

Tracing Post-Traumatic Growth in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore post-traumatic growth (PTG) - a positive psychological change post-traumatic period in a literary text. PTG, as theorized by Tedeschi and Calhoun, identifies positive changes during the post-traumatic period resulting in “self-perception, interpersonal relationships, and philosophy of life, leading to increased self-awareness and self-confidence, a more open attitude towards others, a greater appreciation of life, and the discovery of new possibilities” (Dell’Osso). It examines how deep suffering can also lead to a positive psychological development in an individual’s life after experiencing trauma. In this context, Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* serves as an appropriate literary text for examining post-traumatic growth, as the novel traces Amir’s trauma into transformation. While the novel had

been previously analyzed from the perspectives of trauma, guilt, memory, blame, and redemption, this paper presents the text from the perspective of post-traumatic growth, analyzing Amir's rebuilding of his identity through the two domains of personal strength and new opportunities.

Keywords: Post-Traumatic Growth, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

Trauma is an emotional reaction or response to a deeply disturbing or distressing experience that individuals encounter and find hard to overcome. Indeed, traumatic experiences are an inescapable part of human existence. Events such as abuse, emotional neglect, war, loss, and displacement will have deep psychological and emotional consequences. The psychological impact on individuals from traumatic events includes stress, anxiety, depression, anger, flashbacks, insomnia, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which are some of the negative effects of trauma. Contemporary psychologists have concluded that the trauma persists in the person's mind for a prolonged period of time, and it affects the personal growth of an individual. Moreover, they have traced a positive psychological change that occurs due to trauma, and this phenomenon is known as "post-traumatic growth." It was identified by psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun in the 1990s. In fact, PTG co-exists with PTSD, and this discovery is positive and needs to be harnessed.

One of the major understandings of trauma is that the traumatic experiences collapse an individual's core beliefs about the world and life. Before the traumatic experience, the individual believes that life is beautiful and the world is safe. However, after the traumatic experience, these core beliefs shatter for the individual and make him feel that life is uncertain and unpredictable. However, recent research has confirmed that there is a possibility that, from being in the throes of psychological distress, humans are willingly trying to muster the courage to reconstruct their lives. This process of significant cognitive change is identified as PTG.

PTG does not avoid the distress caused by the trauma; instead, it continues to accept the traumatic experience, finding meaning in it, and gradually recovers their lives with greater resilience, personal strength, and a clear sense of purpose.

Resilience is a person's ability to recover quickly after a distressing event. PTG, unlike resilience, refers to how a person recovers after being deeply affected by a distressing event over a long period of time. It transforms individuals, offering a completely new understanding of themselves and new meaning in their lives, leading to positive changes in perspective, relationships, and self-awareness. Just like post-traumatic stress disorder, which does not affect everyone, post-traumatic growth is not a universal response to trauma, and only some traumatic events lead to PTG. It entirely depends on how the individual perceives, interprets, and understands the experience. According to Tedeschi and Calhoun, this transformation commonly occurs in five areas:

1. **Appreciation of Life**—this is when a person starts to accept and develop a deeper appreciation of life after experiencing a traumatic event. Before that, individuals have a positive view of the world. However, this view shatters in the face of any distressing event, and their entire sense of meaning in life is altered. This phenomenon led the individual to trust the world, and they transferred their previously distressing thoughts, coming to appreciate their life more.
2. **Relating to others**—individuals start to improve their interpersonal relationships, tend to value other people's emotions and feelings, and become more empathetic and willing to support others, developing deeper relationships with others based on trust, honesty, and mutual support, resulting in finding stronger family bonds and better communication with their loved ones and others.
3. **Personal strength**—individuals finding their inner courage, which they had never experienced before, begin to value the ordinary things and moments that they have previously overlooked; instead of viewing themselves as helpless victims, they begin to develop their inner

value and strength. It is not just surviving but overcoming trauma that increases people's confidence and courage to face future challenges.

4. **New possibilities**—this is when individuals start to find new opportunities or goals and prioritize them that they had never considered before, and indulge themselves in new hobbies or interests, which help them to grow. Instead of remaining in the past and in the pain, they force themselves to explore new directions in their lives.

5. **Spiritual or existential change**—when individuals begin to question the fundamental beliefs about the meaning of life, justice, suffering, and faith, some individuals may engage in spiritual pursuits. In contrast, others might begin to cultivate philosophical understanding.

