

A Comparative Narrative Analysis of *Freedom Writers* and *The Kite Runner* for Culturally Responsive Peace Education

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Abstract

*This study investigates how narratives in literature and film can serve as pedagogical tools for culturally responsive peace education. The research aims to compare the narrative mechanisms of the film *Freedom Writers* and the novel *The Kite Runner* using a qualitative descriptive-comparative design supported by comparative narrative theory. Data were obtained through close reading, structural narrative mapping, and thematic coding of both texts. The analysis shows that *Freedom Writers* employs collective-empathy storytelling through safe-space pedagogy, dialogic interaction, and reflective journal writing. Meanwhile, *The Kite Runner* constructs individual moral awareness through a redemption arc shaped by guilt, trauma, and ethnic conflict. The comparative findings demonstrate that cross-media narratives not only depict social realities but also function as structured pedagogical models that foster empathy, critical reflection, and cross-cultural understanding. The study concludes that integrating comparative narrative analysis into language and literature classrooms offers a concrete, culturally responsive framework that supports peace-oriented learning. This research contributes theoretically by strengthening narrative-based peace education and practically by offering applicable instructional models for educators.*

Keywords: culture; education; empathy; literature; narrative

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary education faces complex challenges related to cultural diversity, social identity, and rising intergroup tension (Arfanaldy, 2024; Banks, 2013). These conditions demand pedagogical approaches that focus not only on cognitive aspects but also on cultivating empathy, tolerance, and social awareness (Rosepti, 2022). Literature and film, as narrative forms, have long been recognized for their capacity to convey human experiences and provide spaces for critical reflection. Therefore, using narrative as an instrument of peace education has become increasingly relevant in 21st-century

The film *Freedom Writers* and the novel *The Kite Runner* are widely used in academic discussions on conflict, reconciliation, and humanity (Herdiansyah et al., 2022). *Freedom Writers* portrays the struggles of students from diverse cultural and racial backgrounds as they confront violence and prejudice. In contrast, *The Kite Runner* presents a character's moral journey within the context of ethnic conflict and past trauma (Pramanik, 2020; Rahmawati, 2022). Both works demonstrate the significant potential of cross-cultural narratives to deepen understanding of social issues.

Previous studies have explored these works, although the analyses tend to be partial and not fully integrated. Research on *Freedom Writers*, such as that of (J.-A. Choi, 2009), highlights empathetic learning through reflective writing. Similar findings are supported by (Gómez García et al., 2025), who examine how students' narratives in the film build critical awareness of racism and social injustice, and by (Tanase, 2022), who focuses on the power of storytelling in creating safe spaces for student expression.

Meanwhile, studies on *The Kite Runner*, such as (Kanosh, 2022), focus on morality, trauma, and ethnic identity. (Al-Ramadan, 2023) analyzes reconciliation and ethnic conflict in the novel, while (Waziri et al., 2023) examines the representation of power relations and social inequality. Although these studies acknowledge the pedagogical value of each work, they do not compare the narrative mechanisms of both texts as part of a single, cohesive framework.

This limitation reveals a research gap: the absence of a comprehensive comparative study analyzing the narrative mechanisms in both works as instruments of peace education within a culturally responsive pedagogical perspective. Most studies examine only one text in isolation, leaving an incomplete understanding of how cross-media narratives—film and novel—can complement one another in developing culturally sensitive learning (Istiani & Anam, 2021; Shakib, 2012).

Within this context, the present study becomes essential. By analyzing the two works simultaneously, this research provides a more holistic understanding of the narrative patterns that cultivate empathy, moral awareness, and cross-cultural understanding. This aligns with the needs of multicultural education, which requires narrative-based approaches to help learners understand complex social dynamics (Ågerup, 2023; Haavelsrud, 2023).

The urgency of this research is also supported by increasing intolerance, social polarization, and cultural biases in educational environments. Teachers need pedagogical models that are not only theoretical but also practical and relevant to learners' lived experiences (Hancock, 2016; Rifky et al., 2024). Cross-cultural narratives in literature and film can serve as bridges between real-



world issues and classroom learning, enabling students to develop more empathetic understandings of diversity (Ntoulia, 2022).

