

**CHARISMATIC BLOOD BOND AND SIBLING RELATIONSHIP: A
PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF KHALED HOSSEINI'S *THE KITE RUNNER***

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Abstract

Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner (2003) is a psychodrama of human relationships and the present study focuses, specifically, on the psychology of sibling relationship between the protagonist, Amir and his half-brother, Hassan. The research on psychological select types and laws have been, primarily, premised on the works and findings (through clinical study, case studies, interviews, counselling sessions, etc.) of the psychologists like Stephen P. Bank, Michael D. Kahn, Karen G. Lewis, etc. These psychologists have extensively explored and studied the different types and configurations of sibling bond. The opinions of various other psychologists, researchers, psychoanalysts, scholars and experts in the select study have also been included, as and when required. However, for the basic and general understanding of psychology of relationships the works of Sigmund Freud, Anna Freud, Carl Jung, Hegel, etc. have been studied. The complexities of the brother-brother bond fuelled by parental favouritism and the resulting heart-rending traumatic events fraught with conflicting emotions like sin and guilt and redemption, love and hate, loyalty and deception, truth and lies, and; selfless sacrifice and selfishness highlight the enormous scope in the study of sibling bonds in the novel, in particular and literature, in general.

Key Words: Agnate siblings, Milk siblings, High access siblings, Cain complex, De-identification, Partial identification, Dialectic method, Master-slave dialectic, parental favouritism, infantile sexuality

“I against my brother, my brothers and I against my cousins, then my cousins and I against the strangers.” — (Bedouin)

This ancient Arabic saying speaks of the myriad complications of sibling relationships. It provides a glimpse of the proximity as well as the aloofness which siblings share during the course of their lives. It stirs a vortex of emotions which very few can escape. Maurice Saatchi admits: “Sibling relationships are complicated. All family relationships are. Look at Hamlet.”

The obligatory tone of sibling relationship which persists beside differences and rivalries among siblings cannot be denied. According to Rabbi Michael Gold:

The answer lies in the fifth of the Ten Commandments: “Honor your father and mother.” When we take care of our brother, we are literally honoring our parents. On the other hand, we quarrel with our brother, we are hurting our parents. This is best illustrated by the Biblical verse when Rebekah learns of the striving twins Jacob and Esau in her womb. “The boys strived in her womb and she [Rebekah] said, if it be so, why do I live (Genesis 25:22).”

The Rabbi further says: “By caring for our siblings, we also fulfill God’s plan to perfect the world as a kingdom of God. . . . The man who turns his back on his own brother in time of need will not help the stranger. Charity begins with our own family and flows outward. The values we learn at home are those we carry into the world at large” (Gold).

The aforementioned paradigm reverberates through *The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini’s first novel, published in 2003. It is a powerful and an enthralling story of two brothers, Amir and Hassan. The novel is set in the last quarter of the twentieth century and the early years of twenty-first century.

Amir and Hassan spend their childhood in a most beautiful house in Wazir Akbar Khan district’s new and affluent neighbourhood in northern part of Kabul, where the first part of the story is set. They are Baba’s progeny. Baba, a rich, formidable and respected citizen of northern Kabul, keeps the fact of Hassan—his illegitimate son—from Amir, a secret. Hassan’s mother abandons him immediately after his birth in the winter of 1964, one year after Amir’s “mother died giving birth to . . . [him]” (5). Therefore, technically, they are motherless half-brothers, or (to be very precise) they are agnate (same father but different mothers) siblings. Having been breast fed by a wet nurse, they can also be called milk siblings, as per Islamic rule. Ali, the servant of the house and Hassan’s putative father, says: “there was a brotherhood between people who had [been] fed from the same breast, a kinship that not even time could break” (10). However, Amir is socially accepted as “the entitled half, the society-approved, legitimate half” and Hassan is relegated to the background as the “unentitled, unprivileged half” (313) of Baba. Apparently, their complex sibling relationship is a melange of positive emotions like compassion, trust, loyalty, truth, brotherhood and sacrificial love; and negative connotations like jealousy, envy, hatred, deception, mendacity, and tormenting disposition.