The theory of post-traumatic growth offers scope for exploring yet another possibility of understanding how humans react to trauma. Interestingly, literature often engages characters who have experienced deep psychological suffering because of war, abuse, loss, violence, betrayal, and much more. A critical reading of the characters reveals two distinct strands: one that continues to suffer trauma and loss in its own way, and the other that gradually begins to find meaning in its life, rebuild inner strength, and form deeper relationships. To explicate this understanding, this paper attempts to read Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, where Amir, the protagonist, undergoes trauma and ends up with post-traumatic growth.

One of Amir's major emotional traumas is the emotional neglect and rejection he experiences from his father, Baba. Amir often feels that Baba always prefers Hassan, his servant Ali's son, as he is loyal, brave, and always stands up for others. Baba admires Hassan's qualities because Baba is strong and courageous.

When Amir is playing with the neighbourhood boys, they push him around and take his toys away. Amir never reacts or fights back, but Hassan stands up for Amir. This is when Amir overhears the conversation between Rahim Khan and Baba, where Baba confides, "A boy who won't stand up for himself becomes a man who can't stand up to anything." (22). Amir is

deeply hurt and saddened. Even though Baba speaks to Rahim Khan, Amir realizes that Baba's words are pointed at him. Amir is disappointed. Baba admires Hassan's courage more than Amir's. As a result, Amir feels dejected and rejected, constantly longing for Baba's love, approval, and affection.

Continuing on the same strain, Baba confesses, "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." (22) Amir's heart breaks, and he feels that he is completely rejected. The significant differences between Amir's and Baba's personalities are probably creating an emotional distance between them—while Baba is strong, brave, and a businessman, Amir is a young boy, sensitive, quiet, and fond of reading.

Psychologically traumatized and lacking affection and love from his father, Amir witnesses Hassan's sexual assault, which tests his character. Assef is a violent boy in the neighbourhood whose actions jarred Amir's innocent childhood. Amir and Hassan usually run when the neighbourhood boys start teasing them. But one evening, after Amir won the kite tournament, three boys, including Assef, blocked their path and started beating and sexually assaulting Hassan because he was a Hazara. Amir, who belongs to the Pashtun tribe, fails to stand up for Hassan, despite Hassan always standing up for Amir. Instead, he chooses to stay and be silent. He even chooses to run, Amir confides.

"I had one last chance to make a decision. 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. Or I could run.

In the end, I ran.

I ran because I was a coward." (72)

Amir chooses to run because he is afraid that Assef might sexually exploit and harass him. A little later, Amir also feels extremely ashamed and begins to blame himself for not

standing up to the bullies out of fear. This moment becomes the greatest mistake of his life and the source of his lifelong trauma.

Amir is also traumatized and feels guilty for betraying Hassan. After witnessing Hassan's assault and choosing not to protect him, Amir is deeply affected by guilt and shame. After the incident, Amir stopped talking to Hassan, and he could not sleep: "That was the night I became an insomniac" (81).

Rather than confronting his guilt and asking Hassan for forgiveness, Amir starts avoiding and ignoring him. This avoidance behaviour furthers his guilt and trauma.

"I wished he would.

I wished he'd give me the punishment I craved, so maybe I'd finally sleep at night. Maybe then things could return to how they used to be between us." (86)

Amir expects Hassan to respond angrily to him, but Hassan's kindness deepens his guilt. Later, Amir begins to distance himself from Hassan by inventing false accusations against him. Even after moving away from Afghanistan to Pakistan and then to the United States and starting a new life, he is weighed down by guilt. Though the physical separation through which Amir chooses to avoid Hassan has grown, the memories of Hassan have also grown, haunting and disrupting Amir's everyday life. He was not able to escape the memories of Hassan, which would cause him emotional distress. Amir confides at a later date: "I became what I am today at the age of twelve." (1) The event, which happened in Amir's life at the age of twelve, signifies his betrayal, which changed his life forever with an intense level of guilt, showing how trauma can lead a person's life into misery if it is not confronted at the right time and treated properly.

