How Guilt Impedes a Character’s Individuation

“A man who has no conscience, no goodness, does not suffer” (Hosseini 301). Guilt is a powerful thing—it can destroy people, eat them up inside and nibble away at their relationships with others. If internalized, it will fester and fester, destroying a person’s perception of him- or herself. If not properly addressed, guilt can have lasting consequences; it can keep a person from progressing both personally and socially.

In the novel *The Kite Runner*, written by Kahled Hosseini, a young boy named Amir witnesses the horrific raping of his friend, and Hazara servant, Hassan, by some older neighborhood boys. Amir asks himself if he will go and defend Hassan and decides to stay put. He is so ashamed with his cowardice, and yet he still cannot move. He is ashamed that he is not able to protect Hassan after all the times Hassan has protected him: “I opened my mouth, almost said something. Almost. …But I didn’t. I just watched. Paralyzed” (Hosseini 73). Even after Hassan has promised to “run” the Kite for Amir which they won in a tournament, calling back to Amir, “For you a thousand times over” (Hosseini 67). Hassan would have given his life for Amir, and Amir finds that he cannot do the same. This causes him to experience extreme guilt.

In *The Kite Runner*, Amir lacks individuation. The Oxford English Dictionary describes *individuation* as “The action or process of individuating or rendering individual; that of distinguishing as an individual. spec. in Scholastic Philosophy, The process leading to individual existence, as distinct from that of the species” (“Individuation”). In his dissertation “The Critic Archetype in Fairy Tales: Psychotherapy and the Individuation Process,” Grady M. Fort paraphrases Singer, saying that *individuation* “is derived from Jungian psychology and refers to the awakening process that can occur for a person as his or her own journey leads to a greater
Amir is not necessarily an individual, for most of his life; he is simply existing and trying to forget what he witnessed when he was young. He is repulsed by his actions towards Hassan after the raping and his lack of action during the raping. He has yet to take the journey that will provide a sense of awareness of himself.

In *Plotting the Self: Repurposing our Stories as the Mythos of Second Phase Individuation*, Neora Myrow argues that the second phase of individuation is that of finding “the Self.” Myrow goes on to say that “The goal of the Self finds meaning only in the telling of the story of how the self became a Self” (6). Myrow argues that the narrative must accompany individuation in order for full completion of acceptance of the Self to occur (5). After almost 30 years from witnessing the traumatic event of his friend Hassan’s raping, Amir must finally confront his inner self—confront his guilt and trauma and push past it. Once he returns to his home country of Afghanistan, Amir begins his long-awaited journey to self-discovery—to individuation. Along his journey, Amir encounters self-reflection to self-awareness to self-discovery and finally to self-acceptance—or individuation.

Amir’s inability to protect his friend Hassan has lasting consequences. He feels ashamed and guilty of his apparent weakness. His fear causes him to stand still and watch Hassan be raped. After watching this horrific and traumatic event, Amir grows angry—he is angry with everything in his life, but mainly he is angry with himself. And he channels his anger and guilt into harassing Hassan. It is this guilt and this anger that keeps Amir from achieving individuation. To achieve individuation, one must accept oneself completely, even the parts that are not exactly redeemable or admirable (Dobie 63). Amir takes the pieces of himself that he does not like and projects them onto Hassan, feeling justified in his anger and retaliation. While
initially it may seem that this haunting secret of Amir’s only makes him a perturbed and selfish child, from which he soon grows out of, this memory actually has underlying repercussions that Amir himself would pretend were not there. And he does a very good job of it for a time.

After the tournament, and after the raping, Amir keeps the disturbing scene a secret from everyone, knowing he is not worthy of their praise for winning the kite flying tournament. And yet he craves that praise so desperately, particularly from his own father, that he accepts it, that he does all in his power to keep Hassan away from him, hoping to keep his guilt at bay. Finally, he himself is so cruel to Hassan that Hassan and his father decide to leave Amir and his “Baba.”