Evidently, Amir and Hassan are unaware of their blood relationship. Anyhow, they spend the first twelve years of their lives playing together like brothers. During their childhood they have “high access” (Bank and Kahn 10) to each other. According to Bank and Kahn, siblings of the same sex and closely spaced in age tend to share a more intense bond

(10). Therefore, they knew each other at the “core of one’s identity” (Bank and Kahn 59). But, then, they got separated, never to meet again. It was in 1976 that Amir cleverly managed to expel Hassan and Ali from Baba’s house after accusing them of theft. And, in 1981, the Russian invasion in Afghanistan forces Baba and eighteen-year old Amir to flee to Fremont, California (USA) (where most of the second part of the story is set), thus, reducing the chances of the sibling reunion to minimum. Nevertheless, even after their separation they are unable to expunge each other’s memories from their minds and hearts.

A child craves for warmth and contact. In his childhood days, Amir starves for it. Once when he gets a chance of being physically close to Baba, he says: “. . . [Baba and I] had a fleeting good moment—it wasn’t often Baba talked to me, let alone on his lap—and I’d been a fool to waste it” (15). He idealizes Baba who is his superhero, the bear-fighting “Toophan agha” or “Mr. Hurricane” (11). The narrator, Amir, writes that his first word was “Baba” whereas Hassan’s first word was “Amir” (10). Amir does not want to share his Baba with anyone, not even Hassan. He is also fascinated by Baba’s physical appearance. Once buoyed by Rahim Khan’s (Baba’s very close friend) espousal of his (Amir’s) story-writing skills and Baba’s complete nonchalance towards it, Amir “wished Rahim Khan had been . . . [his] father” (28). But then the thought of Baba’s “great big chest and how good it felt when he held . . . [him] against it, how he smelled of Brut in the morning, and how his beard tickled . . . [his] face” (28) made him give up the idea of replacing his father with Rahim Khan. However, later, this thought makes Amir feel guilty and he vomits. This vague sense of pleasure which Amir derives from his father’s physical contact can be understood with the help of what Sigmund Freud explains in his concept of infantile sexuality. An article—‘Freud was Right: We are Attracted to Our Relatives’ published in *Research Digest* (2010), refutes Edward Westermarck’s assertion that one finds his relatives (parents) “sexually aversive, not attractive” and it confirms Freud’s argument over a child’s sexual attraction towards his/her one or both the parents (“Freud”). Freud “argued that the incest taboo had emerged as way to keep our dangerous incestuous desires in check” (“Freud”), and, hence, Amir’s guilt and immediate expressed disgust can be interpreted as his attempt to suppress his sexually attraction towards his father, for the same reason.

Amir also knows that Hassan is like his father, while he himself is the complete opposite of him (Baba). Therefore, he envies Hassan, who, he thinks, is Baba’s favourite. Amir’s belief is not a misconception of a childish mind as Baba is, indeed, disenchanted with Amir because he feels that he hasn’t “turned out like him” (17). Amir’s demur ways—crying at the sight of brutality he sees at the yearly “*Buzkashi* tournament” (18); having a penchant for reading poetry and stories like his mother; his inability to fight back and defend himself while fighting with the neighbourhood boys—shatters all expectations that Baba has for him. In a state of utter disillusionment, Baba speaks his heart out to Rahim Kahn, his only confidant. Baba reveals his biggest fears while Amir eavesdrops: “If I hadn’t seen the doctor pull him [Amir] out of my wife with my own eyes, I’d never believe he’s my son” (20). It’s heart-rending for him to accept that his son “is a boy who won’t stand up for himself” and will become “a man who can’t stand up to anything” (20). Rahim Khan’s stance on this that Amir, just, lacks “a mean streak”, makes Baba clarify: “Self-defence has nothing to do with

