

Atonement as an Overarching Theme in Khaled Hosseini's *Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and *the Mountains Echoed*

2.1 Examining the concept of Atonement with reference to Guilt

Atonement broadly refers to purging of one's sins. It stems out of an act of wrongdoing for which a person feels guilty. Through atonement a person makes amends by either correcting the wrongdoing or by doing good in other ways to express remorse. Atonement has a slightly different connotation in Christianity. In Christianity Atonement amounts to a belief that Jesus dying on the cross was an act of sacrifice which was imperative to redeem the sins of the entire human race. It led to a reconciliation of God and the mankind.

“Atonement, in Biblical terms, means bringing God and man at-one-ment. Sin is an infinitely unscalable wall that separates man from God. But, on the cross of Christ this wall is broken and man is brought into an acceptable relationship with God.”
(Marbaniang)

In the research undertaken though, atonement would not be discussed considering its Biblical connotation. When one indulges in a transgression of sorts and realizes that he/she has done wrong, an urge for the reparation of the act of wrongdoing surfaces. It is interesting to gauge that atonement does not always imply an act of amending one's past actions but it also means that the individuals yearn to find a larger purpose in life—something which is selfless and which would eventually lead to a greater good of oneself and others. Urging to atone oneself primarily stems from the guilt of having done something wrong. So, it is imperative that one first traverses through the concept of guilt so as to get a better insight into the nitty gritty of atonement as a concept.

Nardjes Kraifi elaborates upon the same in her thesis as she says:

Throughout life, people commit mistakes or transgressions; they may hurt and offend others or even themselves by breaking a moral law and violating the social ethical standard. When transgression takes place, people tend to feel empathy toward their victims seeing the effects of their misconduct; this gives rise to different feelings and emotions like regret, remorse, shame and specially feelings of guilt. This latter is the most painful because it makes them devalue themselves as they lose their positive self-image and believe

they are no more human. So, their inner peace is threatened and all occurs inside their mind. After committing a mistake, taking the responsibility, and confronting one's misconduct is the solution to lessen the feeling of guilt, and this may occur through self-forgiveness and atonement because if a person who cannot forgive himself and lives in a conflict within himself. Then how can he make people forgive him? (Kraifi)

It is evident that a sense of guilt is what primarily drives one to atone oneself. Any act of misdoing which shakes one's moral sensibility of right or wrong leads an individual to make amends. By making amends the person is able to resolve the moral dilemma and let go off the guilt which wrecks his/her mental peace. Atonement is thus an important aspect wherein one strives to be righteous by doing right by the person whom he/she has harmed by any form of misconduct which do not adhere to one's moral or ethical standards.

In the paper, 'Inducing Guilt: A Literature Review,' guilt is succinctly defined as:

Guilt is a self-conscious emotion that implies a specific negative evaluation of the self, focussed on the behaviour that transgresses a moral norm and causes someone else harm, loss, or distress. This unpleasant emotion which most likely appears in social contexts, regulates moral behaviour. It is considered to have positive effects on social relationships, motivation of avoidance of transgressions, repairing the damage, apologizing so that the relationship is restored. (Rebega et al.)

Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis furthermore claims that a sense of repeated guilt leads to therapeutic healing. (Westerink 207–28). But in the twentieth century many thinkers have questioned the necessity of guilt as an emotion. It is questioned whether one harbours the feeling of guilt merely to escape from the rigors of societal demands. In his article in 'The New York Times,' David Crossen mentions:

Twentieth century literature opened a new approach to guilt by questioning its very validity. The freedom of the individual to grow up and become independent begins to conflict with social demands. Often, we feel guilty because we are too vulnerable to these demands to act on what we feel is right for ourselves. By making our instincts second class citizens we lose a basis for

feeling free, and compensate by turning to heroic actions, seeking to find the power to be loved.

In Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman," Willy Loman has suffered years of guilt because his son Biff, a high school football hero, once found him in bed with a woman. The son destroys himself in order to punish the father, who in turn had been feeding his own heroic illusions on his son's exploits. Biff loved the heroic idea of a father, but not the fallible lonely man.

In literature, the compromise that Freud insisted must be made by civilized man is achieved: the instincts become a basis for communication, not an impediment.

The artist wrestles with his guilt and makes himself whole. In this fashion, he taps the true fountain of morality, and reaffirms man's capacity to choose good and eschew evil. (Crossen)

Guilt though a negative emotion makes the perpetrator think hard about his actions and it is this constant sense of guilt that often directs a person to amend his actions. This absolution or reparation is what we call as atonement. Hence, it is established that guilt is usually a precursor or the driving force which prods an individual towards subsequent atonement. As guilt wreaks havoc the individual gradually reaches a realisation that doing right by the person whom he did wrong by only would help him free his conscious of this gnawing and debilitating feeling. Though this reparation or atonement does not always come to be by making amends and resurrecting situations that went awry owing to the individuals act of ill will. At times things cannot be undone and no matter how badly a person wants things to be 'good again,' it is no more possible to rectify the situation. In such a scenario, would an individual forever pine for atonement? Atonement in this regard has another dimension. By indulging in moral deeds, humanitarian measures and contributing to the greater good of the society a person can make an earnest attempt to fight for his unatoned sins. Such selfless acts of love and service to mankind make him reach closer to atonement.

Literature abounds with numerous examples of protagonists who yearn for atoning their sins or ill doings. This constant urge for reparations of one's actions often becomes the central point of their lives. It runs parallel throughout their life's journey

like a trail and follow them like a shadow. At times the guilt of their misdeeds is so entrenched in their souls that all their consequent actions and reactions seem to be an aftermath of the same. Numerous writers have made an endeavour to depict this dilemma through their works. The article 'Literary Guilt' delineates guilt and its repercussions quite deftly. It also touches upon an intriguing aspect of atonement which is the religious aspect. An individual is by and large conditioned to feel guilt of his transgressions and from his childhood is fed upon this truth that if you err or harm a fellow individual with your actions you are a sinner in the eyes of God. Thus, from early on this thought permeates deep down in his psyche that atonement is the goal if one has harmed a fellow being. The article furthermore delves into the plight of literary characters who led miserable lives owing to a sense of guilt and the perennial urge to atone themselves and do good by the one they harmed:

The Scarlet Letter's Dimmesdale is an example of this kind of self-destructive cycle. He tortures himself, carving his own scarlet letter into his breast and wasting away from the torments through which he puts himself. In Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, Mr. Rochester, too, hides himself away in lonely despair after he is blinded by the fire at Thornfield Hall. His guilt stems from his locking away Bertha, as well as from his deception of Jane, and he compounds his guilt by hiding in his damaged mansion, doing nothing to restore the balance upset by his transgressions. While some literary characters are undone by guilt, others seem impervious to it, acting as if they are conscience-free. In fact, the sense of guilt is so fundamental to the human condition that one must assume something is wrong at the core of those who can commit evil and feel nothing. For instance, Iago in Shakespeare's Othello and Chillingworth in *The Scarlet Letter* wreak havoc on all those around them, bent only on achieving their own goals, which in Iago's case is power and in Chillingworth's is revenge. Given Sigmund Freud's theory of the id, the ego, and the superego, in which the id is our primitive impulses, the superego is morality tempering those impulses, and the ego is the mechanism that mediates between the two, these characters would seem to be missing an important part of their psyches. Characters such as these, as well as characters whose lives are spent controlled by guilt, can function as cautionary tales for

the reader. Guilt is an important part of human personality, but when it takes over a life, that life may not be worth living. (bookworm)

It would be thus interesting to investigate as to how the yearning for atonement lays bare a protagonist and overpowers his life. As already mentioned, there are numerous memorable literary characters which are remembered through their human follies and foibles, stuck in the cycle of guilt and atonement. Khaled Hosseini's books are about familial love set against the backdrop of war-ravaged Afghanistan. Yet there is one underlying theme which runs through all his works. It is the theme of atonement in its varied shades that runs deep into the novels of the Afghan-American novelist who is known for his evocative and heart-wrenching near-life tales of the Afghan soil.

