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Kites as Metaphors of Freedom, Class, and Betrayal in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

Dr. Isaac Ashish Kumar Ghosh
Associate Professor, Department of English
St. John's College, Agra, India

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Abstract

Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* employs a rich tapestry of symbols to explore the complex interplay of personal guilt, societal fracture, and the quest for redemption against the backdrop of Afghanistan's tumultuous history. Among these symbols, the kite emerges as the novel's most potent and multifaceted metaphor. This paper argues that the kite and the act of kite-flying function as a complex, evolving metaphor that intricately embodies the intertwined themes of fleeting freedom, entrenched class hierarchy, and profound betrayal. Initially representing a pure, albeit precarious, liberty and a bond that seems to transcend social divisions, the kite becomes the very instrument through which these divisions are violently enforced and personal treachery is executed. Through a close textual analysis, this study will trace the trajectory of the kite metaphor from its zenith as a symbol of childhood agency and cross-class friendship to its nadir as a mechanism of violation, and finally to its reinterpretation as a fragile symbol of hope and cyclical atonement. In doing so, it illuminates how Hosseini uses this singular image to compress the political, social, and personal tragedies of his narrative.

Keywords: Metaphor, Symbolism, Freedom, Class, Betrayal

In literature, a metaphor is a powerful tool. It helps writers add deeper layers of meaning to a story, turning simple tales into explorations of culture, history, and human emotion. Hosseini, an Afghan-American novelist, is a master of this technique. In his writing, he uses metaphors to root his stories in the specific details of Afghan life. At the same time, he tackles feelings and moral problems that readers anywhere can understand. By doing this, he connects the particular world of Afghanistan—its traditions, conflicts, and beauty—to universal themes like guilt, love, and redemption. This allows his stories to feel both authentic and deeply human, showing how a skilled writer can use metaphor to bridge different worlds and speak to everyone. *The Kite Runner* is indeed a work that embodies the

intricate relationships between literature, history, society, culture, and art.

At the very heart of ***The Kite Runner***, the simple kite is much more than a toy. It is the powerful, central symbol that drives the entire story's meaning. While kite-fighting is a famous Afghan tradition, in the novel it works like a master key, unlocking the book's deepest ideas about life. Khaled Hosseini's style relies on using strong symbols and vivid pictures. The kite is his most important image, helping readers truly feel and understand the story's major themes. This paper examines that the kite carries three main layers of meaning at the same time, all packed into one object. First, the kite is a symbol of freedom. Flying a kite represents a thrilling, beautiful escape. For the characters, it's a moment of joy and skill high above their everyday problems. However, this freedom is fragile and short-lived. A kite is always attached to a string and can be cut down at any moment—just like the peaceful childhood and the old Afghanistan it represents, which are both about to be destroyed.

Second, the kite exposes the harsh reality of class and ethnicity. In the kite tournament, there are two roles: the flyer and the runner. Amir, who is wealthy and from the dominant ethnic group, is the flyer. Hassan, his poor servant from a persecuted minority, is the runner. This scene shows their true place in society: Amir holds the string from above, while Hassan chases after what Amir wants, reinforcing their unequal status. Finally, the kite is the direct cause of the central betrayal. Amir's desperate need to win the tournament and bring home the final defeated kite leads him to make a terrible choice. He sacrifices his loyal friend Hassan to obtain the kite. In this moment, the kite stops being a symbol of fun and becomes a trophy of guilt, representing Amir's cowardice and disloyalty. These three ideas—freedom, class, and betrayal—are woven together like the crossbars and paper of a kite. The events unfold simultaneously, imbuing the kite with a profound depth and potency that resonates throughout the entire novel. Through Amir's first-person narration—a style Hosseini uses to show how the narrator "yearns to alleviate or at least control the deeply damaging impact of one past experience on his adult mind"—the kite becomes the locus of memory, guilt, and ultimately, the path to feeling "satisfied with his atonement by the end of his narration" (Shamnad 45).

In Khaled Hosseini's ***The Kite Runner***, the kite starts as a powerful symbol of freedom. But this freedom is not simple or strong—it is delicate, broken, and means different things to the two boys at the heart of the story. By looking at how Amir and Hassan experience this symbol, we can see how Hosseini uses the kite to show a beautiful, temporary liberty that is always under threat. For young Amir, flying a kite is like finding a secret escape. He lives under the heavy weight of his father Baba's expectations. Baba is a strong, respected man, and Amir often feels he is a disappointment—he prefers reading and writing to sports. He feels invisible in his own home. But when he flies a kite, all that changes. High above Kabul, he is in control. The kite becomes like a part of him. During the big kite-fighting tournament, the goal is to cut the strings of other kites. Winning this contest, and especially capturing the last fallen kite, makes Amir feel powerful and free. He believes this victory will finally make Baba proud of him. That blue kite is more than a prize; it is, as one critic notes, a "prized trophy" he thinks will buy him his father's love and finally free him from feeling like a failure (Walker 102). So, for Amir, the kite represents a very personal freedom: freedom from his insecurity and from his father's shadow.