meanness. You know what always happens when the neighborhood boys tease him? Hassan steps in and fends them off. I've seen it with my own eyes. And when they come home, I say to him, 'How did Hassan get that scrape on his face?' And he says, 'He fell down.' I'm telling you, Rahim, there is something missing in that boy'" (20). Baba, thus, prepares the arena for both his halves to destroy each other. The next day Amir's desperation to prove Rahim Khan wrong "about the mean streak thing" (20) makes him rudely snap at his easy target, Hassan, who had, merely out of concern, asked him about his well-being. Thus, Baba's differential treatment of and comparison between his two sons impedes and destroys their chances of a healthy sibling bond. Moreover, it can be argued that Baba's inability to redeem his guilt of having sinned by committing adultery is heightened by the societal constraints that prevented him from admitting his sin. As a result, he, psychologically, over-compensates his love and preference for his illegitimate son, Hassan.

At this stage, Amir and Hassan need each other and thus, they find it difficult to break their bond, though, they are aware that they are two very different personalities. They share a pattern of identification which Bank and Kahn refer to as "partial identification" (93), but in less obvious ways. In this pattern a feeling of closeness coexists "with the clear recognition that difference is desirable" (94). The psychologists place this pattern in a column which they have called "vitality" (85) because "there is some negotiation for change" (94). The affinities and the alliance which both, these half-brothers, share in their initial childhood years can be attributed to this pattern of identification. The loyalty of Hassan is built on this identification and also on the role assigned to him by the society of a low caste Shia Muslim, an ethnic Hazara. Supporting this pattern of partial identification is the fact that when one sibling is harmed by an outsider the other tends to say: "I won't let you do that to my brother" (Bank and Kahn 94). In the same vein, Hassan at all times and Amir (though a coward) on a few occasions manifests Zuk's concept of "go between or mediator" (162). For instance, Amir consoles Hassan when some soldiers pass vulgar remarks on the latter's mother and later, when these two are waylaid by Assef—a "sociopath" (34), rogue, bully, an ardent follower of Hitler—and his entourage, Amir again tries to shield Hassan from their anti-Hazara comments. Similarly, Hassan, as mentioned earlier, always defends Amir against any malevolent outsider.

Bank and Kahn have further classified the "partial identification" pattern into "Loyal acceptance" (96), "Constructive dialectic" (99), and "Destructive dialectic" (102). A thorough perusal of these three patterns makes one safely place the siblings, understudy, in the "destructive dialectic" pattern. It has been given a subtitle by the researchers, which reads as—"Hostile dependent relationships" (102). In this type of relationship, the siblings tend to say to each other: "We're different in many ways. We don't particularly like one another, but we need each other anyhow" (102). "Dialectic method", as popularized by Plato in the Socrates dialogues, has been defined as "a discourse between two or more people holding different points of view about a subject, who wish to establish the truth of the matter guided by reasoned arguments" ("Dialectic"). The above mentioned "wish" is not expressed by the brothers or any other member of the family in the novel. Yet another dialectic—the passage of "master-slave dialectic" ("Master-Slave") from Hegel's masterpiece, *The Phenomenology*

of Spirit, originally published in 1931, has been thoughtfully applied by Bank and Kahn “to illustrate both interdependency and extreme difference” between siblings and its impact on their relationship (102). In the present novel, “the lordship” is Amir where Hassan is “the bondage” (“Master-Slave”). In such a case, there is no scope for a reasoned argument, as stated above, due to the discernible mutual dependency of their relationship besides grave differences in personalities.