2.2 Atonement as a Central Theme in the Kite Runner

The Kite Runner is the debut book of exile writer Khaled Hosseini. It was published in 2003 and attained resounding success. The fact that it came out post 9/11 made it a significant piece of literature as it remarkably aided in assuaging the myths that came to be associated with Afghanistan. It presented to the Western world the real picture of the war-wrecked land of Afghanistan. Though a fictional representation it laid bare the long history of wars and subjugation that the people of Afghanistan were subjected to. A postcolonial text *The Kite Runner* is a tale of love, familial bond, and atonement. Atonement is an inherent theme in the novel which is a story of two Afghan boys Amir and Hassan amidst the backdrop of Afghanistan right from the last days of monarchy in the 1970s to the post-Taliban era. As mentioned earlier that though it is indeed a fictionalized tale, it is deeply rooted in the political and social fabric of contemporary Afghanistan. The novel can be broadly fragmented into three sections. In the first part we are acquainted with the bonds of friendship between Amir and Hassan. Amir hails from the Pashtun clan owing to which he is placed on the higher rungs of the erstwhile Afghan society. Hassan is his ally yet someone who serves him as a Hazara boy of inferior status. Yet we learn how the two boys are inseparable and how Hassan, the Hazara boy seems to go to any lengths for Amir. The first part also gives us a peek into the life of the protagonist Amir, his Baba at the backdrop of then political milieu of Afghanistan right from the last days of monarchy to the advent of Soviet Union. The first part ends with the protagonist's 'unatoned

sins' which in a way becomes the edifice on which the novel is set and which propels the story of Amir and Hassan further along, only to leave the war-ravaged soils of Afghanistan and end up as an expat in dreamy America. The second part hence happens in the US wherein we are made privy to the expat experience of Afghanis which is as authentic as it gets probably because Hosseini draws from his own experience as an expat who has spent most of his life as an expat himself. The third and final sojourn is when Amir comes back to his homeland to atone his sins and reconcile with the hitherto suppressed sense of guilt that gnawed at his being for most part of his adult years. The novel commences on a note which at once makes one realize the sheer helplessness of the protagonist Amir and throws significant light on the fact that though he has moved on and grown in years, he is still deep-down grappling with the demons of his 'unatoned sins':

I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975. I remember the precise moment, crouching behind a crumbling mud wall, peeking into the alley near the frozen creek. That was a long time ago, but it's wrong what they say about the past, I've learned, about how you can bury it. Because the past claws its way out. Looking back now, I realize I have been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty-six years. (Hosseini *The Kite Runner* 1).

Though years have transpired yet Amir has not been able to come to terms with the guilt of his actions and his inability to stand up for his friend and half-brother Hassan. So, when a phone call from his father's old friend, and confidante Rahim Khan tells him, 'There is a way to be good again' (Hosseini *The Kite Runner* 2) a rush of memories coupled with nostalgia surface. Though the urge to atone was always existent lurking in the abyss of his being, the call from Rahim Khan brings it to the fore so much so that Amir is transported to the winter of 1975 when it all began.

These opening lines of the novel set a tone of melancholy, grief, and an innate urgency to redeem and set oneself free of the 'unatoned sins.' Though largely and necessarily the protagonist is seeking atonement of one act wherein he did not stand up for his friend. Yet it is interesting to gauge the protagonist is yearning to atone himself in several other aspects as well and not merely doing right by his friend

Hassan. Thus, in a way the theme of atonement is deeply entrenched in the novel. Niraja Saraswat in her research paper further elaborates on this:

Amir's "unatoned sins," as they are described in the novel's opening chapter, have plagued his conscience, and cast an oppressive shadow over his joys and triumphs. The phone call interrupts Amir's seemingly comfortable life as a married man and newly-published novelist in America, and launches an epic journey back to Afghanistan in search of redemption.... Amir is a cultural hybrid which makes him distinct and unique. Thus, the novel revolves around the central axiom of personal selves permeated by political prejudices and permutations. (Saraswat)

Juan Du in his research titled, 'A Journey of Self-Actualization of Amir in *The Kite Runner*' argues that, *The Kite Runner* not only "shows a person's spiritual growth but also the history of the soul of a nation, and of a country's suffering." (Du 100)

Adopting the format of a bildungsroman, *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini takes us through a journey wherein we see assimilation, adaption and resistance as Amir lives through the ragged land of Afghanistan to the American turf and finally his final sojourn as he comes leaping back to Afghanistan. Atonement is a consistent force that drives him and aids him attain inner peace and salvation from his childhood ghosts. Interestingly not just Amir, other characters in the novel too are depicted grappling with their inner demons and come to terms with actions that they are not inherently proud of. Amir's Baba is one such character who too is shown as someone who is working mutely towards his untoward actions. He had impregnated another man's wife and he could not be brave enough to give the child born out of the act, his name. Honour and class dynamics took precedence and Baba could never own up that Hassan was his offspring. Yet in a bid to atone himself he keeps Hassan in proximity and loves him as much as his other son Amir. Though during his years growing up with Hassan, Amir is acutely envious and insecure of the fact that Baba loved Hassan more than him, it is much later when he is has a promising life in America that he come to know that Hassan was his half-brother. And then he could clearly see why Baba favoured Hassan:

How could I have been so blind? The signs had been there for me to see all along; they came flying back at me now: Baba hiring Dr. Kumar to fix Hassan's harelip. Baba never missing Hassan's birthday. I remembered the day we were planting tulips, when I had asked Baba if he'd ever consider getting new servants. Hassan' not going anywhere, he'd barked. He is staying right here with us, where he belongs. This is his home and we are his family. He had wept, wept, when Ali announced he and Hassan were leaving us. (Hosseini *The Kite Runner* 196)

Inwardly Baba would feel guilty for his actions towards both Ali and Hassan. And his various actions henceforth stemmed from his urge to make things right and to pay in some way or the other for his sins. It is evident in the following lines from the book, in Rahim Khan's letter:

I loved him because he was my friend, but also because he was a good man, maybe even a great man. And this is what I want you to understand, that good, *real* good, was born out of your father's remorse. Sometimes, I think everything he did, feeding the poor on the streets, building the orphanage, giving money to friends in need, it was all his way of redeeming himself. And that, I believe, is what true redemption is, Amir jan, when guilt leads to good. (Hosseini *The Kite Runner* 263)

These lines from Rahim Khan's parting letter signifies that though Baba looked as hard as a rock from outside, he too was pining under throes of remorse and was forever looking for ways to atone himself. Amir was oblivious to Baba's guilt but when he comes to know of how Baba had sinned, it dawned on him at once that 'Rahim Khan had summoned me here to atone not just for my sins but for Baba's too' (Hosseini *The Kite Runner* 198).

In this regard, the study becomes all the more pertinent as the book *The Kite Runner* has not just the protagonist Amir reeling under the burden of perpetual guilt which he urges to atone of but also his father who had sinned as well. There is thus an urgency for atonement at dual levels. We are made privy to Amir's helplessness all through the novel in big bold letters. But later, it is also revealed albeit in bits and pieces as to how Baba was someone who too lived a life forever making up for his actions and

redeeming his transgressions. So, when Amir begins his quest for atonement, he is not just atoning himself but also atoning the past misdeeds of his long-dead father.

2.3 Father- Son Relationship and the Constant urge to atone

Amir's relationship with his father had an indelible effect on his psyche. At the start of the book itself we get a sense that *The Kite Runner* is all about familial relationship. Hosseini chose the volatile backdrop of a broken and disintegrated Afghanistan and one can even draw a parallel with the journey of the various characters vis a vis the rise and fall of Afghanistan. Yet at the core of it the novel is about friendship, love, and betrayal. Other than friendship, the relationship that stands out and the one which plays an integral part in the protagonist's behaviour and life decisions throughout his life, is his relationship with his father. Baba as is he called is depicted as this towering figure, a disciplinarian who was valiant enough to have wrestled a bear. Amir was in awe of his father and from his early childhood days he struggled to please him. His poetry-loving, compassionate self-appeared meek in front of the 'six-foot-five' imposing man who drew everyone's attention the moment he walked in a room. The following lines vividly describes Amir's reverence of his father:

Lore has it my father once wrestled a black bear in Baluchistan with his bare hands. If the story had been about anyone else, it would have been dismissed as a *laaf*, that Afghan tendency to exaggerate- sadly almost a national affliction; if someone bragged that his son was a doctor, chances were the kid had once passed a biology test in high school. But no one ever doubted the veracity of any story about Baba. And if they did, well, Baba did have those three parallel scars coursing a jagged path down his back. I have imagined Baba's wrestling match countless times, even dreamed about it. And in those dreams, I can never tell Baba from the bear. (Hosseini *The Kite Runner* 11)

Amir's struggle with guilt and the consequent self-affirming journey he undertakes to atone his past actions is something which takes place in the second half of the novel. Yet interestingly, it is quite early in the book when we find Amir stepping on the road to atonement in a bid to please his father. As is put forth in this research paper,

The reader also sees how the young Amir struggles with his inability to please Baba. This inability makes Amir jealous of anyone else receiving Baba's attention, which is why Amir became angry anytime Baba praises Hassan.... Amir often finds passive aggressive ways to take his frustration out on the Hassan, such as mocking his ignorance or his inability to read. Reinforcing the theme of the love and tension between fathers and sons that recurs throughout the story is Amir and Hassan's favourite story, Sohrab and Rustom which is about a father that fatally stabs an opponent not knowing until too late that the opponent is his son. For Amir, the story represents his relationship with Baba. (Jaya)

Amir harboured the guilt of his mother's demise in child-birth. He further grieved that he could not match Baba's persona and they were not alike. He strived to catch up to him only to falter and fall short. To make things worse Baba never feigned any interest in the many hobbies of Amir. There was a generational gap wherein Baba could not accept the fact that his son was 'different.' His comments screamed out of his disapproval of how Amir had turned out to be. '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' (Hosseini *The Kite Runner* 21).

