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FRIENDSHIP AS A NARRATIVE AND VALUE-DRIVEN CORE IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S *THE KITE RUNNER*: LOYALTY, SOCIAL INEQUALITY, AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE BOND

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Abstract: This article examines the motif of friendship in Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner* (2003) as the value-driven core of the narrative. The study pursues two research questions. The first question asks how the novel constructs the central bond between Amir and Hassan and how class, ethnicity, and power operate inside this bond. The second question asks how the motif evolves in the adult relationships between Amir and Rahim Khan and between Amir and Soraya. The method combines qualitative close reading with motif analysis, framed by classical friendship theory and by narratology. The results show the childhood bond joins a friendship of virtue on Hassan's side with a friendship of comfort on Amir's side, carries kinship coding from the earliest pages, and contains social hierarchy within the relationship itself. The adult friendships correct the failures of the first bond by supplying recognition, truth, honesty, and reciprocity, and they enable the protagonist's atonement. The article concludes friendship functions in the novel as an instrument of characterization, an engine of plot, and a moral scale. The findings hold value for literary scholarship on Hosseini and for the teaching of ethics through literature.

Keywords: friendship, motif, loyalty, betrayal, social inequality, Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*

1. Introduction

Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) reached a global audience within months of publication and became one of the most widely read novels about Afghanistan in the English-speaking world (Aubry, 2009). The novel narrates the bond between Amir, the son of a wealthy Pashtun merchant in Kabul, and Hassan, the son of the family's Hazara servant. A single act of betrayal in the winter of 1975 breaks the bond, and the remainder of the narrative traces the protagonist's guilt and his late atonement. Existing criticism has concentrated on the second half of this design. Studies of guilt, trauma, and redemption by Khadawardi (2017), O'Brien (2018), and Hao (2024) dominate the scholarship. The friendship itself, the object the betrayal destroys, has received less systematic attention.

The present article addresses this gap. The aim is to define friendship as the narrative and value-driven core of the novel. Two research questions guide the study. RQ1: how does Hosseini construct the Amir–Hassan bond, and how do class, ethnicity, and power operate inside this bond? RQ2: how does the friendship motif evolve in the adult relationships between Amir and Rahim Khan and between Amir and Soraya? The article argues the two adult bonds function as corrective versions of the childhood bond, and the full network of friendships forms the moral architecture of the text.

2. Literature Review

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Three bodies of work frame the study. The first body consists of friendship theory. Aristotle (2000) distinguishes friendships of utility, of pleasure, and of virtue, and he analyzes unequal friendships in which the parties differ in status or power. Lewis (1960) adds the condition of equality: friends stand side by side before a shared object of interest, and the bond is chosen rather than inherited. These two accounts supply the analytical vocabulary for the asymmetry at the center of Hosseini's novel.

The second body consists of narratology. Genette (1980) describes analepsis, the retrospective arrangement in which a narrative opens near its end and rebuilds the past. Rimmon-Kenan (1983) distinguishes direct definition of character from indirect presentation through action and speech. Bal (2009) shows how networks of characters form structural mirrors, so a reader understands one relationship through its parallels with another. These concepts explain how the novel distributes knowledge, sympathy, and moral weight among its figures.

The third body consists of Hosseini criticism. Aubry (2009) documents the American reception of the novel and the reader guilt produced by the collision of intimate affection and inherited privilege. Hower (2003) defines the central relationship through the figure of the servant and the master. Jefferess (2009) reads the novel as an allegory of global ethics in which being good is a practice of responsibility rather than a status. Khadawardi (2017) offers a psychoanalytic account of Amir's guilt as the work of a punishing superego. Saraswat (2014) frames the protagonist's crisis as a search for identity. Nayebpour (2018) analyzes the uses of storytelling inside the novel, and Du (2017) traces Amir's self-actualization. O'Brien (2018) applies trauma theory and stresses the role of the trusted listener in disclosure. The present study joins these strands and redirects them toward the structure of the friendships themselves.

3. Materials and Methods

The material of the study is the text of *The Kite Runner* in its first American edition (Hosseini, 2003). The unit of analysis is the episode. The corpus of episodes covers the childhood chapters set in Kabul, the courtship and marriage chapters set in California, and the Peshawar and Kabul chapters of the return journey.

The method is qualitative and consists of three procedures. The first procedure is close reading of key episodes, with attention to speech, action, spatial markers, and repeated verbal formulas. The second procedure is motif analysis. The study identifies recurrent elements linked to friendship, such as the shared nursemaid, the pomegranate tree, the kite, and the formula of devotion, and traces their distribution across the narrative. The third procedure is comparative structural analysis. The three central relationships are compared as a network, following Bal (2009), in order to establish parallels, contrasts, and corrective functions. Interpretation of the results draws on the theoretical frame described in the literature review. The design corresponds to the standards of qualitative literary research: a defined corpus, a transparent procedure, and findings supported by textual evidence.

4. Results

4.1. The Amir–Hassan bond. Four findings answer RQ1. First, the bond joins two unequal forms of attachment. Hassan offers a friendship of virtue in the Aristotelian sense. He gives without

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measure and expects no return. His formula of devotion, spoken as he runs the last kite of the 1975 tournament, “For you, a thousand times over” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 67), condenses this ethic into six words. Young Amir offers a friendship of pleasure and utility. Hassan entertains, serves, and protects him. The imbalance between the two forms produces the moral tension of the book.