Moreover, peace education requires media capable of facilitating personal reflection as well as social dialogue (Cabezudo & Haavelsrud, 2013; Rifky, 2024). Fictional narratives such as *Freedom Writers* and *The Kite Runner* provide symbolic spaces for students to explore sensitive issues such as trauma, guilt, ethnic bias, and reconciliation (Jones, 2015). This symbolic function positions both works not merely as literary or cinematic texts, but also as pedagogical tools that allow students to safely and meaningfully examine complex issues (Udin & Arfanaldy, 2025). Thus, integrating cross-media narratives becomes a relevant educational strategy for fostering critical analysis and empathetic awareness (Rijal & Mardhiah, 2025).

The novelty of this research lies in its comparative approach that integrates two different media—film and novel—to map narrative strategies that influence peace-oriented pedagogical practice. Unlike previous studies that analyze the works separately, this research offers a cross-media analysis directly connected to culturally responsive pedagogy, presenting a new perspective on using narrative as a transformative educational framework (Alban-Vera, 2025).

Based on this rationale, the study seeks to answer how *Freedom Writers* and *The Kite Runner* construct narrative mechanisms that function as instruments for peace education within a culturally responsive pedagogical framework. It also examines the similarities and differences in the storytelling strategies used by both works to develop empathy, moral awareness, and cross-cultural understanding. The aim is to produce a comparative analysis that explains how cross-media narratives can serve as a foundation for developing a more inclusive, empathetic, and culturally sensitive learning model. This paragraph also delineates the study's scope and provides the conceptual basis for the analyses presented in the following sections.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-comparative design to analyze and compare the narrative mechanisms in the film *Freedom Writers* and the novel *The Kite Runner*. These works were chosen as primary data sources because they address themes of social conflict, trauma, empathy, and character transformation—elements relevant to culturally responsive peace education. Data collection was conducted through close reading and close viewing, enabling in-depth examination of narrative structure, character dynamics, and pedagogical messages (Ibrahim Al Khalaf, 2024).

Instruments

The research instruments consist of narrative analysis sheets

developed based on comparative narrative theory. These sheets include indicators for plot structure, character depiction, narrative style, conflict construction, and emotional elements that cultivate empathy and moral reflection. Thematic coding guidelines were also used to identify key themes related to peace education, such as intercultural dialogue, safe spaces, trauma healing, and moral awareness (S. Choi & Kim, 2017).

Procedures

The research procedures were carried out in several stages. First, the texts of the film and novel were examined to identify relevant narrative units. Second, narrative structures were mapped using categories such as exposition, complication, climax, and resolution. Third, thematic coding was conducted to identify narrative elements related to peace education values. Fourth, a systematic comparison of the two texts was performed to identify similarities and differences in the mechanisms of empathy formation, conflict resolution, and cultural representation. All procedures were repeated to ensure interpretive consistency (You, 2013).

Data analysis

Data analysis combined narrative analysis and thematic analysis. Narrative analysis was used to examine story structure, narrative devices, and character development. Thematic analysis identified patterns of meaning related to empathy, reconciliation, trauma, and cross-cultural understanding. The results of both analyses were then compared to produce a comprehensive understanding of how film and novel function as pedagogical models in culturally responsive peace education (Covert & Koro-Ljungberg, 2015).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Narrative Mechanisms in *Freedom Writers*

The narrative analysis of *Freedom Writers* reveals that the film constructs a pedagogical model grounded in collective social transformation. The storyline develops progressively from a fragmented classroom environment marked by cultural conflict toward the formation of a cohesive learning community. This progression is not merely plot-driven but structured through relational dynamics between the teacher and students, which function as the narrative core of transformation (Mulyadi et al., 2022; Petersen, 2009; Powers, 2007).