Years later, Amir and his father are forced to leave Kabul, Afghanistan to avoid political persecution. They flee to America where Amir hopes he can finally escape his guilt and leave his tainted memory behind. However, this is not the case. Though Amir continues with his life, even after the death of his father and his marriage to Soraya, he still cannot move on from what he witnessed so many years ago. Peter Suedfeld, professor at the University of British Colombia, states traumatic stress can be so overwhelming that is difficult, if not impossible to deal with in healthy ways if not addressed professionally (849). Amir tries to avoid the memory and his feelings of guilt, but they are always present: he even states at the beginning of the novel, “...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 1).

Though he has managed to distinguish himself in the American society by becoming a renowned author, Amir’s memory still proves to be a barrier, keeping Amir from achieving that needed individuation: “For me, America was a place to bury my memories, For Baba, a place to
mourn his” (Hosseini 129). He cannot accept his complete self. He believes that he has accepted it: he has accepted that he is not worthy of goodness and affections. He knows he is wrong and that’s just how it is. But he is not whole. In this, Amir is his biggest critic. According to Grady Fort, Jung’s critic archetype can be a “harsh” and demoralizing one, in which an individual views him-or herself and/or society negatively; or it can be a “motivator,” “protector,” and an “actualizing force” that can guide and push people to “greater levels of awareness” and personal growth (2). Not until he returns to Taliban inhabited Afghanistan does he begin his journey of self-completion and forgiveness, his journey to individuation.

Until Amir’s moment of self-realization and proper acceptance, he suffers from what is known as trauma guilt. Clifford Broman, sociology professor of Michigan State University, says trauma can be anything from “Victimization or the threat of victimization” (Janoff-Bulman). Events such as witnessing violence, unprovoked physical attack, rape, physical, emotional, or sexual child abuse, and even sudden death or disabling witness of a loved one are those generally considered to be traumatic (Horwitz, Widom, McLaughlin, & White; Kessler & McGee; Turner & Lloyd, 1995)” (351). Amir is traumatized by what he has witnessed; and his conscience is weighed by guilt because he did nothing to protect his once protector. Amir struggles to deal with his trauma guilt.

Trauma guilt occurs after witnessing or experiencing a horrifying event, when a person is so overwhelmed by the burden of the guilt he or she tends to take a negative view of his- or herself: a person becomes so focused on the event in question, the or she cannot move forward, rather thoughts of what “could have, “should have,” or “if only,” keep a person from progressing forward, from learning and growing (“Fear, Anxiety, and Guilt After a Traumatic Event”). So, rather than sharing this horrifying event with an adult, Amir internalizes what he has seen and his
guilt from his cowardice and inability to stand up and protect his friend. Because of this, Amir’s mental health never really seems to improve—what he witnesses proves to be a sort of barricade to his conscious health as he never fully accepts himself in a healthy way. Suedfeld states that at the societal as well as the individual level, break downs can be expected when “coping resources are exhausted but the stressor. . . persists” (852). Amir is never able to move past his untimely cowardice and betrayal to Hassan; that memory is always with him: “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 86). Broman also goes onto say that other events that are not necessarily traumatic can still be a stressor with psychological impact. Amir suffers from psychological impact: he strives and often fails to identify with his father; he and Hassan are often the targets of Assef’s bullying, consequently he witnesses Hassan’s raping by Assef; he and his father must flee to America to avoid political persecution. For the majority of his life he is fighting for his father’s affection and acceptance. Striving for his father’s praise and companionship wears upon Amir’s self-esteem; it demoralizes him: “Baba and I were finally friends. . .I finally had what I’d wanted all these years. Except now that I had it, I felt as empty as this unkempt pool I was dangling my legs into” (Hosseini 85). Amir is unable to identify with his own father: “Baba and I lived in the same house, but in different spheres of existence” (Hosseini 49). Amir believes that his father blames him for his mother’s death as she died giving birth to him: “. . .I always felt that Baba hated me a little. After all, I had killed his beloved wife, his beautiful princess, hadn’t I?” (Hosseini 19). Because of the inability to identify with his father, Amir will do anything for his father’s admiration—including keeping a secret traumatic event from everyone after the kite flying tournament, including framing
Hassan for theft: “I lifted Hassan’s mattress and planted my new watch and a handful of Afghani bills under it…Then I knock on Baba’s door and told what I hoped would be the last in a long line of shameful lies” (Hosseini 104). Amir wants his father only to himself, but his father also gives an abnormal amount to Hassan. Amir remembers a time when they all three went to the Gharga Lake: “…Hassan and I were skimming stones and Hassan made his stone skip eight times. . . . . Baba was there, watching, and he patted Hassan on the back. Even put his arm around his shoulder” (Hosseini 13-14). Amir is jealous of this. After all, Hassan is only the servant boy. And it seems Hassan is more like Amir’s father than Amir himself is. Hassan’s personality mirrors that of Amir’s father more than Amir himself does. Like Amir’s father, Hassan is brave and dedicated. He is willing to stand up for those he loves, and even those whom he does not know. He is strong, physically and mentally. Even Amir’s father says “there is something missing in that boy. . . . . A boy who won’t stand up for himself becomes a man who can’t stand up to anything” (Hosseini 22). Baba had not wanted a son who buried his face in literature. Hassan is the son Amir’s father wanted. Hassan is everything Amir is not.