Second, the text codes the relationship as kinship long before the plot reveals the half-brotherhood. The boys feed from the same nursemaid, and the narrator records the cultural belief in a brotherhood of milk. Amir's first word is Baba, and Hassan's first word is Amir (Hosseini, 2003, p. 11). The boys' favorite epic tale, the story of Rostam and Sohrab, mirrors the hidden structure of a household in which a father refuses to know one of his sons. The late revelation therefore completes an existing pattern rather than introducing one.

Third, social hierarchy operates inside the friendship. Amir is a Pashtun and a Sunni, Hassan a Hazara and a Shia. One boy attends school, the other cooks and cleans. The narrator admits he never thought of Hassan as a friend in the ordinary sense, because history and religion stood between them (Hosseini, 2003, p. 25). The analysis identifies this admission as the hinge of the novel's moral design. Amir enjoys the substance of friendship and refuses its name, and the refusal prepares the betrayal. Power also speaks through literacy. Amir teases the illiterate Hassan with invented definitions and alters stories he reads aloud. Small abuses of knowledge rehearse the larger abuse in the alley.

Fourth, the narrative method reinforces the asymmetry. Hosseini characterizes Hassan almost entirely through indirect presentation, through acts of loyalty such as the slingshot defense and the false confession of theft, while Amir exists for the reader as a stream of self-analysis. The servant is seen, the master is heard. Hassan therefore remains an ethical constant, and his formula of devotion returns in the final scene as the measure of Amir's change.

4.2. The evolution of the bond. Three findings answer RQ2. First, Rahim Khan functions as Amir's first adult friend and supplies recognition and truth. The gift of a leather-bound notebook for Amir's stories affirms the boy's inner life against the father's verdict (Hosseini, 2003, p. 96). The telephone call from Peshawar, with its promise of a way to be good again, opens the long analepsis of the narrative and the path of atonement. The final letter interprets Amir's childhood for him, distinguishes guilt from conscience, and instructs him to forgive.

Second, Soraya supplies honesty and reciprocity. Before accepting the marriage proposal she discloses the full story of her past (Hosseini, 2003, pp. 164–165). Amir accepts her and envies her, since she carries her secret no longer while he still conceals his own. The marriage then accumulates the practical content of friendship: defense of Amir's writing, care for the dying Baba, shared endurance of childlessness, and immediate acceptance of Sohrab.

Third, the three relationships form a single structural network. Hassan gives unconditional loyalty and receives betrayal. Rahim Khan gives truth and receives trust. Soraya gives honesty and receives, at last, honesty in return. Each adult bond corrects one failure of the childhood bond, and the network converges on Sohrab, who is Hassan's son, Rahim Khan's assignment, and Soraya's accepted child. The closing kite scene gathers every friendship of the novel into one repeated gesture of devotion.

5. Discussion

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The results extend the existing scholarship in three directions. First, the findings relocate the source of the betrayal. Psychoanalytic readings explain Amir's act through the starved need for paternal love (Khadawardi, 2017), and identity readings explain the act through a crisis of the self (Saraswat, 2014). The present analysis adds a structural cause. The betrayal grows out of a friendship denied from inside, since a boy who refuses to call Hassan a friend finds a way to tell himself he owes Hassan nothing. Inequality is not the background of this friendship but its inner condition, a conclusion consistent with the reception evidence of reader guilt gathered by Aubry (2009) and with the master-and-servant framing of the earliest reviews (Hower, 2003).

Second, the results give the adult friendships a defined function. Nayebpour (2018) shows acts of narration push Amir from concealment toward disclosure, and O'Brien (2018) shows traumatic disclosure requires a safe listener. The network analysis specifies who performs this work and in what order. Rahim Khan listens with the authority of knowledge, Soraya listens with the legitimacy of her own confession, and only after both friendships are in place does Amir speak the full truth. Friendship thereby becomes the medium through which moral repair travels, a mechanism compatible with the account of self-actualization in Du (2017).

Third, the results support the ethical reading of the novel proposed by Jefferess (2009). Being good in the novel is a practice of responsibility toward the person one has wronged. The friendship network provides the training ground for this practice. Amir learns from Hassan what devotion looks like, from Rahim Khan what truth demands, and from Soraya what honesty costs, and the final kite scene demonstrates the lesson learned. A limitation of the study should be noted. The analysis rests on a single novel in a single edition, and the comparative claims about the friendship network remain internal to the text. Future research should test the network model against Hosseini's later novels and against other narratives of unequal friendship in contemporary Anglophone fiction.

6. Conclusion

Friendship in *The Kite Runner* is not a decorative theme. The Amir–Hassan bond joins unequal forms of attachment, carries kinship coding from its first pages, and contains the social hierarchy responsible for its destruction. The adult bonds with Rahim Khan and Soraya correct the failures of the first bond and enable the protagonist's atonement. Together the three relationships form a structural network converging on Sohrab, and the closing scene resolves the network in a single gesture of repaid devotion. Friendship thus serves the novel as an instrument of characterization, an engine of plot, and the scale on which the text weighs every moral action. The findings carry pedagogical value for courses in which literature trains empathy, moral reasoning, and cross-cultural understanding.

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