Many childhood incidents are etched in the minds of these brothers. Amir’s mind is unable to forget that he has wronged Hassan. He experiences the pangs of guilt even after twenty-five years of his separation from his brother. The dark shadow of the past experiences never leaves him as he remembers the fateful day of the kite-flying competition, when the kite runner, Hassan, runs for the coveted blue kite, cut loose by him (Amir), saying: “For you a thousand times over!” (59). This competition is Amir’s only hope to prove his worth to Baba. He recalls, after he cuts the last blue kite, how at last, he manages to find Hassan, being intimidated by Assef, who is an unscrupulous miscreant, in one of the dark alleys. Assef with his coterie had managed to get hold of Hassan in the alley for settling an old score. The price, set by Assef for Hassan’s emancipation, is the blue kite as the former believes that “nothing is free in this world” (63). But Hassan, loyal “as a dog”, doesn’t let them touch the blue kite, which rightfully belongs to his “Amir agha” (63). This agitates Assef and he rapes him. All this while Amir just stands petrified when he could have stepped “into the alley” and stood up for Hassan—“the way . . . [Hassan had] stood up for . . . [him] all those times in the past—and accept whatever would happen to . . . [him]. Or . . . [he] could run” (68). But he is “afraid of getting hurt” (68). As expected from him, he chooses to run—a decision which changes him into an insomniac, leaves his soul brimming with guilt, and confirms his cowardice. Now, Amir makes himself believe that “Hassan was the price . . . [he] had to pay, the lamb . . . [he] had to slay to win Baba” (68). Clearly, he acted out of expediency, and lost Hassan to get Baba.

Tormented by the pangs of compunction, Amir knows that either he has to redeem his misdeeds by punishing himself, or has to jettison Hassan from his life to lighten the burden of compunction on his soul. Unable to bear the pain of having put Hassan in such a situation, he desperately seeks restitution. The narrator (Amir) says: “I wished . . . [Hassan would] give me the punishment I craved, so maybe I’d finally sleep at night. Maybe then things could return to how they used to be between us” (81). In order to provoke Hassan, Amir initiates a pomegranate fight. But Hassan’s quietism impedes Amir’s Machiavellian plan. Amir’s failure to “cleanse” (Bank and Kahn 200) himself leaves him helplessly crying while Hassan takes it as another agonizing test of his loyalty.

Amir’s conscience keeps pricking him, and he starts feeling uncomfortable in Hassan’s company. Crumbling under the pain and the emotional carnage caused by Hassan’s excessive perfection, Amir takes a life-turning decision, which haunts him for the rest of his life: he decides to play on Hassan’s weakness for truth and loyalty to boost his own self-esteem in Baba’s eyes. He accuses Hassan of theft and manages to get rid of him for good. It can be maintained that Amir failed to prove himself as a true Afghan: he did not stand for his brother when he needed him the most—when he was being raped by Aseef. Hassan, on the

other hand, is a true follower of Islam: religious, humble, true to his words, loyal, large-hearted, forgiving, and an epitome of Afghani brotherhood as he could go to any extent to help and protect his brother whenever he is in distress.

Brotherhood that prevails between Amir and Hassan is both complicated and profound. Though, love is always the basis of their relationship, Amir's selfishness and envious nature makes him hate Hassan's virtuosity and he wants him out of his life. Thus, at the early stage of their relationship, Amir remains unappreciative of the sacrifices Hassan makes for him, whereas, Hassan is considerate, compassionate and sensitive. He understands Amir's needs and makes many sacrifices to see his master's son happy: he protects Amir from the bullies of the neighbourhood; he appreciates and honestly criticizes Amir's stories, unknowingly encouraging the latter to become a writer; he runs the coveted blue kite for Amir and is raped when he refuses to surrender it to the unethical, Assef; he forgives Amir for not teaching him to learn and write; and even for not saving him from his rapist; he pleads guilty to save Amir from Baba's wrath when falsely accused of theft by Amir; and, later gives his life to defend his master's (Baba's) honour and house. Evidently, Hosseini portrays Hassan as a much better person than Amir.

