

Existential Crisis in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*: A Critical Study

Tarulata Pegu

Research Scholar

Assam University, Diphu Campus

tarulatapegu18@gmail.com

Abstract

The present research article examines how Khaled Hosseini's characters in *The Kite Runner*, are engulfed in existential crisis. The concept of existential crisis depicted by influential existentialists will be used to discuss the matter. When people face existential crisis they start seeing the deeper sight of life in the universe. There are certain moments in an individual's lifetime when they search for the real value and meaning during existence. The repetition of their worldly activities makes them tedious at a certain point and fails to lend them comforts. Hence they set out for some higher goals during their life. The existentialists' urges one to understand the truth of life that there are no inherent purposes in life rather one has to set it. If they do not follow this and continue to live under the social pressures denying the abundant freedom then this is what Sartre calls a "Bad Faith" which means "lie to oneself" (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 89). War, poverty, dislocation, internal conflicts, deceit, death and suffering made the lives of Hosseini's characters a kind of disease. Afghanistan became the victim in the hands of materialistic and power craze political leaders. The research article further pays attention to understand the characters' inability to accommodate to their present psychological and social

situations. Thus the study explores these matters by reflecting on Amir, the protagonist and other characters in Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*.

Keywords- freedom, existential crisis, meaninglessness, war, suffering.

Introduction

Apart from the meaninglessness of human existence which is thought to bring an existential crisis, there may be some other reasons that brought existential crisis. It arises out of different internal conflicts within the self, concerning others and the world as a whole. The basic forms of existential crisis constitute of isolation, depression, mental disorder, psychological trauma, dissatisfaction with one's life and suffering. It is also the sickness in realizing that the universe has a larger complicate meaning which needs his lone effort to understand it.

Such kind of crisis becomes the aura of Khaled Hosseini's novel, the most renowned Afghan-American writer. The study below highlights how Hosseini's character faces existential crisis through psychological trauma, secrecy, separation, marginalization, marriage, irreparable loss, death of loved ones, threatening experiences in life, social barriers and lack of enough love and affection. Through this crisis, Hosseini's characters realize that they must cope up with such circumstances through some self decisions which are compulsory to continue existence.

Analysis

“A boy who won't stand up for himself becomes a man who can't stand up to anything”

Hosseini created the protagonist Amir in his novel *The Kite Runner* who narrates his own life experience thus weaving the plot for this masterpiece. The study concentrates on the life of more than one character to highlight the universality of existential crisis that haunts human life under certain situations. According to the existentialist and the absurdist, the consciousness of this crisis that people face during his existence is essential for the realization of the truth of human life. This is what Sartre advocated in his “Existentialism and Human Emotions”. It is propounded by him as the very first motive of existentialism. Generally, it results both from the external condition and the internal troubles of the mind. The external troubles consist of the systems of the society whereas the internal forms are those which people face when they are dissatisfied with their life. Human beings' continuous search for meaning in life brings crisis that leads one to negotiate himself with the nature of abundant human freedom.

Hosseini at the very beginning of the novel presents Amir in his own words as “I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in winter of 1975” (Hosseini 1). Amir's life is haunted by the past event that took place far away, twenty-six years ago in Afghanistan, his birthplace when the narration begins. Resettling in California does not reset his past memories. As history repeats itself he realizes that his past can't be covered up by any means. Rather this history creeps to the future too. This awareness brought a huge crisis to Amir's existence. His successful career and happy marriage with his beloved Soraya Teheri could not uproot his feeling of guilt for the past. His frustration led him to confirm that the past always crawls its way to the future because it was unforgettable to him. He knew what it was in

the back of his mind that constantly pricks him. It got a full expression when Rahim Khan rang him up to meet him in Pakistan. This almost cut raw his wounds when Rahim Khan says “There is a way to be good again.”(Hosseini 2) This provides Amir the chance to earn his redemption after long years and draws him to his past.