Like any young motherless child Amir yearned to atone for his sin – the sin of killing his mother as soon as he made an appearance in the world, the sin of not turning out like Baba. For a naïve boy these were heavy burdens to carry. In this regard, we can say that atonement as a theme is inherent even before Amir stood in the alley doing nothing to save the molestation meted out to his friend Hassan. Amir in his perpetual quest to be in the good books of Baba, lashed out at his friend Hassan in different ways. Hassan thus became the 'sacrificial lamb' in Amir's pursuit of earning his father's favours and appreciation. Amir was well aware of this when he says, 'Maybe Hassan was the price I had to pay, the lamb I had to slay, to win Baba. Was it a fair price? The answer floated to my conscious mind before I could thwart it: He was just a Hazara, wasn't he?' (Hosseini *The Kite Runner* 77). Unwittingly Amir mocks Hassan and tests his loyalty time and again. It stems from his insecurities and envy as Hassan was all he could not be. Hassan could fight bullies; Hassan was a kite runner

par- excellence; Hassan was appreciated by Baba and Hassan was all what Amir could not be. In a nutshell Hassan was endowed with the stereotypical masculine traits that Baba deemed appropriate during erstwhile Afghan days. This insightful paper titled, 'Sacrificing and Saving the Lamb: Betrayal, Guilt and Redemption in *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini' further investigates this aspect in the novel:

This religious connotation of the sacrifice of a lamb to appease God with historical allusion to the attempted sacrifice of a lamb to appease God (with historical allusion to the attempted sacrifice of Ishmael by his father Ibrahim, serve to reinforce the necessity of suffering and facing one's internal demons in order to arrive at inner peace and freedom from guilt. At this point in time, however, Amir is not yet willing to take this leap of faith and embrace his guilt. He tries to shift the ethical necessity of taking action by resorting to otherize Hassan as —just a Hazara, thus dehumanizing him in order to make it easy for himself to shun his responsibility towards Hassan. As Amir's character evolves through the narrative, he is finally able to accept fully his wrongdoings in the past and his ethical obligation to save his son Sohrab by going back to a war-torn Afghanistan ruled by extremist religious groups. Thus, his —initiation into a path of redemption obligates him to not only seek amends in the present by facing Assef who now works for the Taliban in Afghanistan but also gives the moral aptitude to acknowledge his past without any racist othering. (Imdad Ullah Khan et al. 72)

Hence, the relationship Amir had with his father was a volatile force which pushed him on the constant path of guilt and the need to atone oneself even before he was wrecked by the shame of not standing up for his friend Hassan.

2.4 The Sub-Conscious Self: A Driving Force towards Atonement

Human beings are complex creatures. We are gifted with a strong sub-conscious self which ensures that we are in touch with the humane side of our being. One may wear a garb of normalcy and pretend that no untoward or unscrupulous deed has been done yet the sub conscious self is merciless. It keeps reminding us that we have sinned. It manifests the sense of guilt in numerous ways and one is forced to stop and take notice. One is bound to be in sync with his/her the morally responsible side and take

corrective measures so as to be rid of this searing sense of guilt. In this regard, Amir too is a slave at the hands of his ethical subconscious self. He chooses to shut his eyes to the fact that he abandoned his friend when he needed him the most. Yet his subconscious mind manifests his shame through numerous ways so much so that he is riddled with insomnia.

Hassan's quiet presence unnerves Amir as he is a constant reminder of his cowardice. The horrendous incident which changed the course of the lives of the boys happened on the days of the kite-flying tournament. It would have been easy for Amir to get it out of his system by confessing it to someone. But human psyche is as convoluted as it gets. And for a teenage boy it was a formidable task to confess that he was witness to such a harrowing crime. Amir's is distraught and his state of mind is depicted in these lines:

"I watched Hassan get raped," I said to no one. Baba stirred in his sleep. Kaka Homayoun grunted. A part of me was hoping someone would wake up and hear, so I wouldn't have to live with this lie anymore. But no one woke up and in the silence that followed, I understood the nature of my new curse: I was going to get away with it." (Hosseini *The Kite Runner* 72).

Another aspect which is a form of manifestation of one's guilt is the dreams they see. The dreams stem out from our guilt-conscious self and more often than not stir us so as to redeem ourselves and do the right thing. Dreams make us see a clearer picture of our anxieties and help unmask the pretences and humanly facades. As is analysed in the third chapter of the book, 'What Dreams Tell Us: Lacanian Interpretations,' dreams often steer us towards acceptance:

During sleep, we are not conscious and hence our mental defences are weak. Then the repressed desires take the form of a dream. Without dreams, we remain blissfully ignorant of them. In a dream what happens is a gradual unveiling and acceptance of what is being repressed. This leads to a more complete and honest form of self-integration. The search for internal integrity is the true mission of psychoanalysis. The best that one can hope for is a healthy acceptance of one's irreparably fractured self. (Vattamattam et al.)

Just before the Kite-flying tournament Hassan had narrated his dream to Amir. It was about them swimming in the Ghargha lake despite the possibility of a monster waiting for them at the bottom of the lake. Amir had been valiant enough to venture in the lake without fearing the monster. Hassan probably wanted to instil confidence in his friend who was a bundle of nerves standing at the threshold of the much-awaited Kite-Flying tournament. Winning the tournament would be a sort of redemption for Amir as it would have got him Baba's approval and love. It would atone him for he had not turned out the way Baba had hoped for. Though later when Hassan is molested, Amir is wrecked with guilt and he look back at Hassan's dream in a new light:

I thought about Hassan's dream, the one about us swimming in the lake. There is no monster, he'd said, just water. Except he'd been wrong about that. There was a monster in the lake. It had grabbed Hassan by the ankles, dragged him to the murky bottom. I was that monster.

That was the night I became an insomniac. (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 75)

The subconscious mind thus conjures up images and bring face to face with the truth which we otherwise may not want to acknowledge. Once Amir encounters his nemesis Assef after all those years, it appears as if his past has clawed its way to him yet again. He fights him and despite being beaten black and blue, instead of feeling defeated he senses an inexplicable sense of freedom. 'My body was broken- just how badly I wouldn't find out until later- but I felt *healed*. Healed at last. I laughed. (Hosseini *The Kite Runner* 253) While in the hospital, drifting in and out of consciousness, Amir dreams again. It is a dream which symbolizes how he is no more the demure teenager who was cowardly. He had finally atoned himself and his subconscious-self seemed to bring home the fact that he was devoid of the guilt that he had harboured almost all his life. The bear analogy is another motif that is stuck in Amir's psyche and it manifest itself in a different light when he attains the coveted atonement:

We are in the Sulaiman Mountains of Baluchistan and Baba is wrestling the black bear. He is the Baba of my childhood. *Toophan agha*, the towering specimen of Pashtun might, not the withered man, under the blankets, the man with sunken cheeks and hollow eyes. They roll over a patch of green grass,

man and beast, Baba's curly brown hair flying. The bear roars or may be its Baba. Spittle and blood fly; claw and hand swipe. They fall to the ground with a loud thud and Baba is sitting on the bear's chest, his fingers digging in its snout. He looks up at me and I see. He's me. I am wrestling the bear. (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 258)

The subconscious self therefore reflected the peace that prevailed within Amir as he had come full-circle and through his sheer act of rescuing Hassan's son Sohrab, he had atoned himself and made peace with his past. Moreover, he also moved away from the shadows of his father and became a man who could stand up for what he felt was right.

