

Innocence Lost: Representations of Children in Conflict in Sorayya Khan's *Noor* and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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Abstract: War has long devastated societies, but its most profound and enduring consequences are often borne by children. This paper examines the representation of children in Sorayya Khan's *Noor* and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, focusing on how conflict disrupts innocence and reshapes childhood. Drawing on literary and cultural analysis, the study explores the multidimensional impacts of war, including physical disability, malnutrition, sexual violence, psychological trauma, displacement, and authoritative neglect. Through *Noor*, Khan depicts the transgenerational transmission of trauma and the stigmatization of difference, while Hosseini portrays the orphaned and abused Sohrab as emblematic of children trapped in cycles of exploitation and silence. Both narratives highlight how states and political authorities fail to safeguard their youngest citizens, placing children in positions of vulnerability and sacrifice. Yet, despite pervasive devastation, these texts also foreground children as symbols of resilience and hope, suggesting that innocence, though fractured, retains the ability to renew. Ultimately, the comparative reading underscores the role of literature in revealing hidden traumas of war and in affirming the enduring potential of children as agents of healing and continuity.

Key Word: War, children, innocence, trauma, Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, Sorayya Khan, *Noor*, psychology, exploitation.

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I. Introduction

“Children are the world’s most vulnerable resource and the best hope for the future.” – John F. Kennedy

Human history is, to a large extent, a narrative of wars shaped by adult motives and political ambitions. In this cycle of conflict, children are often neglected, their innocence fractured by the destructive impacts of armed violence. This disregard remains highly visible today in the ongoing wars in Ukraine, Israel, Palestine, and Sudan, where mainstream media predominantly emphasizes political agendas while paying limited attention to the suffering of women, children, and other marginalized groups [1].

Literature, however, has long provided a medium through which such hidden traumas can be voiced and confronted. English war poets such as Wilfred Owen illuminated the tragic realities of young boys lured into battle under the banner of patriotism [2]. Similarly, contemporary writers like Deborah Ellis, who witnessed the devastation of conflict in Iran, uses fiction to capture the lived experiences of children in war-torn societies [3]. Asian authors, too, have turned to literature to expose the conditions of children caught in conflict. Sorayya Khan's *Noor* and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* intricately portray the shattered lives of children in South Asian war zones. Their narratives provide a vital lens through which one can understand how wars not only devastate children physically and psychologically, but also systematically erase their innocence.

This paper therefore examines these two novels to explore how war affects—and often neglects—the well-being of children. It argues that the representation of children in *Noor* and *The Kite Runner* demonstrates the long-term consequences of conflict: physical disability, malnutrition, sexual violence, psychological trauma, displacement, and institutional neglect. Ultimately, despite the devastation, both authors suggest that children retain a fragile but vital role as symbols of resilience and hope for the future.

Physical Impacts of War on Children

War exerts a devastating toll on children, often leaving visible scars on their bodies and long-term effects on their health. Physical impairments and disabilities are among the most immediate consequences. According to

global estimates, millions of children are disabled by armed conflict, yet most lack adequate access to rehabilitation and essential health services [4].

This dimension of devastation is powerfully illustrated in Sorayya Khan's *Noor*. The novel depicts Noor as an autistic child born to Sajida, a woman deeply scarred by war. While Sajida did not herself suffer a physical disability, her unresolved trauma appears to manifest in her daughter's condition, reflecting the concept of **transgenerational trauma**; the transfer of unresolved parental trauma to children [5]. Magical realism is employed to represent this phenomenon, with Sajida envisioning her daughter as a "strange girl" marked by distinctive physical traits:

"Sajida stared at the strange girl. Her colour was richly dark, her flat nose was bridged by oddly slanted eyes, and her perfectly sculpted miniature ears appeared as if they were meant for a younger child."
(Khan 2)

Noor's joyful movements and immersion in colours may symbolize the resilience and innocence of childhood, yet her "strangeness" also reflects the way war reshapes children's bodies and how society often stigmatizes those differences. Scholars suggest that the experience of war-exposed mothers increases the risk of developmental and neurological difficulties in children, underlining Noor's symbolic condition [6].