The initial phase of the film emphasizes social division through racial and cultural segregation within the classroom. Early scenes depict distrust, symbolic violence, and identity-based hostility, establishing conflict as the dominant narrative condition (Sa'adah, Permatasari, et al., 2025). This fragmented social context functions as a critical narrative foundation that underscores the necessity of pedagogical intervention before meaningful learning can occur (Brown, 2015; Devereaux & Turner, 2022).

A key narrative mechanism in the film is the construction of a safe learning space. The classroom is represented not as a neutral instructional setting but as a dialogic arena where students' lived experiences are acknowledged and validated. Statements such as *"This room will be a safe place"* signify a narrative shift in power relations, marking the classroom as a space of inclusion and mutual recognition (Smith, 2024).

Dialogic interaction between teacher and students plays a central role in shaping the narrative. Classroom discussions are portrayed as egalitarian exchanges rather than top-down instruction. Through these interactions, personal experiences of violence, discrimination, and marginalization are transformed into shared learning resources, allowing cultural identity to function as a pedagogical asset rather than a barrier (Chapman, 2004; Kaufmann, 2010).

Reflective journal writing serves as a crucial narrative and pedagogical device. Journals enable students to articulate traumatic experiences in a private yet meaningful manner, while simultaneously contributing to the development of collective empathy. Expressions such as *"When I write, I feel heard"* illustrate how personal reflection is narratively positioned as a pathway toward emotional recognition and social connecti (Di Pardo Léon-Henri, 2024; *Reflections of Writing Narratives*, 2022).

From a structural perspective, journal writing operates as a form of internal focalization, revealing shifts in students' emotional and cognitive awareness. The narrative gradually moves from external conflict toward internal reflection, suggesting that social transformation is preceded by individual acknowledgment of pain and identity (Adams, 2024).

The emergence of solidarity among students marks a significant narrative turning point. As stories are shared, identity boundaries become increasingly permeable, and experiences of suffering are reframed as collectively understood realities. This narrative transition reflects a pedagogical emphasis on relational empathy and shared humanity (Hager, 2024).

The teacher's role is narratively constructed as a facilitator rather than an authoritarian figure. By encouraging dialogue and validating diverse perspectives, the film presents a culturally responsive pedagogical stance that prioritizes student agency. This positioning reinforces the narrative's alignment with democratic and inclusive educational values (Brown, 2015).

Thematically, collective empathy functions as the central outcome of the narrative process. Empathy is not portrayed as an innate emotional response but as a socially constructed capacity developed through dialogic engagement, reflective practice, and mutual recognition (Stanley & Hurst, 2011).

Overall, *Freedom Writers* employs a narrative mechanism that



integrates plot structure, dialogue, and reflection to model a form of peace-oriented pedagogy grounded in collective empathy, cultural recognition, and social transformation.

Narrative Mechanisms in *The Kite Runner*

In contrast to the collective orientation of *Freedom Writers*, *The Kite Runner* constructs a narrative mechanism centered on individual moral development. The novel's structure relies heavily on retrospection, linking childhood experiences to ethical consequences in adulthood. Reflection, rather than interaction, becomes the primary driver of narrative progression (Du, 2017).

The narrative opens with a retrospective framework that situates memory as the foundation of moral consciousness. Amir's recollections of his relationship with Hassan function not merely as background information but as the ethical anchor of the entire story. Trauma and memory are thus embedded structurally within the narrative (NAYEBPOUR, 2018).

Guilt emerges as the dominant thematic force shaping Amir's moral journey. The confession "*I became what I am today at the age of twelve*" encapsulates the novel's emphasis on formative ethical failure. Guilt operates as both psychological burden and narrative catalyst, propelling the search for redemption (Matondang, 2020).

Symbolism, particularly the recurring image of the kite, reinforces the moral architecture of the narrative. The kite represents loyalty, betrayal, and the longing for moral restoration. Its repeated appearance serves as a narrative reminder of unresolved ethical responsibility (Chen, 2020).

The use of internal monologue intensifies the novel's introspective quality. Through first-person narration, readers gain direct access to Amir's moral deliberations, doubts, and self-condemnation. This narrative strategy deepens ethical engagement by foregrounding internal conflict over external action (Yang, 2020).