Once Amir and his father flee to America, he feels that perhaps he will finally make his father proud. And his father is proud of him. Their relationship seems to grow and strengthen to some level. But Amir still holds onto what happened back in Kabul. Because he is unable to fully accept his past actions, because he allows those past actions to rule his adult self, Amir is unable to become a “psychologically healthy, well-balanced adult…” (Dobie 63). This accomplishment is what Carl Jung, a founder of analytical psychology, considered being the achievement of individuation. Dobie claims the lack of achievement causes a character to project his or her own shortcomings onto others, blaming another for the misfortune or inadequacy (63).
This is exactly what Amir does when he begins to harass Hassan and eventually frames Hassan for theft.

There are many factors to Amir’s failure to achieve individuation, such as his inability to identify with his father, the trauma at watching Hassan be raped, the guilt from not helping Hassan, and the guilt from turning on Hassan and harassing him. However, another contributing factor is Amir’s culture. Afghanistan culture is very different from that of American culture. While there may be similar values between Afghanistan and America, such as honor and loyalty and strength, there are certainly different morals and certainly different ways of handling violated ethics.

William H. Shaw refers to what he calls “ethical relativism,” which is the notion that a person’s morals, values, ethics are based on their culture—that society sets their moral code, and each society has a different perception of morality and ethics (9). Shaw also states that some people argue the difference between cultural ethics is not all that great (9). Perhaps it is simply the perception of these ethics from an outsider’s view that makes them so different. Perhaps it is the approach of the violation of ethics that cause the greatest difference. Either way, it is safe to say that the cultures are extremely diverse.

However, not only is it Afghanistan’s culture that affects Amir, but also his religious culture: Islam. Amir is not a dedicated Muslim; he does not actively practice his religion for most of his life. Generally, the Islamic religion is a kind and peaceful religion. The people follow what they believe to be the only true scripture, the Qur’an. They follow the Law of Sha’ria, which was originally given by the prophet Muhammad. Unfortunately, in the hands of the Taliban, this religion and its laws quickly turned into something harsh and grotesque. The
Taliban took the teachings and laws of the Prophet Muhammad to the extreme, twisting this in ways that were pleasing to them, whether it were hedonistic pleasure or violent fun. The leaders of the Taliban are above the law; this is seen with Assef. However, if any other were to commit a crime of violate a moral code, he or she must suffer from extreme consequences—such as losing a limb or being stoned to death. Thus, Assef’s once neighborhood bullying has grown into what can now be considered a cultural trauma as he has slimed his way up the ranks of the Taliban administration (Richardson).