Since childhood, Amir was shown as a tormented little soul. Growing up without a mother made him a more pitiable character. He strives to get the attention and love of his father. His father being a successful businessman could not devote time the way he wanted. From whatever time he could manage for his son he would often take him for a picnic or sightseeing. However, Amir could not tolerate the fact that he was never alone in such trips. Hassan, the servant’s son was always present with them. Although he loves to play with him, he wanted his “baba” all by himself. While at home his father was always busy with his business works. Sometimes the laughter and chatting of his father and Rahim Khan, his father’s close friend and business partner fascinate him but he was not allowed to sit with the grownups. Amir’s boredom is sensed by the way he spends sitting hours outside his father’s room, listening to the laughter inside. This shows his loneliness and boredom in the house. The affection, softness, and understanding that a mother gave were constantly craved by Amir. He would think of the way his mother looked, the way she dressed and everything regarding her. Although his father loves him dearly, his love was more of the practical and rough one like the man himself. It is humorous how he felt envious for the orphans who would stay in the orphanage that his father was building for them. Amir encounters utter loneliness when this project made his father often to stay

overnight working in the construction site of the orphanage. So misery and boredom permeate his life at a very early age.

Another biting reality of Amir's life was that he considers himself as an outsider in his own home. This was what the existentialists resist and advice one not to isolate oneself. Absurdity and loneliness are said to be part of life. They suggested facing the "anguish" of life (Sartre *Existentialism*). Little Amir has all the consciousness of a lonely being much like a matured existentialist hero. He was living with the guilt that he has killed the beloved wife of his father. As his mother died at the time of giving birth to him; he thinks himself responsible for the death of his mother. As a boy, he was physically slow and does not have much interest in sports. This lost him the chance of being the best son to his father. As a passionate lover of soccer, his father wanted to inculcate the same passion in him which he fails. To take an instance, at a *Buzkashi* tournament, he cried all his way back home at the sight of the player who died a brutal death in the field. This shows Amir's emotional side. On the other hand, his father's excitement arouses more when the game became violent and forceful. Amir thought this was despised by his father secretly as he was a man who wrestled a bear with bare hands in Baluchistan. He heard his father comment about him that "There is something missing in that boy" (Hosseini 20). His awareness that he lacks his father's masculinity and energy hurt him extremely, thus leading to a crisis in himself. The sense of insufficiency within himself brought him his crisis.

The only happiness that Amir finds is in Hassan's friendship. During the holidays they would spend the whole day together. They would climb the hill to their favorite spot in the old cemetery with the pomegranate tree where they would play, chasing each other or Amir read to

Hassan their favorite stories of “Rostam and Sohrab” from the *Shahnamah*. On the pomegranate tree, Amir even engraved the words "Amir and Hassan, the sultans of Kabul" (Hosseini *Kite Runner* 24). Or either they would climb the poplar trees in their home where they would enjoy and annoy their neighbors either by reflecting the lights of a mirror on them or sometimes by shooting the neighbor's dog with their slingshots. All this brought them endless laughter and happiness. Other days they would enjoy in the backyard of the house where cherries, tomatoes, and corn were planted. They often watched their favorite movie *The Magnificent Seven*, in the Cinema Park together and in the winter their most desired time pass would be running kites. Kite has a great significance in their life and this is how the novel gets its title.

Even though Amir was happy with Hassan’s friendship, Amir never considered him as his friend. His awareness that Hassan was the son of their servant always takes him back to accept him as his friend openly. At the same time, he was acquainted with the fact that nobody could understand him better than Hassan. It was Hassan who often rescued him in times of troubles. He would fight back with other boys to protect Amir. He was not afraid to get a scar or blows from the feuds that take place with other boys. Through this Amir seems to be weaker in heart whereas Hassan seems to be braver. This is what they decided to make out of themselves as a child.

