this article, the primary and the secondary data available in this field are taken into consideration. The original texts are considered as primary data and the secondary data incorporate the critical books, analytical essays, articles, and theses papers. Moreover, I have taken the articles from online and printed journals as secondary data. The research question forwarded in the article has been established taking the

references from the original text and the secondary texts. The original text has been extensively referenced with a view to establishing the argument.

### 3. Definitions of the Terminologies

John L. Mckenzie (1945), in his *The Dictionary of the Bible*, defines sin from psychological and historical viewpoints (818). He quotes from the *Bible* to define sin. In the *Bible*, it is said that "sin arises from the lack of knowledge of God" (Ho 2:8, 4:1, p. 6) and it is also said that "sin arises from the evil heart" (Je 7:2 4). The origin of sin lies in the ignorance of God and having an evil heart. Mckenzie also points out the impact of sin on the society by telling that it "is indeed a breakdown of society" (p. 818) because the members of the society fail to do the assigned works properly. On the other hand, Walter Hazen in his book entitled *Inside Islam* (2002) says that sin is considered private in Islam and is kept between the sinner and God. There is no act of confessing to a leader or cleric, as is the practice in some other faiths (p. 21). Similarly, Buddhism holds the individual responsible for committing a sin, "These evil deed were done by you, not by your parents, friends or relatives; and you yourself will reap the painful results" ("What Buddhists Believe"). Both Hinduism and Buddhism relate sin to *Karma*. Sin is a "baneful result of one's misdeed in both the present life and in one's past lives" ("Sin").

According to the theological framework, Mckenzie (1945) defines guilt a distortion which is the result of "iniquitous act" (p. 818). Lewis Joseph Sherrill (2003), in *Guilt and Punishment*, defines guilt as "one has done something forbidden or failed to do something required" (p. 62). He also argues that sometimes disregard for one's feeling may also be responsible for the formation of guilt in a man. It is also the result of one's violation of any rule such as "religious, or legal, or social, or familial, or personal" (Sherill, p. 62) and these rules may also be available in "written form, or as unwritten law" (Sherill, p. 62). In the *Bible*, guilt is thought to be the cause of the fall of human beings. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23) - is the universal perception of Christianity regarding the fall of human beings. It is an anxiety, worry or unhappiness that originates from committing something wrong or causing harm to another person. Herant Katchadourian (2000) in the preface of *Guilt: The Bite of Conscience* says that "it is an integral part of moral reasoning and closely tied with monotheistic religions and to a lesser extent with Asian religions" (p. 4). In *The Kite Runner*, guilt functions both within individual lives and intimate relationships.

Similarly, the word 'Redemption' has religious interpretation. Binoj Mathew (2018) in his essay "Concept of Redemption in the World Religions: A Comparative Analysis of the Account of Redemption in Semitic Religions and Indian Religions" points out that "redemption is a common word in the world religions including the Semitic Religions and the Indian Religions" (p. 53). According to his categorization, the Semitic Religions are "Judaism, Christianity and Islam and the Indian Religions include Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism" (p. 53). There are different ways of redemption in Islam; one can achieve it by being sincere in "faith and doing virtuous actions" (p. 53). On the other hand, in *The Old Testament*, it is advised to make sacrifices to get redemption from sin. But in *The New Testament*, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is thought to have redeemed human beings. Christians can pave the redemption by following the example of Jesus, by loving their enemies. It highlights that redemption is possible by 'being altruistic and committing to the cause of those in need' ... (p. 56).

This concept of redemption is used in this article regarding Amir's pursuit of redemption for the sin he commits to Hassan. It can be stated that the guilt works, in the form of hardship, behind his redemption. The idea of redemption has been a recurrent theme in literatures. Nathaniel Hawthorne's (2004) *The Scarlet Letter* can be taken into consideration in which one of the chief characters namely Arthur Dimmesdale goes through unbearable physical anguish for adultery committed with Hester Prynne. Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* can be considered as a very prominent example. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Dimmesdale inflicts self-torture for seeking redemption while Coleridge's mariner shares the story of his sin again and again so that he may have cathartic experience and ultimately redemption. He shoots the Albatross and commits the sin that reveals the gratuitous violence and lack of love or appreciation of the God's creation. This killing signifies the violation of the sacred relations between the host and the guest. The memory of the dreadful act Mariner once committed becomes so haunting that at times he is forced to give utterance which brings him relief. In a way, he feels redeemed. In the same vein, in Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, Amir undertakes a perilous journey to rescue the son of the man he mistreated, which gives him a sense of relief.