For Hassan, the experience of freedom through the kite is entirely different. Hassan is a Hazara, an ethnic minority that faces severe discrimination in Afghanistan. He is also the son of a servant, which means his place in society is fixed at the bottom. His world is small and defined by service. However, Hassan is the best kite runner in Kabul. A kite runner doesn't fly

the kite; he chases the kites that have been cut down. Hassan has a wonderful natural talent for knowing exactly where a fallen kite will land. In those moments of running through the streets, he is not just a servant. He is a champion, celebrated for his skill. He experiences a pure, physical freedom and a sense of purpose. The shared joy of kite flying creates a special bond between the boys. As one summary of the book states, the boys were always inseparable and developed a strong friendship with one another. Up in the sky, and in their partnership, their friendship seems to rise above the strict rules of social class. For Hassan, the kite offers a taste of respect and equality that his normal life denies him.

But Hosseini is careful to show that this freedom is an illusion—it is temporary and fragile. A kite can only fly as long as its string holds, and the string itself is a source of danger in the fighting contest. This simple truth is a perfect metaphor for the boys' situation. Their joyful childhood in Kabul in the 1970s is like the kite's flight: beautiful, but destined to end. Their country is on the brink of disaster, about to be invaded by the Soviet Union and later torn apart by civil war and the Taliban. The peace and friendship they know is fragile. The story itself points out that the "fragility of this relationship, symbolized by the kites the boys fly along, is tested as they watch their previous method of life disappear" (Shamnad 52). The freedom represented by the kite does not equate to true, lasting liberty. It is a short-lived performance. It depends on everything staying just as it is—the wind, the string, the skill of the flyer. In the same way, Amir and Hassan's joy depends on a society that is already starting to crack. The violent act of cutting a kite's string foreshadows the much greater violence that will soon cut through their entire lives and country.

In the end, the kite as a symbol of freedom is deeply bittersweet. For Amir, it is the freedom to be seen and loved, but it is one he must earn through competition. For Hassan, it is the freedom to be celebrated for his abilities, but only within the limited role society allows him. For both, it is a freedom tied to a specific, vanishing moment—the last days of an old Afghanistan. Hosseini uses this everyday object to show us how the greatest human hopes for liberty and happiness can be as delicate as paper and string, soaring beautifully one moment and dashed to the ground the next.

In Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, the kite is a powerful but deceptive symbol. On the surface, it represents the joyful friendship between Amir and Hassan. But if we look closer, the kite reveals a much darker truth: it is a clear and painful symbol of the deep class and ethnic divisions that split Afghan society. While the boys share a passion for kite-flying, the activity itself copies and reinforces the very inequalities that define their world. The kite, therefore, is not just a toy; it is a mirror held up to a society built on hierarchy and prejudice.

To understand this, we must first understand the world of Kabul in the 1970s. Afghan society was strictly divided. The majority were Sunni Muslims, mostly from the Pashtun ethnic group, who held most of the wealth, power, and social status. Amir and his father, Baba, belong to this privileged group. The minority were the Hazaras, who were mostly Shi'a Muslims. They faced severe discrimination, were often poor, and typically worked in servant roles. Hassan and his father, Ali, are Hazaras. As one analysis of the novel notes, "The socioeconomic conditions in Afghanistan demonstrate the disparity between the majority (Sunni Muslims) and the minority (Shi'a Muslims) and how people discriminate against each other based on physical features and religious beliefs" (Harcourt 64). This is not just a background detail; it is the engine of the story's central conflict.

The roles Amir and Hassan play in kite-fighting perfectly reflect this social structure. Amir is the **kite flyer.** He stands on the rooftop, holding the spool, making strategic decisions. He is in the position of command and control.

Hassan, meanwhile, is the **kite runner.** His job is to wait, watch, and then chase the kites that are cut down, bringing them back as trophies. He is in the position of service and loyalty. Even in their play, one boy issues orders from above, and the other obeys from below. Such an arrangement isn't an accident; it is a direct reflection of their real-life roles as master and servant. This dynamic shows that their friendship, no matter how real it seems, is limited by social rules that they did not make. This role foreshadows Hassan's ultimate fate, which is abuse and exploitation. A critic poignantly connects this scene to a later image in the novel of a traumatized boy, describing Hassan metaphorically as "a painted young boy forced into whoredom, performing the kind of steps once performed by an organ grinder's monkey" (Shamnad 78). This harsh comparison underscores how the role of a loyal runner can tragically lead to that of a victim.