If Sartre’s theory that existence came first than essence is taken into account then it can be located that only after Hassan and Amir’s existence in the world as a human being they define their characters (Sartre *Existentialism*). As they were born in the same compound and grew up feeding on the same breast they acquire their characters based on a series of available choices.

One was courageous than the other. Although Amir was happy that Hassan fights back for him but somewhere he was disturbed by the fact that he lacks the same guts that Hassan has. This was the reason why Amir felt envious when his father always asked Hassan to join them. He could not bear the fact that his father loves them equally. He despised the way his father never missed Hassan's birthday; or the gifts that he brought him. He longed for special treatment and so gets annoyed and jealous when often his father took them to buy kites from Safio and he would opt for a fancier kite; the same would be given to Hassan too.

His hunger for recognition can be seen in the opening ceremony of the orphanage where his father has devoted three years to build it. He was trying to maintain a space for himself in public through his father. He was thrilled when his father motioned him to pick up the air blown hat from the ground before everyone. Thus in childhood, he longs for the love of his father. As existentialists forwarded that lack of love may result in existential crisis; Amir as an immature boy searches for the apparent love of his father.

Amir's treatment of Hassan exposes his selfish nature. He almost forgets the fact that it was Hassan who was the first motivator of his stories, which would later provide him his promising writing career. It was Hassan's words of encouragement and appreciation that leads him to write more and even approach his father with his stories. Hassan exclaimed, "That was the best story you've read me ..." (Hosseini, 22). That same evening Amir wrote his first short story and much excitedly he told his father but his father could not offer to read it. It was Rahim Khan, his pal, who wished him for his stunning story and kept himself forever open for his

stories. His passion for the story was again unwelcomed by his father and this added to his frustration.

It was because of Amir that Hassan would meet his fate that forever changes the course of everybody's life. This was the time when Afghanistan had been facing new tensions for supremacy of power over each other. In 1973 Zahir Shah was overthrown by Daoud Khan thus monarchy gave its way to the republic. It marks the end of the forty-year of peaceful reign by the king. It was also like the two boys were ending their long tranquil years that they spent together. The next day after the coup the two boys getting bored of the continuous news of the new state of Afghanistan as a child decided to run up to their favorite spot where they would sow their first trouble with the encounter of Assef and his friends Kamal and Wali. Assef arouses fear among other boys with his wicked activities like hurting them in the ear with his brass Knuckles. He utterly despises the Hazara community in Afghanistan. And he is giving a goal of hatred for the future. This shows the sense of hatred for other communities within an individual may be rooted in an early age. This is merely the divisions of people among themselves that brought miseries to a certain group of people. If a higher authority is missing as the existentialists believe it is a division made some hypocrite people for their advantages. This division is not new as it is prevalent in every age of human history. So Hosseini had tried to bring out this issue through the characters like Assef whose action consequences in the impact of many people at a time. The Hazara are referred to as "mice-eating, flat-nosed, load-carrying donkeys" (Hosseini 8). As Hassan belonged to the Hazara community he often becomes the target of Assef's cruelties and abuses Amir for befriending Hassan. But human beings have some fixed conditions like the

community, place or the parents they are born in. Similarly, Hassan cannot get rid of his Hazara roots. On that particular day, Assef blamed Amir for having Hassan in his home and had his critical view that the land of Afghanistan is polluted by Hassan's people so they must get rid of them. He said his goal would be to get “rid Afghanistan of all the dirty, Kasseef Hazaras.”

(Hoseini 36) Assef almost intended to hurt Amir for this, when Hassan threat them back with his slingshot pointed exactly to Assef’s eye. This led the three old boys to retreat back but with the promise to take revenge for this in the future. Hassan in a way invited trouble for himself while protecting Amir. However, Amir does not have the same courage to come forward for him.

