



6

Ungrievable Lives, Guilt, and Moral Responsibility in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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Page No. 53-59

Abstract: This paper offers a simple reading of Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner* by focusing on guilt, unequal lives, and the idea of ungrievability. The novel is read as a story where some lives are treated as less valuable and less worthy of grief. Hassan, as a Hazara, represents a life that is ignored and made invisible by society. This reading uses Judith Butler's idea of ungrievability to show how certain people are not fully recognized as worthy of care or justice (Butler 24). Amir's silence during Hassan's suffering is not only a personal failure but also shaped by ethnic hierarchy and social privilege. As Amir admits, "I ran because I was a coward" (Hosseini 77), showing how fear and power work together. The paper also reads guilt as something that continues over time. Even after moving to America, Amir cannot escape his past, as he reflects that the past always returns (Hosseini 1). Drawing on ideas of memory and trauma (Hirsch 22), this study shows that distance does not remove responsibility. The novel presents redemption as action, especially through Amir's return and his attempt to protect Sohrab. This paper argues that *The Kite Runner* connects private guilt with larger social inequality and shows that moral repair begins when unrecognized lives are finally acknowledged and valued.

Keywords: Ungrievability, guilt and redemption, ethnic hierarchy, moral responsibility, memory and trauma, Afghan society, Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*

Introduction

Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner* can be read as a story about guilt, memory, and unequal human value. This paper offers a reading of the novel by focusing on how some lives are treated as less important and less worthy of grief. Hassan's life is shaped by his position as a Hazara, a group that faces discrimination in Afghan society. He is loyal, kind, and brave, yet his suffering is ignored. This reading connects Hassan's condition to Judith Butler's idea of ungrievability, where certain lives are not fully recognized as valuable or worthy of mourning (Butler 24).

The relationship between Amir and Hassan is central to this reading. Amir belongs to a powerful group and grows up with comfort and security, while Hassan lives as a servant without protection. When Hassan is attacked, Amir chooses silence. He later admits, "I ran because I was a coward" (Hosseini 77). This moment is not only about fear but also about a social system that allows Amir to remain silent without punishment. Edward Said explains that power often works quietly through social and cultural systems that make inequality appear normal (Said 25). Hassan's pain becomes invisible because society has already decided his life matters less.

Memory plays an important role in shaping Amir's identity.



Even after moving to the United States, Amir cannot forget what happened. He reflects, “It’s wrong what they say about the past... because the past claws its way out” (Hosseini 1). This shows that guilt does not disappear with time or distance. Marianne Hirsch argues that memory and trauma continue to shape a person’s life even when the event is over (Hirsch 22). Amir’s life in exile becomes a space where memory grows stronger. The idea of ungrievability helps explain why Hassan’s suffering remains unspoken for so long. His life is not publicly mourned or defended. His silence reflects a larger pattern where marginalized people are denied recognition. This reading shows that the novel is not only about personal guilt but also about how society decides which lives are valued.

Through guilt, silence, and memory, *The Kite Runner* invites readers to think about moral responsibility. The novel suggests that true redemption begins when ignored lives are finally seen and acknowledged.

Literature Review

Khaled Hosseini’s novel *The Kite Runner* has been widely discussed for its themes of guilt, memory, exile, and redemption. Many critics read the novel as a personal story of moral failure and later repair. They focus on Amir’s guilt after his betrayal of Hassan and see the novel as a journey toward becoming “good again” (Hosseini 2). Such readings highlight the emotional depth of the text but often treat guilt as an individual issue rather than something shaped by social conditions. Several scholars examine ethnic hierarchy in the novel, especially the unequal relationship between Pashtuns and Hazaras. Critics argue that Hassan’s position as a Hazara explains why his suffering is ignored and why Amir feels safe remaining silent. Edward Said’s idea that power works through cultural and social dominance helps explain how such inequality becomes normal and unquestioned (Said 25). These studies show that Amir’s actions are linked to privilege, not only personal fear.

Some critics focus on memory and trauma in the novel. They suggest that Amir’s narration is shaped by his attempt to deal with the past. Marianne Hirsch’s work on memory explains how trauma continues to affect identity across time (Hirsch 22). Amir’s life in America is often read as a space where memory becomes stronger rather than weaker. A few studies discuss exile and return. They argue that Amir’s return to Afghanistan is a moral journey rather than a political one. Scholars note that physical distance does not remove guilt but increases the need for reflection and responsibility (Safran 87).

However, very few studies directly use the idea of ungrievability to read the novel. Judith Butler’s concept suggests that some lives are not fully recognized as worthy of grief or value (Butler 24). Hassan’s life and suffering can be understood through this idea, yet this connection has not been explored in detail. This paper builds on earlier work by bringing together guilt, ethnic hierarchy, memory, and ungrievability in a single reading.