An analysis of the major characters and their mutual relationships unfolds their connection with sin and guilt that ultimately lead to possible redemption. In *The Kite Runner*, both Amir and Hassan are contrasted characters. Amir is from

a very aristocratic family whose father has the “the most beautiful house in the Wazir Akbar Khan district, a new and affluent neighborhood in the northern part of Kabul” (Hosseini, p. 4). Moreover, he is “one of the richest merchants in Kabul” (Hosseini, p. 13). His grandfather maintained aristocracy who met the king of Afghanistan, King Nadir Shah. Amir proves his family aristocracy offering “an old, grainy photo of (his) grandfather and King Nadir Shah taken in 1931, two years before the king’s assassination; they are standing over a dead deer, dressed in knee-high boots, rifles slung over their shoulders” (Hosseini, p. 5). Because of his aristocracy, he condemns Hassan for his distance with his father.

#### 4. Sin and Guilt

Amir’s only boyhood friend and rival Hassan is Ali’s son, a servant who is very closely connected with his father. Ali was taken to the family by Amir’s grandfather. Both of them are of the same age. Amir’s father also grows up with Ali sharing his boyhood fantasies and feelings as Amir does with Hassan. As a servant to Amir and Baba, Hassan knows his specific role in the family. He helps Amir in taking preparation for school and later, helps his father Ali with the household chores and shopping. Both Amir and Hassan were nursed by the “the same nursing woman” (Hosseini, p. 9). Thus, they shared a bond as they suckled the same breasts. Eventually, they developed a kinship and brotherhood from the beginning of their life. Sometimes, they treat each other like brothers but they also remain aware of their distinct class identity - Amir is Pashtun and Hassan is Hazara. Reading a history book, Amir has come to know that the Hazaras have been cruelly exploited and oppressed for ages by the Pashtuns because they belong to a Shi’a Muslim sect. Amir learns with surprise that it is his own people who exploit the Hazaras.

It is quite impossible for Amir to forget his social superiority. For this reason, he cannot accept Hassan as his friend whole-heartedly. Moreover, his father’s excessive love for Hassan makes him jealous about him. This makes him intolerant about the good words his father uses for Hassan. Ignoring the historical, ethnic, social and religious differences existing between them, Amir was compelled to spend “most of the first twelve years of (his) life with Hassan” (Hosseini, p. 22). Looking back to the childhood they shared, adult Amir realizes many things of his younger days, which he cannot rationalize. He is sure about Hassan’s marginal identity considering the latter’s physical

deformity, ethnicity and poverty. He thinks that Hassan is destined to grow up - "illiterate like Ali and most Hazaras had been decided the minute he had been born, perhaps even the moment he had been conceived in Sanaubar's unwelcoming womb..." (Hosseini, p. 24). Thus, he develops a very complex outlook to Hassan. The reverse idea about this relationship is that he is very conscious of his superiority and always tries to assert it.

Because of Hassan, Amir decides to do something very extraordinary in the annual kite running competition so that his father can be proud of him. He can not rely on his father's likeness for him. He expresses it saying, "was he cheering for me? Or did a part of him enjoy watching me fail?" (Hosseini, p. 56). His disbelief in his father makes him very cruel to Hassan. He rationalises his victimization on Hassan saying, "nothing is free in this world. Maybe Hassan was the price (I) had to pay, the lamb (I) had to slay, to win Baba" (Hosseini, p. 68). This realization leads him to be withdrawn from everything related to Hassan. When Assef and his friends molest Hassan while searching for the lost kite, he looks on the other direction. Hassan is certain about getting Amir's support under any circumstances but the former's dilemma has kept him away from taking any action against Assef's rape. In this situation, Hassan becomes the lamb and Amir holds the knife. Amir also imagines that Hassan must be sacrificed for "higher purpose" (Hosseini, p. 67).