2.5 Atonement as a way to connect to one's Indigenous Past

It has already been established as to how atonement is an overarching theme in the novel. In a postcolonial text atonement has several connotations. It is intriguing to gauge that for a protagonist in exile, atonement also serves as a tool to go back to his indigenous past. An expatriate character is often yearning to be in touch with his roots and the country where he grew up in even if he chooses to call the foreign country his home. So is the case with Amir in *The Kite Runner*. Interestingly Amir is well-settled in America, yet when he comes back to Afghanistan after a hiatus it is homecoming in the true sense of the word. Though America was like a refuge for Amir who was reeling under the effects of guilt. 'For me America was place to bury my memories. For Baba, a place to mourn his', (Hosseini *The Kite Runner* 112) he still mustered up the courage to go back to his homeland knowing how dangerous it was to set foot on the war-trodden land of Afghanistan. This is also thoroughly analysed in the research paper, 'ASSIMILATION, REDEMPTION, AND RESISTANCE IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S THE KITE RUNNER':

Redemption in postcolonial literature is the act of a character returning to their own people or another person's culture, with awareness and understanding gained through experience. This is a useful way of thinking about the redemptive process in literature because it allows considering both fiction and reality. A theme common to all postcolonial literature concerns the idea of escaping a history full of colonization and some form of oppression by those

who colonized an area. One interpretation of redemption in postcolonial literature is that instead of seeking revenge or atonement from the colonizers, the colonies instead tried to find a proper way to justify their identity. This type of literature suggests that in order to thrive as a culture, characters need to look at their past and understand where they came from in order to find meaning and purpose. The theme of redemption is one of the key issues in *The Kite Runner*. The redemption process in the novel appears as a solution to the identity crisis that the protagonist faces in the course of his life. After adopting a new Western identity and getting stable life in America, the protagonist realizes that his identity needs to be redeemed from the unatoned sin of childhood... (Aziz and Longhai 312-313)

Thus, in a post-colonial world, atonement is not merely reparation of one's transgressions but is also a way for the protagonist who is in exile to connect to his past and reclaim his indigenous roots. This is observed in the case of Amir who though an American citizen now, is moved by the visuals of his homeland. Memory of his distant past spent in his homeland brings to fore the guilt of moving away from one's roots. As Jasbir Jain examines in her book, *The Diaspora Writes Home: Subcontinental Narratives*:

Memory is both process and raw- material; process as it covers many journeys back and forth as a new subjectivity is defined, as relationships are reviewed and very often cleansed of bitterness and regret and raw material as it is the only reality which has been experienced either by them or their ancestors, that has created them, made them what they are. All the cultural nuances so imperceptibly imbibed and internalised and often fretted against are now highlighted and framed through the act of remembrance- an act which is simultaneously a process of self-analysis, self-discovery, and relocation. It is raw-material for, no matter how distanced they feel from it, it is the primary baggage they have lugged along the route, the context that provides a meaning. (Jasbir Jain and Springer 9)

This cleansing of the soul that leads to atonement is pivotal in a post-colonial universe as it also aids in doing away with the bitterness and regret and brings the expatriate-

self much closer to his buried past. This sentiment is echoed in *The Kite Runner* and is evident in these lines:

The kinship I felt suddenly for the old land... it surprised me. I'd been gone long enough to forget and be forgotten. I had a home in a land that might as well be in another galaxy to the people sleeping on the other side of the wall I leaned against. I thought I had forgotten about this land. But I hadn't. And, under the bony glow of a half-moon, I sensed Afghanistan humming under my feet. Maybe Afghanistan hadn't forgotten me either" (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 211).

The protagonist Amir is also seemingly a mouth piece of Hosseini himself as Amir is almost a reflection of him. Like Amir he too was away from his homeland and later became a writer of repute. The immigrant experience that Hosseini delves into the book also has stemmed out from his own travails as an expatriate residing in America. Though it not entirely autobiographical in nature one can gauge that Hosseini did put shades of him in Amir. He did not commit a sin like Amir per se yet Hosseini has acknowledged how he suffered from 'survival's guilt' quite often. He escaped a life wrought with misery and turbulence while his fellow countrymen were blown to pieces and were at the mercy of belligerent forces. It would not be thus completely presumptuous to conclude that through Amir, Hosseini was in a way looking to atone himself and come closer to his roots. Atonement is not always redemption of one's past sins but it also implies giving back to the world and feeling a sense of contentment that comes from the sheer act of reaching out to your ilk. Hosseini has also been actively working for the betterment of the people of Afghanistan. He has been serving as a Goodwill Envoy for UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). He also set up the Khaled Hosseini Foundation in 2007 after a trip to Afghanistan and the foundation has been since working to help raise funds for refugees returning to Afghanistan. There is often a thin line between reality and fiction and it would not be an exaggeration to assume that *The Kite Runner* brought about atonement for not just Amir but in a way also acted as a thread that reconciled Khaled Hosseini with his motherland.

Atonement is undoubtedly an overarching theme in *The Kite Runner* and it is this element which propels the characters forward. The political backdrop of Afghanistan and the exile experience of the protagonist add as catalysts for him yearning to atone himself for his past sins and to attain a higher purpose in life by doing good to one and all.

2.6 Atonement as a Theme in A Thousand Splendid Suns

Khaled Hosseini depicts familial ties in multi-generational sagas with the backdrop of political unrest in Afghanistan. Though on the surface, the stories appear to be just families struck by separation and misfortune, but a closer look would reveal that they are steeped in symbolism and depict the realities of erstwhile war-ravaged Afghanistan. Atonement is a perennial theme in Hosseini's novels. In *The Kite Runner* atonement is an overarching theme and one which defines the dilemma that the protagonist faces. Similarly, in his second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* too Hosseini has captured the theme of atonement though it has been delineated from a different perspective. Unlike *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* tells the story of two marginalized women whose lives are entwined in unusual circumstances. Like his previous novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* too delves into characters who are riddled with guilt.

As Rebecca Stuhr points out in her paper, "If was set in an Afghanistan at peace, it would perhaps have been a novel of contrasts: an urban life with educational and professional opportunities for Laila in Kabul, and a rural life of strict mores and stark deprivation for Mariam growing up outside the city of Herat. Because it is a novel of Afghanistan at war and in upheaval, however, it is a story of shared experiences. The women's lives come together and intertwine with a shared desire for their family's survival. The differences in their upbringing and circumstances become inconsequential as personal survival becomes less important than caring for each other and their children. The story of their lives runs parallel to the story of Afghanistan as the novel stretches over four decades." (Stuhr 53)

War acts as a bitter equalizer and thus two women from disparate backgrounds find solace in each other, become one another's confidante, and together waddle through the human depravities, political subjugation, and incessant wars. Both the protagonists

in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam and Laila become victims of political unrest, patriarchy and suffer emotional and physical abuse. They appear to be passive yet as in when they could, they make an earnest attempt to raise their heads against their circumstances. Mariam who appeared to be docile owing to her grim childhood too does not prove to be a weakling when faced with the direst situation. The theme of atonement flows as an undercurrent and it is only when the two protagonists redeem themselves in differing ways do they find peace and solace.

Simone de Beauvoir famously said in her much-acclaimed book *The Second Sex*, “One is not born but rather becomes a woman.” (Beauvoir 283) Hosseini unlike *The Kite Runner* chooses to tell the story of two marginalized women stuck amidst the belligerent forces in a country wrought with wars and antagonism. In a country where patriarchy lives and breathes within the very fabric of the society, he makes an endeavour to unravel the plight of two Afghani women. While the women stumble through their lives, and look for atonement and a purpose to their sad lives, we realize that the fact that they are born women in a parochial society is what makes their lives much worse. When the Taliban takes over, and Sharia law is imposed their position in the society is dwarfed and they are left to be mere pawns in the hands of their male counterparts. Thus, herein we find Simone de Beauvoir’s statement much apt. Women may physically and biologically be born different than men. But by ascribing them the feminine title, society has pushed them in the periphery to be assumed as a ‘second sex.’ This action further gave them gender specific roles and expected them to behave in a certain manner. Mariam is a demure woman who was conditioned to bear the atrocities of the world at large owing to her illegitimate birth. But Laila is depicted as a rebel, an educated girl who was told by her father to be something and do something worthwhile. Yet both in the end look to redeem themselves and find themselves suffering and at the mercy of their husband. They do find a higher purpose and atonement follows yet the road which they must tread to reach that sojourn is thorny.

