

## **Bears of the Past Demonstrate Similarities Between Father and Son**

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Khaled Hosseini's novel, *The Kite Runner*, is an intricate work of literature that ingeniously depicts many struggles and hardships that the characters face and overcome. Amir strives relentlessly for the affection of his father, but because of the manifest differences between them Baba makes his son feel unworthy of his love. However, the story of Baba wrestling the bear exemplifies the similarities between Baba and Amir because of their struggles with the past.

The black bear is used in both a literal and metaphorical way. Hosseini writes "Lore has it my father once wrestled a black bear in Baluchistan with his bare hands" (12). This account is used to illustrate many different concepts and ideas in the story. Wrestling the bear is used to demonstrate the significant differences between Baba and Amir. The story illustrates Baba as a strong, courageous, and honorable man. He is described as a "force of nature, a towering Pashtun specimen with a thick beard, a wayward crop of curly brown hair as unruly as the man himself, hands that looked capable of uprooting a willow tree" (12). Hosseini forms images for the reader such as, "At parties, when all six-foot-five of him thundered into the room, attention shifted to him" (13). He depicts Baba in a way that illustrates him as a large, beast-like creature by creating similarities between this dynamic character and a formidable bear. This creates an enticing comparison between Baba and an immense black bear because it shows he also has the ability to demand attention simply with his enthralling presence. Similarities between Baba and a mighty bear continue to be exemplified through quotes such as "He took a deep breath and exhaled through his nose, the air hissing through his moustache for what seemed an eternity" (16), and even his snoring is "so much like a growling truck engine—penetrating the walls" (13). Because Hosseini uses all of these significant details and words such as: "thundered," "growling," and "penetrating" it shows that not only did Baba wrestle a fearsome black bear, but that he himself is like this petrifying beast.

It is not only his physical traits that make him similar to this massive creature, but also Baba's astounding personality and reputation as well, because "if the story had been about anyone else, it would be dismissed as *laaf*" (12). The author demonstrates that because of his size and reputation people are likely to believe that he would have the ability to wrestle such a gigantic creature. Baba is a man who has the ability to "drop the devil to his knees begging for mercy" (13), which demonstrates what a powerful force he can be and that he himself is terrifying. Amir states that "no one ever doubted the veracity of any story about Baba" (12). He is a man that is loved and feared by many. He doesn't follow the religious leaders of the country but rather states, "Piss on the beards of all those self-righteous monkeys" (17), and "You'll never learn anything of value from those bearded idiots" (17). Baba is courageous enough to speak his mind even against the religious rulers. He stands up for his beliefs and he lives according to his own terms regardless of what people say: "They told Baba running a business wasn't in his blood and he should study law like his father. So Baba proved them all wrong by not only running his own business but becoming one of the richest merchants in Kabul" (15). It is his strength, determination, and independence that gives Baba the bear-like qualities and ability to face difficult challenges. Amir realizes that "Baba had wrestled bears his whole life. Losing his young wife. Raising a son by himself. Leaving his beloved homeland. His wanton. Poverty. Indignity. In the end, a bear had come the he couldn't best. But even then he lost on his own terms" (174). Baba has been a strong man his whole life and has had the ability to face even the most difficult challenges that he has been forced to face throughout his life. Amir admires and envies his father for the astonishing valor and strength that hasn't been evident in his own personality. He states that "I hadn't turned out like him. Not at all" (19).

Amir lacks the "bear-like" qualities that his father possesses, which results in his struggle to become more like him. Baba tells Rahim Khan, "Sometimes I look out the window and I see [Amir] playing on the street with the neighborhood boys. I see how they push him around, take his toys from him, give him a shove here, a whack there. And you know, he never fights back. Never. He just...drops his head" (22). Baba feels his son lacks the ability to stand up for himself and his values, a characteristic that is very important and obvious in Baba. Because of the lack of courage that his father possesses, Amir is forced to live with the guilt of not defending Hassan while he was tormented and raped in the alley. He admits, "I ran because I was a coward. I was afraid of Assef and what he would do to me. I was afraid of getting hurt" (77).