Hassan, like Jacob, one of the two sons of Isaac and Rebecca, pays a heavy price for being Baba's favourite. In the Biblical story, Jacob, on the advice of his mother, Rebecca, (who favoured him over her elder son, Esau), steals his brother's (Esau's) birthright and later guiltily dreads being killed by him. However, in the present context, it can be stated that Hassan and Amir's timely separation saved their lives and their relationship to a large extent. If they had been forced to live together, Hassan (though, here, is the one who has been robbed of his birthright), also, at a certain stage could have been killed by Amir and might have ended up paying even a much heavier price for being Baba's favourite. Referring to a way of resolving sibling conflict, Sensale records that sibling "rivalry is . . . resolved by what Schacter calls the Cain Complex, . . . [*i.e.*] siblings deidentifying with each other, in contrast to the Oedipus Complex where child-parent rivalry is assumed to be resolved by the child identifying with the parent." Clearly, physical separation facilitates de-identification and, hence, can be termed as a defence against "Cain Complex" also known as "Brother Complex"—"Extreme envy or jealousy of a brother, degenerating into hatred" ("Cain Complex")—as it prevents the murderous feelings from coming out in the open. Supporting this notion is the argument, which Bank and Kahn put forth on the benefits of separation. They state that separation works as "a helpful safety valve" which precludes the sibling conflict from going haywire and extremely violent (224). However, they also point out that such "lack of contact reflects no lack of feelings but is, instead, an energetic neutralization of anger, guilt, and competition" (224). Thus, the physical estrangement, between the two half-brothers, understudy, can be termed as advantageous.

Anyhow, even in America, Amir desperately seeks redemption for depriving Hassan, his illegitimate half-brother, of what he rightly deserved. It seems as if, an unknown power does not want Amir to forget Hassan's debt as the doctors, in America confirm that the couple "couldn't have kids" due to "Unexplained Infertility" (162), Amir knows "it was meant not to be" for "something, someone, somewhere, had decided to deny . . . [him]

fatherhood” (164) because of the injustice he had done to Hassan. Instead, he fathers guilt and “emptiness” (165). Thus, in America, Amir and Baba miss Hassan, whereas, in Afghanistan, Hassan patiently and devotedly waits for the return of his master, Baba, and his childhood friend and brother, Amir. Living up to his image of a loyal servant, Hassan dies while trying to save his Baba’s house in Afghanistan, where the boys had spent their childhood. This adds to Amir’s (who learns the fact, much later, from Rahim Khan while visiting Pakistan on the pretext of redeeming himself) woes and makes him, who is happily married and settled in America, guiltier.

As expected, Amir—who feels guilty of torturing Hassan and responsible for his untimely and brutal demise—seeks redemption like his father. Ultimately, desperate for absolution from his sin, Amir goes against his natural timorous, demure and selfish tendencies to save Hassan’s son, Sohrab. He, thus, pays for his own sins and also for his Baba’s. Clearly, sin, if not confessed and redeemed, can damage family relationships—as the burden of one’s tainted soul, consciously or unconsciously, manifests itself in the form of guilt. It impairs one’s capability to take important decisions regarding one’s own life and that of the other family members as all decisions of the sinner exhibit his desperation to vindicate his tormented soul. Certainly, Baba’s honest confession of his sin would have made the life of the two half-brothers much better. It would have strengthened their brotherly bond, and more importantly, saved Hassan’s life.