2.7 Mairam’s Guilt and Eventual Sense of Atonement

Mariam is one of the pivotal characters in the novel. And in her one finds someone who is an epitome of resilience. Treading through a life which is never fair, she finds her a peaceful sojourn when she offers herself in one final act of sacrifice. The very

first chapter sets the tone and tells one about the quagmire of the protagonist Mariam. Mariam is the daughter of Nana who is a disgruntled woman owing to the fact that she was impregnated and later abandoned by an upper-class man Jalil. Mariam is bitter because she is forced to mother an illegitimate child almost single-handedly. She is ostracized from the society and lives away from Jalil and his family. She in turn vents out her angst and frustration over Mariam quite early on. The very first chapter portrays the grim reality of Mariam's sad childhood. She is made well-aware of the fact that she is a '*harami*,' an unwanted illegitimate child:

At the time, Mariam did not understand. She did not know what this word *harami* -bastard- meant. Nor was she old enough to appreciate the injustice, to see that it is the creators of the *harami* who are culpable, not the *harami*, whose only sin is being born. Mariam did surmise, by the way Nana said the word, that it was an ugly loathsome thing to be a *harami*., like an insect, like the scurrying cockroaches Nana was always cursing and sweeping out of the *kolba*. (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 4)

Like Amir in *The Kite Runner*, Mariam is also saddened by the fact that by being born she not only burdened her mother but also made life difficult for those around her. This is a huge weight to carry for a little girl. And Mariam thus grows up knowing that she did not deserve happiness and love like any other normal being. She and her mother were like weeds which were 'something you rip out and toss aside' (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 8). Guilt is the stepping stone to the quest for atonement. Harboring guilt for one's deeds is something which makes one yearn for atonement so as to absolve oneself of the perpetual sense of wrong-doing. In this case Mariam is merely five years old when the guilt of being a *harami* is thrust upon her. Thereon life becomes only formidable for her. Her father Jalil's weekly visit is the only time when she feels loved and wanted. Despite Nana's accusations against Jalil, Mariam continues to dote on her father. She is too naïve and clueless to question as to who was in the right- her mother or father?

Not just Mariam, Jalil too was reeling under the guilt of abandoning his daughter. He was not brave enough to give his daughter, borne out of wedlock from a lowly housekeeper, the rightful position in his home and in the society at large. Thus, he too

looked to make amends for his cowardice. Providing a small house with basic amenities along with the weekly visits to his daughter, was his way of atoning for his actions:

Jalil put in a new cast-iron stove for the winter and stacked logs of chopped wood behind the kolba. He added a tandoor outside for making bread and a chicken coop with a fence around it. He brought a few sheep, built them a feeding trough. He had Farhad and Muhsin dig a deep hole a hundred yards outside the circle of willows and built an outhouse over it. Jalil could have hired labourers to build the kolba, Nana said, but he didn't. "His idea of penance." (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 10)

Jalil is conditioned to not openly accept Mariam as his daughter. His social stature would be shaken if at all he were to bring his illegitimate child to stay with him. Despite that as a human being he must be guilt-stricken. He strives to atone himself and it is manifested through small gestures. Every month he sends two of his sons to fill Nana's *kolba* with ration. He could have sent his servants to do the task given the fact that he was affluent enough. Yet he chose to send his sons push a wheelbarrow all the way to the *kolba* to provide supplies to Nana and Mariam. It is evident thus that Jalil is depicted as a flawed character, yet he too was capable of displaying an urge to atone for his actions.

Towards the end we find the Jalil despite his unforgivable actions against his daughter, is regretful to the core. He asks for forgiveness through a letter and keeps aside some money for Mariam hoping that one day she would come home and atone him of his sins. But it is Laila who discovers the letter long after Mariam is dead. And Jalil too has passed away by then. Hence, he dies yearning for his daughter's forgiveness and in turn his salvation:

You were a good daughter, Mariam jo, and I cannot ever think of you without feeling shame and regret. Regret... When it comes to you, Mariam jo, I have oceans of it. I regret that I did not see you the day you came to Herat. I regret that I did not open the door and take you in. I regret that I did not make you a daughter to me, that I let you live in that place for all those years. And for what? Fear of losing face? Of staining my so-called good name? How little

those things matter to me now after all the loss, all the terrible things I have seen in this cursed war. But now, of course, it is too late. Perhaps this is just punishment for those who have been heartless, to understand only when nothing can be undone. Now all I can do is say that you were a good daughter, Mariam jo, and that I never deserved you. Now all I can do is ask for your forgiveness. So forgive me, Mariam jo. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 358)

Mariam is shown to be conflicted between choosing between her mother and father as both present her with contradicting stories about her birth and childhood. Yet Mariam though loving her mother, always tend to lean towards Jalil who was her only link to the big wide world beyond her small *kolba*. He spent quality time with her whenever he was around and made her feel loved and wanted, something she yearned for since forever:

Jalil brought clippings from Herat's newspapers, *Itifaq-i-Islam*, and read from them to her. He was Mariam's link, her proof that there existed a world at large beyond the *kolba*, beyond Gul Daman and Herat too, a world of presidents with unpronounceable names, and trains and museums and soccer, and rockets that orbited the earth and landed on the moon, and every Thursday, brought a piece of that world with him to the *kolba*. (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 22-23)

Part one of the novel narrates the story of Mariam and establishes as to how she is buried under the massive guilt of being an illegitimate child. Mariam is struck with the ultimate tragedy of Nana's suicide. Her life takes a massive turn and she is wrecked with guilt for having left the *kolba* to visit her father. Nana feeling saddened and hopeless by Mariam's abandonment takes the extreme step and kills herself. Mariam is crestfallen and disillusioned as her father do not prove to be the kind and compassionate man, she had hitherto presumed him to be. She is married off to a man double her age and sent away from her home and away from the only people she knew. Once married she faces the agony of multiple miscarriages which leads to her husband's antagonism towards her. She becomes pray to abuse and suppression at the hands of her husband.

Part two tells the story of the second protagonist Laila. Laila's childhood is quite different from Mariam having born in 1978 during the April Revolution in Afghanistan which in turn brought the communists to power. She has a liberal father and teachers and girls are not put behind veils during the political reign when Laila was growing up. Laila's only friend and confidant is Tariq, a crippled young boy who cares for her. Political upheavals run parallel in the novel and affect the characters' lives remarkably. Laila loses her parents and home as Mujahiddins fight to take reign of Kabul in 1992. The bombing and the mayhem that follows owing to the political unrest upturns Laila's life and pushes her into a life of misery and subjugation.

Rasheed takes in a now orphaned Laila and gives her refuge in his home. Later it turns out that he intends to marry her much to the chagrin of Mariam. But there is little both the women could do to resist. Laila agrees to marry Rasheed as she learns that she is already pregnant with Tariq's child. And thus, the fates of two women gets entwined. Both these women look to atone themselves. Mariam who feels guilty of her mother's death, of being born a bastard, of being childless, atones herself by making the ultimate sacrifice and paving the way for Laila's freedom. Laila on the other hand, finds atonement in a higher purpose. She comes back to Afghanistan and leads the rest of her life working for the education of the children of her homeland. For her this living a life filled with purpose serves as an act of atonement- a life which was saved by the sacrifice made by Mariam.

A Thousand Splendid Suns brims with characters who lived with and harboured perpetual guilt. Mariam could not till the very end do away with the stigma of being an illegitimate child and an encumbrance to her parents. She curses herself for bringing on her mother's untimely demise. As she kills Rasheed and saves Laila, she finds atonement. To her mind, this act of killing Rasheed atones her. In Laila and her children, she had found selfless love and acceptance which she yearned for all her life:

Yet as she closed her eyes, it was not regret any longer but a sensation of abundant peace that washed over her. She thought of her entry into this world, the *harami* child of a lowly villager, an unintended thing, a pitiable, a regrettable accident. A weed. And yet she was leaving the world as a woman

who had loved and had been loved back. She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A mother. A person of consequence at last. No. It was not so bad. This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings. (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 361)

Thus, despite all the hardships and unfairness Mariam faced throughout the course of her life, she dies a woman atoned. She dies in peace and with a contented heart with the knowledge that her life was not futile. She is able to save Laila from the turmoil and devastation and is able to carve out a happy life for her. This thought lends meaning to her otherwise insignificant existence as per her. It is interesting to gauge that atonement has varied connotations in the novels of Hosseini. In *Kite Runner* it was absolution of one's sins. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, atonement dawns on the two women differently. For Mariam atonement is the ultimate sacrifice for her friend, confidant and daughter, Laila. And for Laila, it is her resurrection and giving back to the Afghan society.