Amir fails to "wrestle the bear," or face a difficult circumstance of standing up for his loyal friend. Yet when placed in a similar situation, Baba is willing to risk his own life for a complete stranger. In Mahipar he tells the Russian Soldier that he will "take a thousand of his bullets before I let this indecency take place" (116). Unlike his son, Baba has the courage to defend a woman he barely knows regardless of what the outcome might be. Just like wrestling the bear, Baba courageously overcomes a dangerous state of affairs in order to do what is right. This causes Amir to recall the day in the alley and realizes how differently he had reacted from his father; "Sometimes, I too wondered if I was really Baba's son" (116).

Although the actual fight between Baba and the bear signifies the dissimilarities between father and son, Hosseini implies that it is the "bear," or the struggle with inner turmoil, that in the end makes the two of them so much alike. It is evident to the reader that Amir is burdened with an overwhelming sense of guilt and regret for what happened in the alley and the way he treated his most loyal friend. Amir wishes he would have been more like Baba and done what was right, but after Rahim Khan reveals Baba's secret of fathering Hassan, it is apparent that Baba was also struggling with secrecy, shame, and remorse. Amir says, "like father, like son. But it was true wasn't it? As it turned out, Baba and I were more alike than I'd ever known. We had both betrayed the people who would have given their lives for us" (226).

In the Hospital after his fight with Assef, Amir dreams about Baba's fight with the bear. Describing this incident he says,

they roll over a patch of green grass, man and beast, Baba's curly brown hair flying. The bear roars, or maybe 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 into its snout. He looks up at me and I see. He's me. I am wrestling the bear. (295)

Amir's dream exemplifies that he and his father are in fact the same: "He's Me" (295). At first the memory seems to simply be a recollection from Amir's memory about the story that he so often fantasized about during his childhood. We see that Baba and the ferocious bear are entangled as one, so not only is Baba wrestling the bear, but Baba is this powerful creature, and in the end Amir is Baba. The two become one and have both overcome the beasts of their pasts. It is demonstrated that Amir has acquired the astonishing strength and audacity that he has envied his father for because Amir has the dream after he has had the immense courage to battle Assef. Like Baba, Amir triumphs over his overwhelming sense of guilt and fear in order to battle the "beasts" that have been a burden throughout his life. Hosseini uses this dream to show that although Baba and Amir seem different at first, in the end they are very much the same. Both Amir and Baba overcome the inner turmoil and regret that has haunted them for the majority of their lives.

Rahim Khan explains that Baba "is a man torn between two halves" (301). Baba not only has had to wrestle the "bears," or sin and regret of the past, but he himself has also represented the bear by inflicting emotional pain on both himself and Amir. Both Baba and Amir take their guilt out on others and especially out on themselves. Rahim Khan explains to Amir that Baba "could not love Hassan the way he longed to, openly, and as a father. So he took it out on you instead" (301). Baba takes his pain out on his son and ruins their relationship because "When he saw [Amir] he saw himself. And his guilt" (301). Amir too is overcome by a sense of regret when he sees Hassan. He destroys their friendship in the attempts to be able to live with his shame since Hassan is a constant reminder to him like Amir is to Baba.

Baba and Amir both redeem themselves by overcoming the bear and allowing their guilt to lead to good. In his final letter to Amir Rahim Khan explains that,

good, real good, was born from [Baba'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 is what true redemption is, Amir jan, when guilt leads to good. (302)

Baba helps those in need in order to make up for the sin in his past. Like his father, Amir is able to overcome his fear and battle the beast in order to redeem himself by rescuing Sohrab from Assef and the destruction of Afghanistan. This is "A way to be good again" (310), and for Amir to liberate himself of his shame. He finds redemption in battling Assef because after all the years Amir finally has the chance to make up for what happened in the alley. This is evident when he says "I laughed because I saw that, in some hidden nook in the corner of my mind, I'd even been looking forward to this" (289), and although he is physically beaten the fight releases this overwhelming sense of relief "I felt healed. Healed at last" (289).

In the epic novel, *The Kite Runner*, there appear to be many significant differences between a father and son. Baba is depicted as a fearsome character with bear-like qualities and Amir appears to lack the strength and courage his father possesses. However Hosseini uses the story of wrestling the bear to demonstrate that because they struggle and overcome inner-turmoil, Baba and Amir are in fact very much alike.