In the winter of 1975, the time when Afghanistan is showered in white by the snows, was like every winter the best time for flying kites. This was the same year of Hassan being the victim of rape which would snatch Amir's and Hassan's little happy world from them. Rather the incident will add Amir a terrible existence. The kite tournament was on its way and everybody has been eagerly waiting for that. The day of the kite flying tournament finally came. This was supposed to be the biggest tournament in the last twenty-five years and of course one of the vital for Amir as he sets his mind to win the tournament to make a room for himself in his father’s heart. Amir tried to mitigate the distance between himself and his father through worldly achievements. However, worldly achievements fail to provide permanent happiness in human life. Amir understood this in the latter part of his life. So existentialists suggest seeking the greater truth and value in life. As hard works pay Amir came victorious after a long day struggle of cutting all the other kites. His intolerable neck pain or bleeding hands did not matter to him. Hassan and Amir’s excitement knew no boundaries. They embrace each other and cried out of

happiness. Unfortunately, this turns out to be their last happiness. Then Amir requested the best kite runner, Hassan to run and came back with the kite. At this Hassan replied, "For you a thousand times over!" (Hosseini 59). This shows him as a devoted friend.

In winning the kite tournament Amir achieved his desired end. His father grandly celebrated his thirteenth birthday. He was much proud of him and would show every guest the trophy of the tournament. He even took him to his favorite places for a picnic; however, all this was short-lived. Things began to cool between them after some time. Moreover, Amir considered his victory as unfair because it is earned from Hassan's blood. Amir never again tried to gain his father's love by all the needless efforts. As true love was what matters.

The incident that took place in the evening of the kite tournament shattered Amir's whole life. All his hopes destroyed out of the blue. Amir runs desperately to find Hassan who went to fetch the blue kite and still he was nowhere to find. Finally, he lands up to the place where Hassan was being tortured by Assef and his two friends. As a revenge of the earlier incident, they promise to spare Hassan at the cost of the blue kite, the trophy. Hassan was determined not to give away the kite as he has run it for Amir. He insists them to leave him but Aseef would not let him go free. He tried to resist them, hurling a stone at them when they came near him but they set up their mind to hurt him in the worst possible way. Hassan sacrificed his self-esteem to protect the kite for Amir. Being alone against the three they raped him brutally in the alley. All the while Amir was present there peeping at the alley in vague. But he could do nothing; he only kept on staring still at the way Hassan's hands were tugged behind by the two other boys and at the drops of blood falling from Hassan's back. He tortured himself biting his hand but could not

set a foot forward to protect Hassan. He was lost and has not the slightest courage to interfere with the wrong done to the person who always stands for him.

He could not escape from it even after long years. This let him narrate at the beginning of the novel “I became what I am today at the age of twelve...” (Hosseini 1) His crisis was extreme at this level. His suffering was more due to shame on himself as a being. Amir’s inactivity shows him as a coward and this further brought in him a huge existential crisis.

Amir’s hope to get punished by Hassan as a way to relief himself remained unfulfilled. Once after the incident, he called Hassan to accompany him to the old cemetery to read him a story that he wrote. In the middle of reading, he rose up and started hitting Hassan with the ripe pomegranates in the hope that Hassan will hit him back. However, Hassan could do no such thing and was standing vaguely. At last, Amir cried out to hit him back this time in anger. Hassan does the opposite by crushing the remaining pomegranates against himself and left the place. What was more painful to Amir was on the night of his thirteenth birthday when he saw Hassan serving drinks to the same boys that victimized him.

So he decided to act, but his action only worsens the situation. Amir decided to liberate himself and Hassan from all this with his dreadful idea. His decision was more an influenced act from Rahim Khan's story, so it cannot be considered as a conscious decision of his own. In existentialists' view, the individuals must decide consciously their actions. But Amir could not keep up with it. He plotted a wicked plan to drive out Hassan from the house by blaming him for stealing his wristwatch and money the very next day of his birthday. And his plan was successful. Ali and Hassan left the house forever. But at the same time, he was burdened more

with the guilt of separating a brother, not by blood and a son by blood. Hassan's acceptance of stealing was another blow to Amir and his troubled life.