2.8 Laila's quest for a higher purpose as Atonement

Laila as a protagonist represents the middle-class Afghan woman who by dint of being born in the Soviet reign is exposed to education and is not expected to be pushed in the inner sanctums of the house. Being a woman is not a menace during Laila's childhood years. Her father Babi is an erudite poet who instils in her the love for education the need for women to become something and do something meaningful with their lives. He tells her early on that education would not only pave her way towards a brighter future but it is something which will aid her in the upliftment of her homeland:

I know you are still young, but I want you to understand and learn this now, he said. Marriage can wait, education cannot. You're a very very bright girl. Truly you are. You can be anything you want, Laila. I know this about you. And I also know that when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, maybe even more. Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila. No chance. (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 114)

The paper, 'The Plight of Marginalized Women in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* in The Third World Feminism' also resonates the same thought:

Laila stands for the middle-class Afghan woman who has a determined place, responsibilities, and ambition to fulfil in life. Through the stages of her development, her ideas, past memories and circumstances lead to conflicts and transitions from patriarchal impediments to resistance triggered by gender equality and feminism....The marginalization of women aggravates her agony. Its consequences are domestic violence, cultural riots and female protests in the policies of dislocation. (Çevik and Tongur 62)

Laila dreamt of achieving something and her parents love and bonding make her romanticize love. She falls in love with Tariq, her neighbour and is already imagining a bright future with him. But she is not an inhabitant of a country in peace. When her parents die in a bombing, she is coerced into marrying Rasheed. Seeing it as her only hope for refuge in a country where rockets and missiles bombard the city in fury, she accepts her plight. Her unborn baby and love child is someone she wants to bring into a safe and sound home. Even before she becomes a mother, she makes a life-changing decision. Yet amidst all this she does not let her spirit falter. She is still the brave and resilient Laila who would go to any extent to pursue what she aims at. Here it is interesting to observe that Laila stayed in Rasheed's house as per his rules, yet she perpetually stands up to his abuse and openly disagrees to his political ideologies. When the Taliban banned women folk from venturing out and working, she cried out vehemently disagreeing with Rasheed, "They can't make half population stay home and do nothing... This isn't some village. This is Kabul. Women here used to practice law and medicine; they held office in the government.." ((Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 271).

We thus realize early on that Laila is no weakling and she would find atonement and in turn happiness when she realizes a higher purpose. She would redeem herself when she is not just a wife, daughter, and a mother but also someone who can contribute to the society and make a remarkable difference in the lives of people.

Hosseini in this novel presents two women who are poles apart in terms of their upbringing and thought process. He consciously depicts Laila as someone who is

equipped enough to have some agency. And she does employ this agency and voice out her opinion which in those circumstances in an acutely patriarchal society and in the despotic Taliban era, is commendable. Hosseini's women are real and not mere caricatures. They think and they resist. Laila schemes to run away and plans meticulously for her departure. She does not bow down to her fate and does not comply to the miserable life with Rasheed.

Later when she is leading a comfortable life with her children and husband in Pakistan, she resolves to come back to her homeland. Post 9/11, things have transformed in Afghanistan. The country has an interim President in Hamid Karzai. Laila is overcome with a sense of restlessness. As implied Laila could not possibly be at peace till, she had accomplished a higher purpose and atoned herself. In her case it is not the reconciliation with the Higher Power but reconciliation with the fact that she did not turn her back to her country Afghanistan and did not let Mariam's sacrifice go in vain:

She hears of schools built in Kabul, roads repaved, women returning to work, and her life here, pleasant as it is, grateful as she is for it, seems...insufficient to her. Inconsequential...Did Mariam die for this? Laila asks herself. Did she sacrifice herself so she, Laila, could be a maid in a foreign land? Maybe it wouldn't matter to Mariam what Laila did as long as she and the children were safe and happy. But it matters to Laila. Suddenly, it matters very much. (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 378)

Before going to Kabul, Laila makes a stop at Herat. Herat was the town where Mariam spent her first fifteen years. It is as if Laila wants to inch one step closer to redeeming herself by being where Mariam was the happiest. She wants to probably take her blessings before making her life of some consequence to the homeland where these two women were born. In her *kolba*, Laila pictures a young Mariam and it is a life-changing moment for her a moment which brings her closer to her own salvation:

A young Mariam is sitting at the table making a doll by the glow of an oil lamp...In a few years, this little girl will be a woman who will make small demands on life, who will never burden others, who will never let on that she too has had sorrows, disappointments, dreams that have been

ridiculed...Already Laila sees something behind this young girl's eyes, something deep in her core, that neither Rasheed nor the Taliban will be able to break. Something as hard and unyielding as a block of limestone. Something that, in the end, will be her undoing and Laila's salvation. (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 389-390)

While in Herat, Laila also discovers Mariam's father Jalil's last letter to her seeking an apology and asking her to atone him for wrong that was meted out to her because of his cowardice. Pleas of forgiveness resounds through the pages of the letter, "Now all I can do is say that you were a good daughter, Mariam jo and that I never deserved you...So forgive me Mariam jo. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me" (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 394). Laila in this regard becomes an instrument in the atonement of Jalil too. Her visit to Herat and the letter acts as a bridge between the ill-fated father and daughter Mariam and Jalil. Though at this point both of them are no more, yet the words of forgiveness through Laila would have certainly brought the father and daughter together in the heavens. Jalil leaves some money for Mariam and though the money is in possession of Laila and not Mariam, one can hardly argue that Mariam would have been the happiest to see it being used by Laila for the betterment of education in Afghanistan.

Laila's homecoming gives her joy and purpose. She and Tariq work towards the reconstruction of the orphanage which had once housed their daughter Aziza. Laila teaches the children in the orphanage and dreams of a better Afghanistan. In living this dream Laila realizes she feels closest to Mariama. It is atonement in the true sense of the word as she feels Mariam's presence in all nooks and corners of the orphanage's classrooms which symbolizes a new and educated Afghanistan:

Mariam is never very far. She is here in these walls they've repainted, in the trees they have planted, in the blankets that keep the children warm, in the pillows and books and pencils. She is in the children's laughter. She is in the verses Aziza recites and, in the prayers, she mutters when she bows westward. But mostly, Mariam is in Laila's own heart, where she shines with the bursting radiance of a thousand suns. (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 402)

2.9 Psychoanalysis of Repressed Emotions and the Exile Writer's Atonement

Khaled Hosseini in an interview elaborates as to why he chose to write about the women of Afghanistan in his second novel. In an interview with RheadBooks, he tells:

I was actually in Kabul just before *The Kite Runner* was published. I spent two weeks in Kabul. I met a lot of people and many of the women and children. I met a lot of little girls, little boys and a lot of women. I spoke to them. I know you can. One of the things in Kabul is that you could just walk up the people on the street and just start talking to them and just kind of learn about their life, what they have been through. And I remember meeting these women and hearing the stories of what they have gone through during the time of the Mujahiddin, in fighting during the Taliban years...and I was speaking to them just to learn what had happened in my country because I have been away for twenty-seven years. I remember seeing these women walking down the street with the children and thinking about now what is their life, what are their inner thoughts..do they have hopes, dreams, are they disappointed...when I sat down to write my second novel, I started thinking about those women and I can't say that either of my main two characters in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* were based on any of those women per se but they were based on the collective spirit of all the women that I met in Kabul in the Spring of 2003. (RheadBooks)

For a writer in exile, the homecoming acts as an act of atonement. Hosseini left Afghanistan when he was a young boy. Far removed from the volatile and violent phases of Afghan history he had subconsciously found redemption in the written word. And though his novels are not autobiographical, we tend to find him clawing back to his roots through his characters. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* too, Laila comes back to Afghanistan abandoning a peaceful life in Muree. Laila acts as Hosseini's mouthpiece who symbolizes hope and represents the emancipated Afghan women, willing to work towards a better Afghanistan.