Beyond disability, children who are fortunate enough to escape physical impairment often endure deteriorating health, malnutrition, and neglect. Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* illustrates this through Amir's visit to an orphanage managed by Zaman, where children's most basic needs were unmet:

"We don't have enough beds, and not enough mattresses for the beds we do have. Worse, we don't have enough blankets... There is very little shelter here, almost no food, no clothes, no clean water." (Hosseini 234)

Such depictions echo real-world accounts from Afghanistan, where armed conflict has destroyed healthcare systems and left orphanages chronically underfunded [7]. The neglected state of the "lucky" children who reached such institutions reveals that physical suffering and deprivation extend far beyond battlefield injuries.

Sexual Violence and Abuse

The consequences of war on children extend beyond physical injuries into more insidious forms of exploitation. Sexual violence, often overlooked or underreported, is widespread in conflict zones. Children are particularly vulnerable because of their innocence, fragility, and limited capacity to resist or seek justice [8].

In *Noor*, Sorayya Khan addresses this through the testimonial narrative of Ali, who recalls the sexual assault of a young girl during the war:

"She stood in the corner of the room and did as she was told. On his command, she let her sari pallu fall to her side... he left behind two rows of teeth marks [on her skin]. She didn't make a sound." (Khan 153)

The victim, described as possessing "child's arm[s]," embodies the silenced suffering of countless children exploited during conflict. Such scenes highlight how perpetrators wield sexual violence as both a weapon of war and a manifestation of power over the powerless. Research confirms that wartime sexual violence is frequently used strategically to terrorize communities and destabilize families [9].

Hosseini likewise exposes this reality in *The Kite Runner*, where he presents not only the sexual abuse of children but also the taboo issue of homosexual paedophilia under the Taliban regime. Amir's encounter with Assef, who exploits Sohrab, reveals the institutionalized hypocrisy of practices like *bacha bazi*:

"Sohrab went to him, head down, stood between his thighs. The Talib, wrapped round his arms around the boy... His hands slid down the child's back, then up, felt under his armpits... The man's hand slid up and down the boy's belly." (Hosseini 257)

This mirrors real accounts of *bacha bazi*, a practice documented in Afghanistan where boys are exploited by powerful men, despite official prohibitions against homosexuality [10]. Hosseini critiques this hypocrisy directly through Amir's confrontation with Assef: "What mission is that?... Raping Children?... All in the name of Islam?" (Hosseini 261). By exposing sexual violence in war, both Khan and Hosseini highlight the profound physical and psychological violations that remain largely ignored in dominant political narratives of conflict.

Psychological Impacts and Trauma

Beyond physical and sexual harm, war profoundly shapes children's psychological development. Exposure to violence, displacement, and exploitation renders them highly susceptible to long-term mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression [11].

In *Noor*, Sajida embodies the psychological scars of childhood trauma. Having lost her family in the 1970 cyclone and becoming an "unaccompanied child" during the 1971 Liberation War, Sajida carries distorted and fragmented memories of her past: "Sajida considered the story of her beginning. She recognized it was different now from the one she'd carried with her since she was a girl of five and six." (Khan 218)

Her trauma resurfaces when triggered by Noor's artwork: "In the corner of the drawing, there was an outline of a baby. The longest of lashes, Sajida noted, eyes drawn perfectly closed. The recognition of this detail more than

any other made Sajida's hands go cold." (Khan 88) Here, Noor becomes the unwitting vessel through which Sajida's unresolved trauma resurfaces, reflecting how war trauma not only persists across lifespans but may also be reconstructed through subsequent generations.

Similarly, Sohrab in *The Kite Runner* embodies the long-term psychological toll of war and exploitation. His experience of trafficking and sexual abuse leads to profound depression and self-harm. When confronted with the possibility of returning to an orphanage, his trauma resurfaces, culminating in an attempted suicide:

"I pictured Sohrab... twisting the razor handle and opening the twin safety latches on the head, sliding the blade out, holding it between his thumb and forefinger... lowering himself into the water, lying there for a while, his eyes closed." (Hosseini 321)

Even after adoption by Amir, Sohrab's silence and detachment reveal the enduring effects of war trauma:

"Sohrab's silence ... was the silence of one who has taken cover in a dark place, curled up all the edges and tucked them under... He walked like he was afraid to leave behind footprints. He moved as if not to stir the air around him." (Hosseini 331)

Such narratives align with medical reports that describe war-affected children as suffering from what has been termed "Human Devastation Syndrome," where trauma dismantles not only their immediate wellbeing but their capacity to rebuild social and emotional lives [12].

Attachment Theory and Displacement

Children's development is deeply tied to their sense of belonging and attachment to family and familiar environments. According to Bowlby's **Attachment Theory**, disruptions in early attachments increase vulnerability to depression, anxiety, and difficulties in later relationships [13]. Armed conflict, which frequently displaces children and severs familial ties, exacerbates these risks.