Ethnic conflict between Pashtun and Hazara communities provides a critical socio-political context for the narrative. Inequality and systemic oppression are portrayed as forces that shape interpersonal relationships and moral decision-making. The narrative thus connects individual guilt to broader structures of injustice (Wagle, 2023).

The redemption arc is crystallized in the statement "*There is a way to be good again*", which functions as a narrative turning point. Redemption is depicted not as absolution but as an arduous process requiring risk, sacrifice, and confrontation with past wrongdoing (Connolly, 2007).

The novel also foregrounds the long-term consequences of moral inaction. Amir's failure to intervene in childhood is shown to reverberate across his adult life, emphasizing the ethical weight of silence and complicity (Kai-fu, 2019).

Structurally, the consistent movement between past and present reinforces the causal relationship between trauma and moral responsibility. Temporal shifts function as narrative bridges that sustain ethical coherence throughout the story (Mraović-O'Hare, 2022).

Collectively, *The Kite Runner* constructs a narrative mechanism that emphasizes individual moral awareness, ethical accountability, and redemption within a culturally and politically complex setting.

Comparative Narrative Mechanisms and Pedagogical Implications

The comparative analysis highlights two distinct yet complementary pedagogical orientations embedded within the narratives. *Freedom Writers* emphasizes social empathy developed through collective interaction, whereas *The Kite Runner* foregrounds individual moral reflection rooted in personal accountability. These differing orientations illustrate the pedagogical diversity of narrative forms (Coulter et al., 2007).

Empathy in *Freedom Writers* is relational and dialogic, emerging through shared experiences and collaborative learning. In contrast, empathy in *The Kite Runner* is reflective and introspective, cultivated through engagement with internal moral struggle. Both forms contribute uniquely to peace-oriented learning (García Ochoa & McDonald, 2020).

Media form plays a significant role in shaping pedagogical impact. Film utilizes visual immediacy and dialogue to represent social processes, while the novel employs linguistic depth and interiority to explore ethical consciousness. These media-specific mechanisms generate distinct learning experiences (Sa'adah, Nurhamidah, et al., 2025).

From a pedagogical standpoint, *Freedom Writers* offers a model of classroom-based practice that can be directly adapted, including dialogic discussion and reflective writing. This approach emphasizes learning as a social and communal process (Cattorini, 2022; Prastanti, 2018).

Conversely, *The Kite Runner* provides a framework for reflective learning that encourages critical engagement with moral dilemmas, identity, and injustice. The novel supports pedagogical practices focused on ethical reasoning and cultural awareness (Thakur, 2020).

Integrating both narratives enables a holistic pedagogical approach that balances social interaction with individual reflection. Learners are invited to engage both emotionally and ethically across different narrative modalities (Kalogeras, 2013).

Conflict functions as a pedagogical catalyst in both texts. Social conflict in the film and internal conflict in the novel each prompt reflection, dialogue, and transformation (Shakib, 2012).



Cross-media narrative integration enriches culturally responsive pedagogy by offering multiple pathways to understanding diversity and justice. The combination of film and literature expands the scope of narrative-based learning (R'boul, 2021).

Together, these narratives support the development of empathy, critical reflection, and cross-cultural understanding through complementary pedagogical mechanisms (Rosen, 1999).

Thus, comparative narrative analysis demonstrates that cross-media storytelling can function as a structured pedagogical framework for peace- oriented and culturally responsive education.

CONCLUSION

The film *Freedom Writers* and the novel *The Kite Runner* demonstrate distinct yet complementary narrative mechanisms for culturally responsive peace education. While *Freedom Writers* foregrounds collective empathy through dialogic classroom interaction and reflective journaling, *The Kite Runner* constructs individual moral awareness through a redemption narrative shaped by trauma and ethnic conflict. These differing orientations indicate that narrative form and media significantly influence how peace-oriented values are internalized within educational contexts.

The comparative findings suggest that integrating cross-media narratives enables a more comprehensive pedagogical framework by combining social- collaborative learning with personal-introspective reflection. Such integration reinforces the role of narrative as a structured pedagogical instrument capable.

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