The central, traumatic event of the novel—Hassan's rape in the alleyway—is where the kite's metaphor as a symbol of class privilege becomes terrifyingly clear. Amir wins the tournament, but his victory depends entirely on Hassan retrieving the final, defeated blue kite. That blue kite is Amir's "prized trophy," the key to his father's love (Walker 87). Assef, the racist bully, corners Hassan, but he refuses to give up the kite. In this moment, the blue kite stops being a symbol of shared joy and transforms into something much uglier: a **token of Amir's privilege**.

Hassan's desperate cry to Assef—"Amir Agha and I are friends"—is one of the most tragic lines in the book (Walker 91). He is asserting a bond of equality and love. But the social order, represented by Assef, does not recognize this bond. Assef sees only a Pashtun master and a Hazara servant. When Amir hides and watches the assault without intervening, he makes a terrible choice. He chooses the blue kite—the symbol of his own social success and his father's approval—over the safety of his friend. In doing so, he accepts the brutal logic of his society: that Hassan, because of his class and ethnicity, is a sacrificed price to pay for Amir's advancement. The kite is no longer a shared prize; it becomes "a spoil of entrenched inequality," bought with Hassan's suffering.

This moment is not just a personal failure of courage for Amir. It is the logical, awful result of the prejudices he has breathed in since birth. The betrayal in the alley is a personal act, but it is fueled by a poisonous social system. Amir believes, on some deep level, that his status as a Pashtun makes him more valuable and that Hassan's role is to serve and even suffer for him. When he takes the blue kite from Hassan's hands later, his "bloodied hands" are metaphorically stained not with the blood of the fight, but "with the guilt of this betrayal long before he ever physically fights Assef" (Walker 110). The trophy is forever corrupted.

The kite-fighting tournament itself is a **microcosm**—a small, perfect model—of this unequal society. The system rewards the cunning, strategic flyer (the privileged Amir) with glory and parental love. But that reward is only delivered through the exploited labor, loyalty, and ultimate suffering of the runner (the subjugated Hassan). The flyer enjoys the victory from a distance; the runner fights the brutal battles on the ground. The novel shows us that Amir's glorious victory is built on Hassan's broken body. This mirrors how a privileged class can often benefit from a system that rests on the unseen or accepted suffering of a lower class.

In Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, the meaning of the kite is not fixed. It does not stay forever as a dark symbol of betrayal. Instead, like Amir himself, it changes and grows. The story shows that we can't erase the past, but we can make amends, heal, and build anew from our mistakes. The kite's journey from a trophy of guilt to a tool of connection is the most important part of Amir's own journey to redemption.

For decades after the alleyway, the memory of the blue kite haunts Amir. His betrayal of Hassan is a sickness in his soul that he carries from Kabul to America. But a chance to "be good again" arrives when he learns that Hassan has been killed by the Taliban and that his son, Sohrab, is alone and in danger in Kabul. Amir's return to his homeland is not just a physical trip; it is a moral quest. He must go back to the place where his cowardice began and face the consequences. This journey is his first real step on the long road to atonement—the difficult process of trying to make up for a terrible wrong.

The road to atonement leads Amir directly into a brutal confrontation with the past. To rescue Sohrab from a Taliban official, Amir must meet the man face-to-face. That man is Assef, the same bully who raped Hassan in the alleyway. This meeting is a nightmare come to life. Assef, now a cruel Taliban commander, forces Amir to fight him for Sohrab's freedom. As Amir is being badly beaten, something miraculous happens. Sohrab, who has been silenced by trauma, uses a slingshot—the very weapon his father, Hassan, used to protect Amir from Assef when they were boys—and shoots Assef in the eye. This single act is bursting with symbolic meaning. This act reverses the powerlessness that was felt in the alley. Where Hassan was once helpless, his son now becomes the protector. Where Amir once failed to act, Sohrab's action saves him. This moment begins to "cut the string of the past." It does not undo the old betrayal, but it starts to balance the scales. The cycle of violence and victimhood is interrupted by an act of defense from the next generation.

However, physically rescuing Sohrab is only half the battle. Sohrab is deeply traumatized, lost in silence and despair. Bringing him to America does not automatically bring him peace. Amir struggles to connect with Sohrab and provide him with a reason to hope again. This chapter brings us to the novel's final, beautiful scene, where the kite metaphor is completely transformed.