Amir is very articulate regarding what he is going to do with Hassan. When he discovers his father's special favour for Hassan, he experiences a sting of jealousy. He begins to consider the latter as his competitor and so, wants to get rid of him. His planning starts when he remains silent when Hassan is raped by the gang. Amir's silence to Assef's rape on Hassan is the beginning of his well planned mission of banishing him from his house. His revenge-motif is also found in his charge of theft against Hassan. He realizes that Hassan has made a 'final sacrifice' for him by admitting the allegation against him by Amir. Amir loves Hassan's sacrifice but knows that it is he who is "the snake in the grass, the monster in the lake... a liar, a cheat, and a thief" (Hosseini, p. 92). By doing all of these activities, he wants to identify himself. Moreover, he wants to secure his place to his father. His motif becomes clear when he says, "one final opportunity to decide who I was going to be. I could step into that alley, stand up for Hassan-the way he'd stood up for me all those times in the past-and accept whatever would happen to me" (Hosseini, p. 68). It can be assumed that Hassan realizes Amir's intention for which he has accepted the allegation of

theft. Amir constantly feels that he lacks something. He does not possess the value of courage, honour, and decency as defined by his father. Sometimes, he wonders if he is “really Baba’s son” (Hosseini, p. 101).

## 5. Redemption

Amir is very conscious of the injustice done by him to Hassan. This has been a haunting memory for him for many years. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, he and his father migrated to America. This departure helps Amir forget the sin he once committed. The physical distance from Afghanistan works as a catalyst in forgetting the guilt he committed earlier in his life. It becomes clear when he considers America 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” (Hosseini, p. 119). The geographical distance between America and Afghanistan has been united by the memory of Hassan. The very mentioning of Hassan’s name by Rahim Khan makes Amir feel like “those thorny old barbs of guilt.., as if speaking his name had broken a spell, set them free to torment (me) anew” (Hosseini, p. 176). This realization of sin is very important to decide his future course of life and his way of redemption.

Sin, as I discussed in the earlier section of the article, is the lack of knowledge of God and the existence of evil in the heart. The evil begins to haunt him with the awareness that his father loves Hassan more than him. Amir launches his evil agenda with his decision of condemning Hassan for theft. Amir’s treatment to Hassan is a sin as it causes him to deviate from the path of good. If we compare Amir’s sin to that of the ancient mariner’s as we find in *The Ancient Mariner*, we will discover a difference regarding the level of morality. Ronald Paulson (2007), in his *Sin and Evil: Moral Values in Literature*, says that the critics

(from Anna Laetitia Barbauld to John Livingston Lowes and Irving Babbitt) who complained about the Ancient Mariner’s lack of moral emphasis felt the killing of the albatross was too trivial an act for such a harsh punishment. They were judging the act in moral terms- it is merely a bird. (p. 256)

In *The Kite Runner*, we get a different picture. Here the opponent is a man who deserves more from Amir than the bird does in *The Ancient Mariner*. Both evil and sin can be traced in his behavior towards Hassan.



Patrick Sherry (2000), in *Images of Redemption: Understanding Soteriology Through Art and Literature*, examines the novels based on the idea of redemption. He shows that Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Mauriac's *The Knot of Vipers* cover the idea of redemption. About Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, he remarks that the novel "explores the themes of guilt, repentance, redemption through suffering and new life" (p. 117). Sherry also points out the fact that there are many novels based on the theme of moral redemption which demonstrates "redemption through love" (p. 118). Amir's early life, particularly the part of his life with Hassan, can be incorporated with the parameters of guilt originated from his injustice to the latter. Human life cannot be one dimensional. He cannot suppress his guilt throughout his life. There comes a moment in his life which brings him back that reflection of life. In other words, if there is guilt, there should be a way of achieving redemption.