As Hassan left the house the gap was filled with another major social crisis in Amir's life. The year 1976 ended all the peace in Afghanistan; it was as if with Hassan everything was gone. The situation in Afghanistan was such that Amir and his father were compelled to flee from Afghanistan in 1981. Thousands of people were deciding the same thing. They were choosing from the set of probabilities knowing that their decisions are taken in "anguish" (Sartre *Existentialism*). That is they take all the responsibility of their choice, knowing the uncertain future but still they move forward with a new hope. All the gunfire, rockets and the presence of Russian soldiers became endless. Villages were burnt away, schools and shops were shut down, leaving the people in poverty. They were robbed of their basic needs; people no longer can wander openly in the streets. All this external violence added to the disillusionment and misery in Amir's life as he too has to leave his comfortable home. He has to part with the place full of memories of his mother and Hassan.

Hosseini has drawn Hassan completely different from Amir. He was also dragged into existential crisis in his way. His mother left him when he was just five days old. And what most hurts him is to enduring all the insults meted out to him relating his mother. He has a loving father but his physical disabilities make life tough for Hassan. One could only imagine the moment of his wounded feelings when his father was made fun of, chased on the streets and called with various names for his paralyzed face and twisted right leg. His realization of belonging to the Hazara community brought another gush of tragedy to his life. At every point in

his life, he faced discrimination as an inferior and despised creature. His only healer was Amir, for whom he could do anything. However, it is seen that Amir played with him only when there is no one else to play with. When there are friends around him, the sons of his father's friend he was never included in such groups. Hassan does all the works for Amir whether it is ironing his dress, polishing his shoes or keeping ready his breakfast. He loves to devote all his time to doing things for Amir. But Amir betrayed him in the end. He could not come to his rescue when he was being raped. His friendship and sacrifice were paid back with the blame of being theft and this left his life devastating.

In the novel, Amir's father was too swallowed up in existential crisis. He lost his beloved wife soon after the birth of Amir. He had the responsibility of raising a son all by himself. He was engulfed with loneliness and anxiety and this let him to commit a sin that is sleeping with the wife of his servant Sanaubar and this is how Hassan was born. However, he could not accept Hassan as his son in the society. He desired to love his sons equally but he was caught up in the systems of society that would not permit him to do so. He also deceived Ali, who was not only a servant but more like a brother to him. They grew up together as a child in the same house and since then they were inseparable. Much like Amir and Hassan's relationship his father too never considered Ali as his friend. In deceiving Ali by dishonoring him, a sense of guilt always rolled him up and distressed his life hideously. So he did everything possible on his part for Hassan. His heart broke pieces when Ali has decided to leave the house. Amir has separated not only a brother from a brother but a father from a son. After a few years, he had to abandon his beloved country, his ancestral homeland, for a blurred identity in a new land. The drastic changes in

Afghanistan led him to flee. His power, status, and society do not hold any value amidst the tumultuous condition. It is painful how things that he built, fought for and earned with his efforts crumbled before his eyes.

This is how characters are entangled in existential crisis in Hosseini's first novel *The Kite Runner*. Hosseini's heroes and heroines are caught up in situations where they found inherent meaning in life as non-existent and this brought them existential crisis for a certain period. But as life must move on, they carried forward their life with new hopes.

References:

1. Barfield, Thomas. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton University Press, 2012.
2. Hosseini, Khaled. *The Kite Runner*. Bloomsbury, 2003.
3. Kaufmann, Walter, editor and translator. *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*. Meridian books, INC, 1956.
4. Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Hazel stele Barnes, Simon and Schuster, 1992.
5. ---. *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. users.telenet.be/sterf/texts/phil/Sartre-ExistentialismandHumanEmotions.pdf. Accessed 2 Feb. 2019.
6. Stuhr, Rebecca. *Reading Khaled Hosseini*. Greenwood Press, 2009.