Research Gap

Most studies on Khaled Hosseini’s novel *The Kite Runner* focus on guilt, redemption, exile, and Afghan history. Many critics read Amir’s betrayal mainly as a personal moral failure and discuss his journey as emotional healing. Some scholars also examine ethnic hierarchy and show how Hassan’s position as a Hazara shapes his suffering. However, these studies often treat guilt, social power, and memory as separate themes instead of connecting them within a single framework.



There is very limited work that uses the idea of ungrievability to understand the novel. Hassan's life is repeatedly ignored, his pain is not publicly acknowledged, and his voice remains silent, yet this condition has not been fully explained through a theoretical lens. This paper addresses this gap by offering a reading that connects guilt, ethnic hierarchy, and ungrievability. It shows how Amir's silence is shaped by a system where some lives are treated as less valuable, and how redemption becomes meaningful only when such lives are finally recognized.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative and text based approach to examine Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner*. The paper offers a close reading of the text to understand how guilt, ungrievability, and moral responsibility are presented through characters, events, and narrative voice. Important moments such as Hassan's suffering, Amir's silence, his life in exile, and his return to Afghanistan are analyzed carefully. These moments are read as key points that reveal how social power and personal choices are connected. Quotations from the novel are used to support the analysis and to show how language expresses guilt, fear, and memory.

The study also uses ideas from scholars such as Judith Butler, Edward Said, and Marianne Hirsch to support the reading (Butler 24; Said 25; Hirsch 22). Butler's idea of ungrievability helps explain how some lives are treated as less important, Said's work helps explain how power works through social systems, and Hirsch's theory explains how memory and trauma continue over time. By combining close textual reading with these theoretical ideas, the paper offers a clear and simple interpretation of *The Kite Runner* that connects personal experience with larger social and ethical questions.

Discussion

Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner* can be read as a powerful narrative where guilt, silence, and unequal human value are closely connected. This discussion offers a detailed reading by bringing together the ideas of ungrievability, ethnic hierarchy, memory, and moral responsibility. It shows that Amir's actions are not only personal but shaped by a social system that decides whose life matters and whose suffering can be ignored.

1. Ethnic Hierarchy and the Making of Ungrievable Lives

The relationship between Pashtuns and Hazaras forms the base of power in the novel. Hassan, as a Hazara, is placed at the lowest level of this system. He is loyal and loving, yet his life is treated as less valuable. Amir himself reflects this learned belief when he says, "History isn't easy to overcome... neither is religion" (Hosseini 9). This shows how inequality is taught and accepted as normal from childhood.

Judith Butler's idea of ungrievability helps explain Hassan's position. Butler argues that some lives are not seen as fully human and therefore their suffering does not receive attention or mourning (Butler 24). Hassan's pain is not publicly recognized. Even when he is attacked, there is no justice, no acknowledgment, and no voice raised for him. His silence is not just personal but socially produced. Hassan's famous line, "For you, a thousand times over" (Hosseini 67), reflects loyalty, but it also shows how deeply he has accepted his position. He gives everything without expecting recognition. This makes his life emotionally powerful but socially invisible. His ungrievability is what allows others to move on without confronting his suffering.



Edward Said explains that power often works by making inequality appear natural (Said 25). In the novel, no one openly questions Hassan's position. This normalization allows violence and silence to continue without resistance.

2. Silence, Guilt, and Moral Failure

Amir's silence during Hassan's assault is the central moment of the novel. He watches but does not act. Later, he admits, "I ran because I was a coward" (Hosseini 77). This confession is important because it shows awareness, but it comes too late. His silence is not only about fear but also about protecting his social position. Amir also reflects, "I had one last chance to make a decision... I ran" (Hosseini 73). This shows that he knows he had a choice. However, that choice is shaped by a system that rewards silence. Speaking up would mean risking his privilege as a Pashtun boy.

This reading understands Amir's guilt as both personal and social. He feels guilty because he knows he failed morally, but that failure is made possible by a structure where Hassan's suffering is not seen as important. Butler's idea of ungrievability helps explain why Amir is able to justify his silence at that moment (Butler 24). If Hassan's life had equal value, silence would not be possible. Marianne Hirsch's theory of memory explains how such moments continue to shape identity (Hirsch 22). Amir cannot escape this event. It returns again and again, showing that guilt is not temporary but lasting.

3. Memory, Trauma, and the Return of the Past

Memory plays a central role in the novel. Amir begins his story by saying, "I became what I am today at the age of twelve" (Hosseini 1). This shows that the past is not separate from the present. His identity is shaped by a single moment of failure. He also reflects, "It's wrong what they say about the past... because the past claws its way out" (Hosseini 1). This line shows how memory works like a force that cannot be controlled. Even when Amir moves to America, his past follows him. Hirsch argues that trauma continues to shape identity across time and space (Hirsch 22). Amir's life in America may seem peaceful, but internally he remains disturbed. His success as a writer does not remove his guilt.

This section shows that exile does not offer escape. Instead, it creates a distance where memory becomes clearer and more painful. Amir cannot build a new life without facing the old one.