Salman Rushdie as a postcolonial exile writer expresses his fear that while coming to terms with one's repressed memories exile writers may carve imaginary lands which

may or may not be closer to reality. Their memory is scratched and metamorphosed into a new world which may or may not depict the realities of their homeland. He says:

It may be said that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (Rushdie 9–21)

But despite the question of authenticity which arises when memorising and revisiting the fragmented memory, it cannot be dismissed as something of no value. Azade Seyhan in the book *Neither Here/Nor There: The Culture of Exile* delineates the significance of the memories as an important medium to reclaim history and produce literature of value:

Commemoration is often the only means of releasing our (hi)stories from subjugation to official or institutionalized regimes of forgetting. Remembering is an act of lending coherence and integrity to a history interrupted, divided, or compromised by instances of loss. We engage in history not only as agents and actors but also as narrators or storytellers. In narrative, we may be able to redress forcibly forgotten experiences, allow the silences of history to come to word, and imagine alternative scripts of the past. Our understanding of the present is invariably predicated on actual or imagined links to, or ruptures from, a recalled past. (Seyhan)

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini not just portrays the lives of fellow countrymen and women amidst the mayhem and despotic reign of the Taliban but he also ends the novel on a cautious yet hopeful note. Through Laila he expresses a possibility that Afghan refugees can go back and contribute in the nation building. Thus, though he seems to have put forth a tale of fiction merely on the basis of his fragmented memory and observation, he imparted a pivotal message. As told by

Seyhan in the above lines, he produces literature which is not too far-removed from reality. And in doing so he channelises his repressed memories in a positive manner.

Psychoanalysis which implies bringing out these repressed memories often aids in a person finding peace and absolution. In this regard, we observe that most of Hosseini's characters deal with grief and guilt and bottle up their woes. The paper, 'Confronting Memory: Guilt And The Quest For Redemption In Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner, A Thousand Splendid Suns And The Mountains Echoed' discusses this aspect at length:

Each of the characters that Hosseini uses personally portrays a story of selfishness and selflessness, the element of acceptance as well as forgiveness. In addition to presenting the characters engaging in actions that cause them feelings of guilt, Hosseini also presents each character's quest for redemption from guilt, as well as seeking reconciliation with the victim of the said action. Some of the characters achieve the redemption which they seek, while others do not clearly achieve the objectives of their quests. Regardless of this difference, it is clear that most of the characters embark on their respective quests for the sake of achieving peace of mind. They seek this peace of mind so that they can live with themselves again without struggling with their inner feelings of guilt..... The three texts can be termed as Hosseini's personal quest for redemption. In Christian mythology, redemption refers —to the mystery of God's deliverance of mankind from the evil of sin and his restoration of man to the state of grace by an act of divine power and merciful love. Redemption restores man to a state of grace. That is, it restores him to a state of peace and happiness...Psychoanalysis which aims at bringing out that which is in the unconscious world into consciousness is the basic theory that is used in the analysis of the characters' quests for redemption in all the three novels. The aim of psychoanalysis is to —uncover the hidden causes of the neurosis in order to relieve the patients of his or her conflict, so dissolving the distressing symptoms. (Magagula 104)

Hence it is apparent by turning to psychoanalysis that atonement is possible for the ones with guilt and repressed emotions. And Hosseini has paved the path for

atonement both for his characters and himself by facing the inner demons. He may have attained this by creating these characters and sketching their journey to reach absolution. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* he depicts homecoming and nation-building as the ultimate sojourn which offers Laila atonement. In knowing that she made something fulfilling and of value out of life, she ensures that Mariam's sacrifice do not go in vain and in turn helps her get salvation in the true sense.

Though up until now, research has mostly dealt with *The Kite Runner* as a text with strong undercurrents of atonement as a theme, on the basis of the above discussion, we can surmise that in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* too atonement appears as an underlying theme which directs the actions of the protagonists.

2.10 Atonement as a Theme in and the Mountains Echoed

The third novel by Khaled Hosseini, *And the Mountains Echoed* has him narrating multiple stories woven together. The stories have themes of grief, remorse, and atonement at their core. The stories are interconnected and though human follies and foibles take centre stage in this multi-generational saga, the backdrop of Afghanistan's political and social milieu is what affects the characters and directs their lives. Afghanistan has always been a country stricken with wars and political chaos. The invasion of Soviets, the warring spats of the Mujahiddins and the eventual despotic rule of the Taliban- Afghan citizens had to endure all that comes as an aftermath of their country's volatile state of affairs. Like his previous works here too Hosseini takes a deep dive into familial bonds, separation, grief, and longing. Yet here too, multiple characters are shown to be caught in the rigmarole of guilt, yearning for absolution of their past actions. Atonement thus once again forms an integral part of Hosseini's third novel. Though not as structured as his previous two novels, *And the Mountains Echoed* remains his most ambitious project which crosses continents and not just portrays the terrible fates of Afghan citizens but also touches upon the refugee crisis, the expatriate experience and lastly the rehabilitation work done by doctors and nurses from around the world to bring stability in Afghanistan. In this regard, *And the Mountains Echoed* has a much broader spectrum. But herein we would delineate the theme of atonement which is inherently entrenched in the narrative thereby ascertaining the woes and reactions of the various characters:

Distinguishing about Hosseini's narratives, as Ab. Majeed Dar expounds, is the fact that they "are written against a history that has not been told in fiction before", (qtd. in Souissi 492) delineating the cultural richness and splendor of a country heading towards destruction. Hence, by mirroring his life-like characters' experiences - being enmeshed in the incessant socio-political struggles, Hosseini draws the human face of the country that has rarely been portrayed before. Put differently, the novelist confers on his characters the prerogative of voicing stories that fictitiously translate his countrymen's real journeys. Therefore, his characters are archetypes that epitomize and illustrate the life of ordinary Afghans.

To unravel the concealed, yet subtly visible side of Afghanistan's life, culture, struggles, customs, traditions, hopes and possibilities, Hosseini chronicles the differing yet convergent journeys of his characters. The latter's fate, concomitantly interweaved with the fate of the nation, conveys the intermittent political unrest underpinning and channelling the stories' lines. (Souissi 492)

2.11 Saboor's Sense of Guilt and Yearning to Atone

The novel begins with Saboor narrating a tale to his children Pari and Abdullah. The tale entails Baba Ayub giving away his son to a *div*. He is agonized when he has to sacrifice his beloved son for the greater good of the village. He travels far and wide to the *div*'s palace to get his son back. Yet when he sees that his son has a better life in the palace than his penury-stricken days with Baba Ayub, he walks away. In turn the *div* gives him a potion that erases his memories of his son.

The story itself sets a background and gives us a peek into the anxious mind of Saboor. Like the characters in the story, he too is going through a similar dilemma of giving up his beloved daughter. Yet like Baba Ayub he too has to take the bitter pill to ensure happiness and a better life for his daughter. Though the mere act of giving away his daughter changes him. He becomes grief-stricken and lives in regret. He yearns for atonement but to no avail. He not only feels remorse for his deed but he also feels the burden of separating a brother from her sister. Abdullah loved Pari deeply and Pari's separation breaks him. It affects him deeply and the yearning to be with his sister haunts him throughout his life.

Saboor cuts the oak tree after he gives away Pari. It is symbolic of the pain that is gnawing within his heart. The tree represented familial bond and love and after the sacrifice of his little girl, Saboor could no longer see it that way. Abdullah sees that behind the strong exterior his father has a faint heart of a grieving father, "Sometimes in unguarded moments, he caught Father's face clouding over, drawn into confusing shades of emotion. Father looked diminished to him now, stripped of something essential...he didn't tell stories anymore, had not told one since he and Abdullah had returned from Kabul. Maybe, Abdullah thought, Father had sold the Wahadatis his muse as well." (Hosseini, *And the Mountains Echoed* 47-48). Nabi is instrumental in bringing Pari to the Wahadatis. He is Saboor's brother-in-law and yet after this incident when he visits Saboor, he is given a cold shoulder. Clearly, Saboor do not take this man who led to Pari's separation, kindly. He wants to obliterate any memory associated with the sheer act of giving away his daughter. As a matter of fact, Saboor's act of atonement begins right before he commits the unforgiving crime of abandoning his child. As Nabi puts it, "I will never fully understand why he chose to instead walk from Shadbagh. Or why he allowed Abdullah to come along. Perhaps he was clinging to what little time he had with his daughter. Perhaps he sought a measure of penance in the hardship of the journey." (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 102)

But we learn as the book progresses that Saboor is not able to meet Pari again and he dies hoping to repent his sins. Yet this act is something which sets in motion a series of events which lead to sorrow, a yearning to atone and affects not just Saboor but many more.