According to Alon Lazar, expert in Holocaust studies, and Tal Litvak-Hirsch, academic journalist and clinical psychologist, cultural trauma can also serve as a “symbolic boundary” (1). According to Smelser and Alexander, to be considered a cultural trauma, an event must be public and damaging—not just to the individual(s) witnessing said event, but to the culture as well (para. in Lazar, Litvak-Hirsch 1). Initially, it is an extremely traumatic event for Amir, as well as Hassan—it is not necessarily done publically, but it is done by a pro-Nazi and fellow school-mate of Amir named Assef and his two friends, who seem to be more of fearful henchmen than anything else. They openly run Hassan down an alley and there proceed to rape him. It is this scene that catapults Amir into his traumatic guilt which impedes his completion of individuation.

Later, upon Amir’s return to Afghanistan, he finds what was once his own personal trauma has now grown to be somewhat of a cultural trauma: Assef, who once was the terror of Amir and Hassan, has now climbed his way to the top of the Taliban regime. Greedy and sadistic, Assef’s control affects many, many people of Kabul. It is ironic that Assef is extreme in his punishment to those who have violated the moral and ethics code of Afghanistan and the
Muslim culture because he is a violator himself: to satiate his twisted hunger, Assef takes one child, be it boy or girl, from the orphanage in exchange for money to the owner of the orphanage. Sometimes the children return to the orphanage. Sometimes they do not. Amir discovers that it is Hassan’s son Sohrab that Assef has taken, though he does not yet know that it is Assef with whom he is meeting to negotiate for Sohrab. Almost thirty years later, Amir has come full circle—he is thrust back to the day of the raping of Hassan and now must choose whether he keeps back again or becomes his father and takes strength and honor and defeats Assef. He must choose whether or not to finally complete his path to individuation, or continue to stagnate and give in to his fear and cowardice. Amir is given the chance “to be good again” (Hosseini 2) and he must decide if he wants to redeem himself. He is told by his friend and fatherly figure Rahim, “And that, I believe, is what true redemption is, Amir jan, when guilt leads to good” (Hosseini 302). Amir must constructively utilize his guilt to help another in extreme need.

Amir is forced to face that part within himself that he does not like. He must redeem himself and finally unburden himself from his guilt and forgive himself and even forgive his father. Once he has taken from his heavy heart, the burden of what happened so many years ago, once he has forgiven himself and his father, Amir can continue further down the path of individuation further than he ever journeyed before.

Amir was unable to achieve individuation when Hassan left and was no longer a very tangible and present reminder; he was unable to achieve individuation when he moved to America, when he graduated from high school and college, nor when he married Soraya. Amir managed to push himself further from individuation when he and Soraya failed to have children and he felt that it was his fault—that he was not worthy enough to have children; “…perhaps
something, someone, somewhere, had decided to deny me fatherhood for the things I had done. Maybe this was my punishment, and perhaps justly so” (Hosseini 188).

Amir’s initial reaction upon returning to Kabul and learning what he must do and why, causes him to run away and wish he hadn’t come back. However, Amir decides it is time to face what he has done, what he has not done, and what he must do. It is in this decision to rescue Sohrab that Amir ventures down the path of individuation. Even after Amir discovers the journey it will take to get Sohrab to safety, he does not give up. He cannot forsake Hassan a second time.

It is on this path of individuation that Amir discovers the trail of forgiveness. Margaret Holmgren claims that a person’s first response to committing a wrongdoing is “self-condemnation” and guilt; however, once a person forgives him- or herself, the initial response is replaced with a more positive self-evaluation (105). She states that the offense must first be addressed and admitted in order for forgiveness to be possible (107). Finally is retribution paid to Amir as he reconciles with himself and his past. After discovering Sohrab has been taken by a member of the Taliban administration, after witnessing a stoning as the half-time show at a soccer game, after setting up a meeting with the man who has taken Sohrab, Amir finds himself alone and vulnerable inside a guarded compound with his childhood nightmare Assef sitting across from him. He finds himself listening to Assef’s story of how he came to be where he is now.