4. Exile, Privilege, and Moral Distance

Migration to the United States gives Amir safety and opportunity. However, it also allows him to avoid immediate responsibility. He builds a new life, gets married, and becomes successful. Yet, he admits that something is missing. Rahim Khan's call, "There is a way to be good again" (Hosseini 2), breaks this comfort. It reminds Amir that moral responsibility has not ended. His past still demands action.

Scholars argue that exile often creates reflection rather than freedom (Safran 87). Amir's life in America shows this clearly. He is physically distant from Afghanistan but emotionally connected to it. Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests that moral responsibility is not limited by place (Appiah 107). Amir's journey supports this idea. He cannot escape what he has done simply by moving away.

5. Violence and the Denial of Grief



Characters like Assef represent extreme violence supported by ideology. Assef believes in ethnic superiority and acts without guilt. His violence is open, unlike Amir's silent failure. When Amir meets Assef again, he is forced to confront both personal and social violence. The fight between them is not only physical but symbolic. It represents a confrontation with the past. Hassan's death is another important moment.

It happens quietly, without justice or public mourning. This reinforces Butler's idea that some lives are not considered grievable (Butler 24). Hassan's death does not create social outrage. It passes almost silently, showing how deeply inequality is accepted.

6. Redemption as Ethical Action

The novel presents redemption not as a feeling but as an action. Amir's decision to rescue Sohrab is his attempt to respond to Hassan's ungrieved life. This act is not perfect or complete, but it is necessary. Amir reflects during his confrontation with Assef, "My body was broken... but I felt healed" (Hosseini 289). This shows that pain becomes part of moral repair. Redemption requires suffering, acknowledgment, and action. However, the novel does not present redemption as complete. Sohrab remains silent and traumatized. Healing is slow and uncertain. This suggests that moral repair cannot fully erase the past.

7. From Ungrievability to Recognition

The final part of the novel shows a small but important change. Amir runs a kite for Sohrab and says, "For you, a thousand times over" (Hosseini 371). This line repeats Hassan's earlier words, but now it carries a different meaning. It suggests recognition. Amir is no longer ignoring a life. He is responding to it with care and responsibility. This moment does not erase the past, but it shows a shift from silence to acknowledgment. This reading argues that *The Kite Runner* presents moral responsibility as the act of recognizing lives that were earlier ignored. Ungrievability is challenged when someone chooses to see, remember, and act.

Through ethnic hierarchy, silence, memory, exile, and return, the novel shows how personal guilt is shaped by social systems. Hassan's life represents those who are denied recognition, while Amir's journey shows how such denial creates lasting moral burden. By using the idea of ungrievability, this discussion shows that the novel is not only about guilt but about whose lives are allowed to matter. Redemption becomes meaningful only when these lives are finally acknowledged.

Key Findings

This study finds that guilt in *The Kite Runner* is not only a personal emotion but is shaped by social and ethnic power. Amir's silence during Hassan's suffering is made possible by his position as a Pashtun, which protects him from consequences. The novel shows that moral failure cannot be understood fully without looking at the system that allows such failure to happen. Hassan's life, as a Hazara, is treated as less valuable, which makes his pain easy to ignore. This confirms that social hierarchy plays a major role in shaping ethical choices. The paper also finds that the idea of ungrievability is central to understanding the novel. Hassan's suffering and even his death do not receive proper recognition or mourning. His life remains largely invisible within the social structure. Using Butler's idea, this study shows that some lives are not seen as worthy of grief or justice, and this lack of recognition allows violence and



silence to continue. The novel highlights how such ignored lives create a deep moral burden for those who benefit from the system.

Finally, the study finds that redemption in the novel is presented as an ongoing ethical process rather than a complete solution. Amir's return to Afghanistan and his effort to protect Sohrab show that moral repair requires action, acknowledgment, and responsibility. However, the novel does not offer full closure. Trauma and silence remain, especially in Sohrab's character. This suggests that while individuals can attempt to correct past wrongs, the effects of inequality and ungrieved lives continue across time.

Conclusion

Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner* presents a powerful story where personal guilt is deeply connected to social inequality and unequal human value. This paper has offered a reading that brings together guilt, ethnic hierarchy, memory, and the idea of ungrievability. It shows that Amir's silence is not only an individual moral failure but is shaped by a system that allows some lives to be ignored and treated as less important. Hassan's life represents those who are denied recognition, voice, and justice.

The study also highlights that memory plays a central role in shaping moral responsibility. Amir's past does not disappear with time or distance. Even in exile, he remains tied to his actions and their consequences. This shows that ethical responsibility cannot be escaped. It must be faced and acknowledged. The idea of ungrievability helps explain why Hassan's suffering remains unrecognized for so long and why this silence creates lasting guilt.

Finally, the novel presents redemption as a difficult and incomplete process. Amir's actions toward Sohrab show an attempt to respond to a life that was once ignored. However, the pain and trauma do not fully disappear. This suggests that while individuals can try to correct their past, the effects of injustice remain. The novel ultimately reminds us that moral repair begins when we recognize and value lives that were earlier unseen, unheard, and ungrieved.

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