In a park in California, Amir buys a kite. He does not do it to fight or to win a trophy. He does it to connect with a broken boy. He teaches Sohrab how to fly it, just as he and Hassan once did. Then, in a moment of profound change, Amir takes on a new role. He shouts to Sohrab, "For you, a thousand times over!" These are the exact words of loyal, selfless love that Hassan once said to *him*. Now, Amir is no longer the privileged kite-flyer giving orders. He has willingly become the **kite runner,** the loyal supporter, chasing the kite for Sohrab. This simple act is one of the most powerful in the entire book, and it redefines what the kite means.

First, the **kite is no longer a prize of violence**. In Kabul, the blue kite was a trophy won through Hassan's suffering. In California, the kite is a **therapeutic tool**. It is an offer of friendship, a gentle activity meant to draw Sohrab out of his shell. It serves as a link between Sohrab and his father's happier past, as well as his war-torn Afghan heritage. Second, the **freedom it represents is different**. The childhood freedom of the kite was about winning, competition, and proving oneself. Now, the freedom is quieter and more profound. For Amir, it is the **hard-won freedom from a lifetime of guilt**. By finally acting with courage and sacrifice for Hassan's son, he has earned the right to feel peace. For Sohrab, the small smile he offers at the end is a sign of a possible inner freedom from his overwhelming pain. It is a first step.

Most importantly, this act **smashes the old class hierarchy**. For their entire childhoods, Amir was the master and Hassan the servant. This system was mirrored in their kite-flying roles. Now, Amir voluntarily lowers himself to the role of servant. He becomes Sohrab's kite runner. In doing so, he explicitly dismantles the master-servant dynamic that poisoned his friendship with Hassan and led to the betrayal.

He serves Sohrab not out of social obligation, but out of pure, repentant love. The betrayal is not erased—Hassan is still gone, and the past is unchanged—but it is **actively atoned for through a mirrored, loving action**. He is finally repaying the loyalty he was once given.

This final scene is the completion of Amir's character arc. As one analysis notes, the act of storytelling and revisiting the past is a form of "recollection and reconstruction" that allows Amir to finally feel "satisfied with his atonement by the end of his narration" (Shamnad 124). By flying the kite with Sohrab, he is reconstructing a broken bond. He is also finally living up to the moral code his father, Baba, tried to teach him. Baba once said that "a boy who doesn't stand up for himself becomes a man who can't stand up to anything." Amir failed to stand up for Hassan. But, as the same analysis points out, "as an adult, he can only redeem himself by proving he has the courage to stand up for what is right" (Barnes & Noble 96). His entire journey to Kabul and his care for Sohrab is proof. Flying the kite is his peaceful, final stand—not a stand fought with fists, but with patience, love, and a promise kept.

The evolving metaphor of the kite shows us that redemption is possible. It is not a magical solution, but a challenging journey of confronting repercussions, making sacrifices, and executing fresh, affectionate deeds to mend past wounds. The kite that once symbolized a friendship destroyed by class and cowardice is, in the end, reclaimed. It becomes a symbol of a new relationship built on service, equality, and hope. It teaches us that while we cannot change the past, we can change what it means for our future. For Amir, the string of the kite is no longer a wire cutting into a rival's kite but a lifeline, finally pulling both him and Sohrab back into the light.

In the end, Khaled Hosseini's use of the kite is a brilliant lesson in how to use a metaphor. It is much more than just a toy in the story. It becomes a changing symbol that captures the book's greatest struggles. It represents the short, beautiful freedom of childhood and of Afghanistan before the wars. It exposes the ugly machinery of class and ethnic hatred that organizes that society. And it is the direct tool and lasting reminder of Amir's terrible betrayal. As Hosseini fills his novel with Afghan words and customs to make it feel authentic, "the kite—a real part of Afghan culture—becomes the perfect object to carry all these meanings" (Shamnad 124). The true strength of this metaphor is that it changes, just as Amir does. It starts as a symbol of a longed-for escape, then becomes a symbol of unfair power, then a reminder of shame, and finally, a delicate tool for healing. The study shows that "cultural and individual skills from experience, together with rational impressions of the world, have a tendency to offer a leading contribution to the comprehension" of deep literary symbols like this one (Shamnad 132). Through the story of the kite, readers around the world can understand the "ethnic and ideological realities of Afghanistan not as distant political ideas, but as real forces that cut into individual lives as sharply as a knife. Finally, Hosseini gives us a message of hope. He shows that while kites—like freedom, friendship, and a nation's identity—can be violently destroyed, people have a wonderful ability to remember, to love, and to make things right. With enormous effort, we can send hope back into the sky, even if its flight is shaky. The string that once tied Hassan to a life of service and Amir to a life of guilt is, in the final pages, turned into a line that connects a wounded past to a future where healing is possible.

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