Assef tells Amir how he and his family were imprisoned by the Soviet Union regime. Some nights he was taken out by the one of the guards and beaten. One night he was beaten so badly, and yet he could do nothing but laugh. Assef has allowed his own stress to break him; he takes that stress and up-rises from his breakdown in anger and retaliation. The more he laughed,
the harder the guard kicked; the harder the guard kicked, the harder Assef laughed. Assef knew that the guard’s anger could not defeat him. It was in that moment that Assef knew how he was going to get power and what he was going to do with it. It was his gaining of power that took him from neighborhood bully, or as Amir said, “sociopath,” to being an enforcer of cultural trauma.

It seems that Amir’s traumatic childhood memory must assault him once again. As Sohrab is brought into the room, Amir is taken back to his childhood. Amir’s nephew Sohrab is almost the exact image of his father Hassan. This is Amir’s chance to redeem himself. Assef offers Amir a deal: if Amir can beat Assef in a fight, he can take Sohrab away.

It is in this moment, this violent moment, that Amir finally unburdens himself. He is finally granted the pain and punishment he so dearly craved for almost thirty years. It is ironic that Amir begins to laugh. For as he begins to laugh, Assef begins to beat him harder, and the harder Assef beats Amir, the harder Amir laughs. He is finally free of his guilt. He has forgiven himself. Amir allowed his own similar break-down to free himself of a burden, to find the peace within himself. He uses this stressor, Assef and his crimes, constructively, to relieve himself of pain and guilt. While Amir does not eliminate Assef as a cultural threat completely, he has at least made the world a better place for another person; it is this difference in one person’s life that allows Amir to begin to feel redeemed.

However, Amir does not achieve full individuation until later. Even after he escapes from Assef with Sohrab supporting him, Amir still needs finish his path to individuation, he must accept all of his parts completely. He still struggles with the notion of Hassan being the better son, though, in fact, the illegitimate son.
After he and Sohrab escape, the journey, both physical and mental, is still not through: the couple in Pakistan who was to take Sohrab does not exist. Amir decides then that he will take Sohrab home with him. But because Hassan and his wife Farzana both died, Amir struggles in getting a visa for Sohrab. Also, because Hassan was the illegitimate son of Amir’s father, Amir is unable to prove his relation to Sohrab which would make it easier for him to come home with him.

Finally, after Sohrab has begun to open up and trust Amir, Amir breaks his promise that Sohrab need never live in an orphanage again and tells Sohrab that he will not be able to come to America for at least another year. Later that night, Sohrab tries to kill himself. Amir finds his eleven year old nephew bleeding out in the hotel bathroom. It is there that Amir sees how much he loves this boy and how much he is a piece of him. It is this heavy moment that helps Amir to forgive. He forgives his father and has finally achieved individuation: “I think he loved us equally, but differently” (Hosseini 322). Amir accepts the love his father had for him and Hassan. Though Amir never received professional help, he still manages to eventually overcome his feelings of guilt—he finally begins to move forward.

Upon Amir’s return to Peshawar after rescuing Sohrab, he finds a letter addressed to him from Rahim, telling Amir that in the end, “God will forgive” (Hosseini 302). Rahim tells Amir that God will forgive him, Amir, Amir’s father, and himself Rahim. He then implores Amir to also forgive: “Forgive your father if you can. Forgive me if you wish. But, most important, forgive yourself” (302). It is when Amir begins to absolve himself and his father for both their past actions that he begins to reach individuation.

I had been the entitled half, the society-approved, legitimate half. . . [Hassan.] The half that, maybe, in the secret recesses of his heart, Baba had thought of as his true son. I
slipped the picture back where I had found it. Then I realized something: That last thought had brought no sting with it. Closing Sohrab’s door, I wondered if that was how forgiveness budded, not with the fanfare of epiphany, but with pain gathering its things, packing up, and slipping away unannounced in the middle of the night. (Hosseini 359)

It is with the soft and silent epiphany that Amir has finally achieved his individuation; he has reached a balanced and healthy state of mind. It is this “commissive” forgiveness that allows Amir to commit to a promise to “a course of action” (Pettigrove 12). As the novel ends with Amir and Sohrab flying a kite, Amir promises Sohrab he will run for him “A thousand times over” (Hosseini 371).


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