In *Noor*, Sajida's childhood experiences reveal the traumatic consequences of detachment. As an "unaccompanied child" during the 1971 Liberation War, she grew up separated from her family and transplanted into a new cultural context in West Pakistan. While she matured within her adoptive household, subtle racial and cultural differences highlighted her sense of estrangement:

Nanijaan's first thought was, 'Where did she learn that? Before the thought was complete, Nanijaan was ashamed. East Pakistanis, Bengalis were Muslim, too, she knew. But somehow hearing the words spill from the child's mouth made it true to Nanijaan as it hadn't been before (Khan 67).

This illustrates how displacement not only alienated Sajida from her biological family but also fractured her cultural identity.

Hosseini presents similar themes in *The Kite Runner* through Sohrab's detachment and silence. Despite being relocated to the United States, he struggles to adapt to his new environment and withdraws socially: "Sohrab's silence ... was the silence of one who has taken cover in a dark place..." (Hosseini 331). His alienation reflects the dual weight of traumatic memory and cultural displacement, both of which hinder his ability to establish secure attachments in his adoptive home.

Children in conflict zones often attempt to cope with such dislocation by attaching themselves to sources of familiarity—even pain. Self-harm has been described as a maladaptive coping mechanism for releasing stress and managing traumatic memories [14]. Sohrab's act of cutting himself when threatened with a return to the orphanage symbolizes this dangerous familiarity with suffering, a psychological tether to his past abuse. Similarly, Noor's inability to feel pain when her leg was fractured illustrates how children of war internalize suffering to the point of numbness.

Both Khan and Hosseini thus highlight how war disrupts children's attachments not only to caregivers and families but also to their own bodies and emotions, with profound consequences for their long-term wellbeing.

Government Negligence

The suffering of children in war is not only the product of violence but also of systemic neglect by those in power. Governments, entrusted with the responsibility of safeguarding their young populations, often fail to provide even the most basic protections during armed conflict [15]. Hosseini exposes this neglect vividly in *The Kite Runner*, when Zaman, the orphanage director, laments the Taliban's indifference to the children's needs:

I've asked the Taliban for money to dig a new well more times than I remember and they just twirl their rosaries and tell me there is no money. No money. ... we have less than a month's supply of rice left in the warehouse, and, when that runs out, the children will have to eat bread and tea for breakfast and dinner (Hosseini 234).

This scene underscores how political authorities prioritize power and ideology over humanitarian obligations, leaving vulnerable children to starve.

Khan similarly symbolizes governmental negligence through Hussein's neglect of Noor. Sajida confronts him: "... you behaved as if she didn't exist... you gave up on her... You let her fall taking her first steps. Not once did you greet her, let alone kiss her, when she waited for you at the door... you never acknowledge[d] her."

(Khan 107) Here, Hussein's role as a negligent father mirrors the failure of governments to protect and nurture their children. His dismissal of Noor's paintings further suggests the tendency of political authorities to conceal the consequences of their actions, erasing the truths children bear witness to. Yet, as Khan illustrates through Noor's ability to reproduce her paintings, children's memories often outlast political attempts to suppress them [16].

Both narratives therefore expose the structural failures of adult authority, portraying children as sacrificial victims of state indifference in wartime.

II. Conclusion

The portrayals of children in Sorayya Khan's *Noor* and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* offer a sobering lens through which the human cost of war can be imagined. Both authors demonstrate that children endure a multifaceted burden: physical disability, malnutrition, sexual violence, psychological trauma, displacement, and systemic neglect. Yet, their narratives also affirm that despite devastation, children embody resilience and the possibility of renewal. In Khan's novel, Noor emerges as a symbol of hope, shattering mirrors and surrounding herself with colour, suggesting that children's innocence can resist the darkness of history. Similarly, Hosseini closes *The Kite Runner* with Sohrab's tentative smile during a kite-flying scene, a fragile but profound symbol of healing: "I looked down at Sohrab. One corner of his mouth had curled up just so. A smile. Lopsided. Hardly there. ... But it had been there. I had seen it." (Hosseini 340)

Together, these novels echo John F. Kennedy's vision of children as "the best hope for the future." They remind us that while war desolates children in every imaginable way, their capacity for innocence, resilience, and renewal offers the only path forward for a fractured world.

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