

REDEFINING HEROISM IN MODERN AMERICAN FICTION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE KITE RUNNER AND THE ROAD

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Abstract

In 21st-century American literature, the image of the hero has undergone a significant transformation. This article investigates the concept of modern heroism through the lens of two renowned novels—The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini and The Road by Cormac McCarthy. Unlike traditional heroes associated with physical bravery and public triumph, the protagonists in these works reflect a more introspective and ethically nuanced form of heroism. The study focuses on themes of guilt, emotional endurance, moral responsibility, and quiet sacrifice as new indicators of heroic identity. These novels reveal that modern heroism is not about overcoming enemies, but about confronting oneself and protecting vulnerable lives in the face of adversity.

Keywords: Modern hero, redemption, moral courage, emotional endurance, trauma, Khaled Hosseini, Cormac McCarthy, post-9/11 literature.

Introduction

The classic archetype of the hero—brave, noble, and publicly victorious—has been slowly deconstructed by contemporary literature. In place of sword-wielding champions, modern American fiction presents protagonists whose courage lies in silence, endurance, and moral choice. This shift reflects not only changes in literary style but also in the collective psyche of a post-9/11, ethically complex society. The literature of the 21st century gravitates toward internal battles, emotional resilience, and private redemption.

This article examines two novels that vividly embody this transformation: The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini and The Road by Cormac McCarthy. Although distinct in tone, setting, and narrative style, both texts redefine heroism by centering on protagonists who must navigate trauma, ethical dilemmas, and deeply personal struggles. By analyzing Amir and the unnamed father, the article highlights how

modern heroism is not a matter of spectacle but of emotional and moral steadfastness.

1. Amir's Journey: From Privilege to Redemption

In *The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini constructs a narrative around Amir, a privileged boy growing up in pre-Soviet Kabul. While Amir appears to have every material advantage, his story is fundamentally one of inner weakness and moral failure. His betrayal of Hassan—a Hazara servant and loyal friend—is not merely a youthful mistake; it represents the ethical rupture that haunts him into adulthood. As Uzbek scholar Dr. Ruzmatova points out, the power dynamics between Pashtun and Hazara ethnicities serve as a backdrop for Amir's moral failure and eventual growth:

“Positive relationships between Pashtuns and Hazaras were an incredible revolution... Baba can be called a rebellious character who fights against stereotypes, while Amir is raised as ‘a superior member’ and struggles to escape that identity” (Ruzmatova, 2018, p. 33).

Amir's later decision to return to Afghanistan and rescue Sohrab, Hassan's orphaned son, is driven by the need to redeem this past. His heroism lies not in the act of saving, but in the courage to confront his shame, rebuild bonds, and assume responsibility for the boy's well-being. It is, as Dr. Ruzmatova notes, a triumph of human connection over rigid social structures:

“In the society, people need each other more than any kind of materialism... Hosseini demonstrates the need for true human relations and proves the reality of our natural contacts” (Ruzmatova, 2018, p. 32).

Amir's heroism, then, is not inherent—it is earned through suffering, recognition of fault, and conscious transformation. Hosseini frames this as a *bildungsroman* and a *künstlerroman*: a novel of growth and artistic awakening, where personal evolution parallels a greater understanding of human complexity.

2. The Father's Devotion in *The Road*: Survival as Heroism

The post-apocalyptic environment in McCarthy's *The Road* leads readers to experience an entirely different world from Amir's complex life of memory and guilt. A fatherless character together with his son embarks on a perilous journey through an empty world to find safety and purpose. In this narrative the hero

achieves their goal through persistent determination. The father maintains complete devotion to his son although he displays paranoia alongside emotional distance and sometimes shows cruel behavior.

The father in this story lacks external enemies to fight against. The genuine danger stems from the total destruction of human values. Through his portrayal of the father as a person who "carries the fire" McCarthy illustrates how hope and compassion along with moral duty survive in a world that has lost its warmth and compassion. The father finds his heroism through his battle against darkness while teaching his son values that no longer exist in their environment like kindness trust and love.

In *The Road*, love becomes an act of rebellion against despair. The father's absolute commitment to safeguard his child transforms him into a moral reference point. His path lacks any kind of acknowledgment but his dedication remains equally heroic despite being unseen. According to McCarthy those who preserve moral values in a society without ethics become the genuine heroes.

3. Comparative Insights: Redefining the Heroic Model

The stories in both novels challenge traditional heroic ideals by presenting authentic heroism which develops through personal duty along with ethical maturity. The main source of heroism in *The Kite Runner* stems from Amir's efforts to confront his guilt and rebuild his bond with Hassan through emotional and social reconciliation. The father's heroism in *The Road* manifests through his enduring love for his son along with his refusal to lose faith in the world.

Key commonalities emerge:

The main characters select to defend personal moral values rather than attempting to rescue the world because they wish to protect their remaining moral integrity.

Emotional Courage: Heroism is redefined as the ability to confront fear, shame, and loss.

The father along with Amir avoid seeking recognition for their actions. Through their actions they demonstrate quiet personal human qualities.

Responsibility: Heroism is no longer inherited or bestowed—it is chosen through conscious, often painful, decisions.

Both authors employ symbolic elements effectively since the kite in Hosseini's work symbolizes lost innocence as well as forgiveness together with hope while McCarthy uses fire to represent love and moral strength and the survival of the

soul. These symbols function as ethical guides which lead the protagonists toward their weak yet important redemption.

4. The Post-9/11 Context and Humanism

Both novels emerged during the early 2000s when the cultural landscape was influenced by traumatic events along with international tensions and personal identity transformations. The authors Hosseini and McCarthy addressed a cultural period which demonstrated that traditional heroic stories no longer met the needs of the times. They created a new literary approach that emphasizes humanistic elements together with personal moral decisions and emotional survival techniques.

The work of Hosseini combines personal memories with Afghan national history as it explores diaspora identity. Through his evolution Amir studies how privilege and ethnic identity and shame interact within Afghan cultural structures. Through his writing McCarthy provides a general exploration about fatherhood and loss together with the sacred quality of love during a world without civilization.

Both novels establish that heroism exists to shield people from inner and outer darkness rather than to conquer external foes.

The modern American literary tradition has abandoned its traditional depiction of heroes as warriors and conquerors and flawless ideals. The modern American novel shows how heroes manifest as imperfect yet strong characters who select to practice love and responsibility alongside compassion during times of hardship. Through their narratives *The Kite Runner* and *The Road* demonstrate how heroes develop from within by making ethical decisions while maintaining human dignity during a world that tries to eliminate these qualities.

Hosseini and McCarthy guide readers toward new ways of understanding heroism through everyday sacrifices and moral realizations as well as the unobtrusive power of goodness. Through their storytelling the authors demonstrate that heroism exists throughout all settings of life including living rooms and orphanages and endless road journeys because every individual holds the power to choose kindness over cruelty and protection over abandonment and love over despair.



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