Amir is a dynamic character—he grows and changes as the story progresses, whereas, Hassan is static—his goodness is continuous, saintly, expansive and all-inclusive. In the beginning of the story, we see Amir living in a state of denial. He denies his real goodness and pretends to be callous and mean. He is insecure due to physical and idiosyncratic weaknesses whereas Hassan’s sense of security is grounded in his morality, physiological and psychological strength. Amir acquires the role of a heartless and selfish brother and a friend after he misinterprets his father’s conversation with Rahim Kahn and is bent upon proving his father’s notion about him—that he cannot stand up to anything in his life—wrong. Baba’s revelation of his disappointment in Amir, while comparing him to Hassan, ruined the relationship between the two boys. This incident highlights the destructive impact that indirect communications can have on the child’s receptive and fragile mind. Obviously, a child is not mature enough to understand the real parental concern and care hidden in their disappointment in their child. As a result, the absence of direct, open and honest communication between Amir and Baba led to complications and misunderstandings in the relationship among the father-brother-son trio. Furthermore, Baba does not even encourage open and fair communication between his children. This deepens the chasm between the brothers and, at one stage of their relationship, shatters all attempts made by Hassan to bridge the gap.

Hassan and Amir’s relationship during their childhood and pre-adolescence period lacked the mutual support—as Amir was mostly on the receiving end. But after Hassan and Baba’s death, giving Sohrab what Hassan should have got becomes the aim of Amir’s life. It was his way of paying back for what Hassan gave him. Thus, Amir, finally, overcomes his weaknesses and plays the role of a responsible elder brother. In the absence of Baba, Amir is

not obligated to help Sohrab but, when given a chance by Rahim Khan, he goes to the extent of risking his life because he knows that Hassan's son, Sohrab, was his last chance of being good again.

The relationship shared by these brothers, definitely, refutes the belief that favouritism propagates vile rivalries and is incompatible to the growth of loyalty between siblings. Besides, Baba's clear inclination towards his illegitimate first-born, Hassan, and Amir's extreme abominable attitude towards Hassan's irreproachable nature, these two half-brothers, unaware of their ties of kinship, unconsciously, shared a strong brotherly relationship. Loyalty, brotherhood, and affection always lurked under the veneer of Hassan's extraordinary submissive nature, and Amir's shrewd and self-centred attitude. Though, it can be considered as the charisma of the blood bond they shared, yet, the fact that they loved each other like brothers even when unaware of their blood tie makes it clear that there is something much thicker and brighter than the blood flowing in their veins and it keeps both of them connected. This is proved by the fact that Hassan's "loss", both by geographic separation, and later by death, "is a constant presence" (Bank and Kahn 274) strongly felt by Amir. Amir, secretly, considered Hassan his brother even when he was oblivious of the latter's true link to Baba. Moreover, they both complimented each others' identities. By remaining a loyal slave to Amir, who was always the selfish and jealous master, Hassan could make his superior virtues, self-control, and goodness more conspicuous. As a result, he derived deep satisfaction from it and compensated for the low-esteem he has in the society as a Hazara. Apparently, he was more righteous, optimistic and confident of the two siblings. He believed that "it's wrong to hurt even bad people. Because they don't know any better, and because bad people sometimes become good" (277). Similarly, Amir, later, succeeds in exploring and bringing to the forth his own hidden goodness. He gathers the strength to acknowledge and pay back Hassan's selfless sacrifices. He realizes and admits how much he loves and needs his brother in his life (initially denied due to jealousy). Though, more than redeeming himself from the miasma of guilt that surrounded his life, it was, primarily, the love for Hassan alone and secondarily, the blood-tie he shared with him that transformed him—leaving him spiritually more clean, more virtuous, manly, and courageous than ever before.

The initially evident obsolescence of Amir and Hassan's brotherhood finds replacement with an eternal brotherly bond that, though, is always present but never clearly expressed. The revelation of their blood ties, further, strengthens their bond and the belief that—"Blood is a powerful thing" (163). This statement is an articulation of the clamorous assertion that these people have shared the same father; shared experiences and memories that mirrored their crude and distorted childhood; shared each other's unspeakable secrets, and have known each other's intimate details. In the same breath, they have been each-other's closest friends and severest enemies. Yet, despite all losses and complications, finally, the brother-brother bond is celebrated. It, indeed, proves the magical and enigmatic nature of the unique bond these brothers share.

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