In the long years in America, Hassan reappears to Amir's mind as his unalterable past. His realization about his guilt leads him to search for his redemption. The sense of redemption is not strong for him as he is almost obsessed by his personal life in America. The thin connection he has is through Rahim Khan, his father's life long friend. He is now in Pakistan. The Soviet invasion in Afghanistan compelled him to lead a life of refugee in Pakistan. In his last years, he suffered from a deadly disease. But he wanted Amir to know about his past relationship with Hassan and his son, Sohrab. A letter comes to him from Pakistan and Amir decides to visit him.

Though Amir takes America as an abode for playing hide and seek to run away from his past, he fails to do so. While Soraya tells Amir about her sensational elopement as a confession, Amir actually feels envious that she has the moral courage to speak about the event. He "envied her. Her secret was out. Spoken. Dealt with. I opened my mouth and almost told her how I'd betrayed Hassan, lied, driven him out, and destroyed a forty-year relationship between Baba and Ali" (Hosseini, p. 144). He cannot share with anyone, even his wife what he did to Hassan. He cannot tell her that he condemned an innocent fellow for theft. It constantly haunts him that he is the reason of Hassan's expulsion from the place where he was born and brought up. Moreover, he considers his personal agony of childlessness as the result of his misconduct to Hassan. This becomes clear when he says, "perhaps something, someone, somewhere, had decided to deny me fatherhood for the things I had done" (Hosseini, p. 164).

So, this understanding is the clear proof of his guilt and his realization of it. When he comes to know about Sohrab from Rahim Khan, he hesitates to go to Afghanistan to rescue him. But he wants to compensate for the injustice he did towards Hassan. His process of redemption begins with this decision. Rahim Khan tells him that it is God's will he comes to Pakistan in search of Hassan's son Sohrab. The very mentioning of Hassan's name by Rahim Khan makes Amir feel like "those thorny old barbs of guilt...as if speaking his name had broken a spell, set them free to torment (him) anew" (Hosseini, p. 176). This is accelerated by the knowledge that Hassan knew about his original fatherhood. This makes him sympathetic to Hassan. He comes to the conclusion that all these days both of them have been buried in the quagmire of "a cycle of lies, betrayals, and secrets" (Hosseini, p. 198). This discovery leads him to be more compassionate to Hassan. From Rahim Khan he also comes to know that Hassan wanted to bring up his own son with his own hands. He comes to know about Hassan's wish that his "son will grow up to be a good person, a free person, and an important person" (Hosseini, p. 191). His redemption begins because he discovers the "way to end the cycle" (Hosseini, p. 198).

It is Rahim Khan who shows Amir the way of redeeming himself in one of his letters. He says that "a man who has no conscience, no goodness, does not suffer. I hope your suffering comes to an end with this journey to Afghanistan" (Hosseini, p. 263). After Sohrab's suicide attempt, Amir realizes that his "hands are stained with Hassan's blood; I pray God doesn't let them get stained with the blood of this boy too" (Hosseini, p. 302). He comes to the conclusion that he cannot let Sohrab die like his father. Even he faces the social realities boldly to re-establish Hassan's identity through Sohrab. For this reason, when his father-in-law raises questions about Sohrab's bloodline, Amir boldly confesses that "my father slept with his servant's wife. She bore him a son named Hassan. Hassan is dead now. That boy sleeping on the couch is Hassan's son. He's my nephew. That's what you tell people when they ask" (Hosseini, p. 315). This realization expedites his redemption.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this study, I have explained in the light of universal notions like sin, guilt and redemption how Amir, the protagonist, commits wrongs deliberately and decides to compensate for it in his own way. He commits sin because he is goaded into action by the original sins like jealousy and hatred. As conscience

pricks him, he loses mental peace even after migrating to America with his family. Hassan is the only catalytic force behind his sin and redemption. He commits sin for Hassan and it is because of Hassan's son, he gets his redemption. His committing of the guilt, sin and redemption through his risky journey to Afghanistan and rescuing Sohrab are in good tune with the sin, guilt and redemption ideas.

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