2.12 Parwana's Act of Envy and her Bid to Atone

And the Mountains Echoed is primarily the story of two siblings separated by the cruel twist of fate. But there are other multiple interconnected stories and characters that stand out as well. Parwana who is Saboor's second wife is one such character who as Saira Salman investigates in her insightful paper as someone who has an 'inter dimensional existence' (Salman). We are introduced to her in the beginning as a dutiful mother and wife. But it later in the consequent chapter that we are made to dig deep in her character and learn that she is a layered character. Her life is not so linear as it appears. Tagged as a 'bad apple' from an early age she is constantly looked down

upon while her twin sister Masooma is showered with compliments and affection. Suitors line up for Masooma while Parwana is ignored by all. This leads to bitterness and jealousy. Fuelled by envy for her own twin sister, Parwana shoves her from a tree, crippling her for life. It is intriguing to gauge that most of Hosseini's characters are flawed and real. Parwana comes across as one such character who after committing the sin of ruining her sister's life, cares for her with all her might. This is an act of repentance and she is hoping to atone herself for her one slip of judgement which changed the life of her sister. Thus, for years she takes care of her incapacitated sister in a bid to be atoned of her sin as she feels she deserves to be punished. "This is her own handiwork, this mess. Nothing that has befallen her is unjust or undue. This is what she deserves. She sighs, surveying the soiled linens, dreading the work that awaits her." (Hosseini, *And the Mountains Echoed* 51)

Tired of living a painful life and being completely dependent on her sister, Masooma asks Parwana to abandon her and live a free life. And though she hesitates as she feels it is her doing that her sister is living this dreadful life, Parwana gives in. And when she walks away from her sister, painful it is, she feels liberated. We do not know if Masooma knew that it was Parwana who pushed her. Maybe she did. But, in the end Parwana feels free as she not only frees her sister from a life of pain but also chooses to live her own life. She finally atones herself and finds peace with her life. The following lines depict how Parwana finally moves away from the feeling of self-loathing and decides to forgive herself, "Parwana keeps marching toward her new life. She keeps walking, the darkness around her like a mother's womb, and when it lifts, when she looks up in the dawn haze and catches a band of pale light from the east striking the side of a boulder, it feels like being born." (Hosseini, *And the Mountains Echoed* 72).

2.13 Nabi's Sense of Guilt and Eventual Atonement

Nabi is one of the pivotal characters in the novel. He is the one who sets in motion the separation of Abdullah and Pari which changes their lives forever. This act shakes up the lives of many others too including Nila Wahadati, Saboor and years later even Abdullah's daughter Pari. When Nabi introduces Saboor to the Wahadatis and suggests the possible adoption of Pari, he does not realize the consequence of this

decision which he is instrumental in bringing about. Later, he understands that his unrequited love for Nila led him to do so. Thereafter he spends his whole life taking care of Suleiman Wahadati and in a way considering it his penance. He does not live in the palatial house of the Wahadatis and when the house is bequeathed to him after Suleiman's death, he chooses to donate it to the aid workers. And then he takes the last and most important step which takes him closer to atonement. He pens a letter to the Greek Doctor Markos narrating him his life story and the circumstances which led to the separation of two siblings Pari and Abdullah. He hopes that Doctor Markos would help find Pari and probably that would give Nabi peace and redemption. He expresses his penance in the lines of his letter:

The second is that you try to find my niece Pari after I am gone. If she is still alive, it may not prove too difficult – this Internet is a wondrous tool. As you can see enclosed in the envelope along with this letter is my will, in which I leave the house, the money, and my few belongings to her. I ask that you give her both this letter and the will. And please tell her, tell her that I cannot know the myriad consequences of what I set into motion. Tell her I took solace only in hope. Hope that perhaps, wherever she is now, she has found much peace, grace, love, and happiness as this world allows. (Hosseini, *And the Mountains Echoed* 131).

2.14 Abdullah's Desperation and Guilt

And the Mountains Echoed has a plethora of characters. Yet it is the heart-rending and heart-warming story of siblings Abdullah and Pari which is at the core of the novel. Hosseini himself underlines the importance of the brother-sister characters and how they take centre stage and steer the novel forward, "It was a matter of remembering that these other characters were simply branches that had come off the main tree trunk, which was the story between the two children at the very outset of the book." (Burzynski)

The brother sister duo of Abdullah and Pari share bonds of love which touch the farthest corners of your heart. Bereft of mother's love, little Pari finds solace and unbridled happiness with her brother Abdullah. He showers her with immense love and cares for her like a mother:

He was the one raising her. It was true. Even though he still was a child himself. Ten years old. When Pari was an infant, it was he she had awakened at night with her squeaks and mutters, he who had walked and bounced her in the dark. He had changed her soiled diapers. He had been the one to give Pari her baths...This was his purpose, he believed, the reason God had made him, so he would be there to take care of Pari when He took away their mother. (Hosseini, *And the Mountains Echoed* 31).

Thus, when his father is forced to sell Pari to the rich Wahadatis on his uncle's behest, Abdullah is crestfallen. He considers himself Pari's guardian and his only true family. So, it shatters him when Pari is snatched away from him. What further adds to his sorrow is his helplessness and inability to save his sister. The loss of his sister breaks him and changes him as a person. He is not able to forget Pari and her memory hounds him forever- "Pari hovered, unbidden, at the edge of Abdullah's vision everywhere he went. She was like the dust that clung to his shirt." (Hosseini, *And the Mountains Echoed* 49). In the latter part of the novel, we see that even though years have passed and Abdullah has left Afghanistan, grown old, still the memory of his sister has not been obliterated from his heart. He even names his own daughter after his sister Pari. The sense of guilt and failure to protect his beloved sister haunts him till he is a ripe old man. A reunion with his sister would have been atonement in the true sense for Abdullah. And it does happen towards the end of the novel but fate plays havoc again and by the time Pari reaches out to Abdullah, he has become an old man with dementia who is in delirium and fails to recognize her. But in finding Abdullah, Pari also finds her niece, her namesake Pari. And both the women forge a bond which help them forge ahead in life holding on to the memory of Abdullah, the loving brother and devoted father. Before his memory fails him, Abdullah sets aside a favourite tin-box which used to be his sister's prized possession with the words, "They tell me I must wade into waters, where I will soon drown. Before I march in, I leave this on the shore for you. I pray you find it, sister, so you will know what was in my heart as I went under." (Hosseini, *And the Mountains Echoed* 400). Though Pari has no memory whatsoever of the tin-box and the feathers, she feels happy knowing that her brother remembered her fondly till his last moments. We can infer from the above discussion that Abdullah suffered and was guilt-ridden for most part of his life

as he was helpless when his sister was snatched away from him. But in the end, it is true atonement as Pari reunites with him and his daughter and through his daughter finds a familial connection with her long-lost brother. This was like coming home for the family separated by the cruel hands of fate. As Abdullah's daughter Pari dreams of the reunion of the two siblings, we realize that though the brother and sister duo were separated for almost half their lives, they finally do meet and Abdullah redeems himself through his daughter:

They are children once more, brother and sister, young and clear-eyed and sturdy. They are lying in a patch of tall grass in the shade of an apple tree ablaze with flowers. The grass is warm against their backs and the sun on their faces, flickering through the riot of blossoms above. They rest sleepily, contentedly, side by side, his head resting on the ridge of a thick root, hers cushioned by the coat he has folded for her. (Hosseini, *And the Mountains Echoed* 402).

Atonement thus forms an integral part of all the works of Khaled Hosseini. It is an overarching theme which ascertains the behavioural traits of the myriad of characters in his novels, be it *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* or *And the Mountains Echoed*. The perpetual need to let go of one's guilt and walk the path of atonement is what propel his characters forward. Afghan social milieu, the political chaos and the constant wars affect these guilt-ridden characters who are looking to redeem themselves. The redemption at times happens in homecoming, giving back to the homeland and at times with regretful confessions. But in the end, atonement completes the circle and leads the characters to their peaceful sojourn.

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