The emotional distance between Amir and Baba begins to fade after winning the kite tournament. Amir believes that he has finally proved his worth to Baba, which is reflected in this line:

“He opened his arms. I put the kite down and walked into his thick hairy arms. I buried my face in the warmth of his chest and wept. Baba held me close to him, rocking me back and forth.” (74)

Amir feels extremely emotional when Baba embraces him. It is one of the first times Baba openly shows his affection towards Amir. Throughout his childhood, he faced emotional neglect from his father, but now he feels that he has finally received the love and approval. Due to political changes, Amir and his father leave Afghanistan for Pakistan and end up in the United States. Amir explores new possibilities: after immigrating to the United States with his father, Amir attempts to build a successful career as a writer and a responsible husband, even while carrying his guilt.

While in the United States, Amir’s transformation begins when he receives a phone call from Rahim Khan, who says, “*There is a way to be good again.*” (2) This call becomes the turning point in Amir’s emotional journey. His decision to travel to Afghanistan to rescue Sohrab, Hassan’s son, is an act of turning his emotions from avoidance to acceptance and of increasing his awareness of the need to confront reality. According to Tedeschi and Calhoun, post-traumatic growth begins when individuals stop avoiding their trauma and start to confront and realize their mistakes and make meaning.

However, the thought of returning to Afghanistan frightens Amir. The memories of his childhood trauma immediately return, and he initially tries to avoid the place where he lost his peace. But when Rahim Khan confesses that Hassan is Amir’s half-brother, he becomes furious with his father, Baba, and Rahim Khan for hiding this truth for years. Amir finally decides to go to Afghanistan because he wants to fight for himself and not let anyone fight for him:

“...I remembered Baba saying that my problem was that someone had always done my fighting for me. I was thirty- eight now.”

...

“I was older now, but maybe not yet too old to start doing my own fighting”
(210)

This marks Amir’s psychological transformation. Unlike when he ran away and failed to protect Hassan in his childhood, he now chooses to fight back, ready to face his fears, to accept responsibility for his past actions, and to begin his emotional journey toward redemption by rescuing Sohrab.

Amir’s growth after the guilt is gradual and not immediate. This can be identified in one of the five transformative domains identified by Tedeschi: personal strength. Amir’s attempts to rescue Sohrab were not driven by any external motivation or force but by his own willingness and personal strength to seek redemption, from being a child who fears everything and remained silent to an adult who bravely faces the danger despite knowing the consequences. This particular act signifies not only his courage but also the realization of his inner strength, which had remained dominant despite many years of guilt and self-blame.

While rescuing Sohrab, he was beaten heavily and was almost dead by the same person who had harassed and abused Hassan. Even though he bore all his physical pain, he experienced emotional liberation, and his psychological scars are healed. Amir articulates this transformation: “My body was broken—just how badly I wouldn’t find out until later—but I felt *healed*. Healed at last. I laughed.” (265-266) Even though he is physically broken, he finally realizes that he did the right thing by risking his life to save Sohrab. True healing for Amir does not come from escaping the past but from having the courage to face it and accept responsibility.

Amir feels that his life is emotionally incomplete because he never attempted to confront his trauma. After finding Sohrab, Amir begins to care for him. He decides to protect Hassan's son out of a sense of moral responsibility:

"I won't ever get tired of you, Sohrab," I said. "Not ever. That's a promise. ...

I won't ever let that happen. I promise you that." (297)

Amir promises Sohrab that he will never abandon him, and his determination to protect Sohrab contrasts with his failure to protect Hassan, symbolizing his emotional growth. Later, when Sohrab attempts suicide, Amir desperately prays to God to save his life by saying, "My hands are stained with Hassan's blood; I pray God doesn't let them get stained with the blood of his boy too." (317), revealing his deep love for Sohrab and the fear of losing him. Amir believes he is morally responsible for Hassan's suffering and death because he abandoned and betrayed him during their childhood. Now, he felt Sohrab's life was in danger, so Amir prays to God that he will not commit the same mistake again. His transformation through saving Sohrab shows how his trauma redirects him toward responsibility and compassion, leading him to abandon selfishness.

Amir's journey in *The Kite Runner* powerfully illustrates that trauma can shatter a person yet also lead to profound transformation, which is termed "post-traumatic growth." The novel vividly portrays how Amir is ensnared by his trauma, burdened by guilt, and haunted by memories, shame, and self-blame throughout his existence. His suffering is understandable, but ultimately, it is through risking his life that he finds healing. This journey, which in itself is a transformation, reveals that, at times, trauma can guide an individual to refocus, uncover their true purpose, achieve moral maturity, and foster significant psychological transformation towards positive growth.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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