



## THE HYPHENATED EXISTENCE: A STUDY OF KHALED HOSSEINI'S *THE KITE RUNNER*

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### Abstract

Khaled Hosseini's debut novel *The Kite Runner* takes the readers on a journey to explore the customs, culture, traditions, religion, ideology, and values of Afghan society. Hosseini has skillfully sketched the realities of Afghanistan illustrating two very different sides of Afghanistan: the first part of the novel where the country is a harmonious and peaceful homeland of the Afghans and the later part exposes the war-torn Afghanistan during and after Soviet-Afghan War and the Taliban control. Hosseini, being an Afghan-born American, through the life and events of his characters in the novel, gives an insight into his childhood world of Afghanistan - his motherland and the drastic changes that had occurred in his homeland after he left to settle in America.

Each character in the novel represents the kind of individuals that coexists within the Afghan society, the morals and values they hold while dealing with situations, both good and bad. Amir's father is a man of culture, loves talking about politics, and has interesting views on religion. He has traveled to many places for his business, in short- an ideal successful man. But later in the story as Amir and his father migrates to America to flee the dangers of war in Afghanistan, Amir watches his father slowly and painfully crumbling. The novel can therefore be critically analyzed as American immigrant literature. While discussing the themes, humanistic, political, social, and moral aspects of Khaled's novel *The Kite Runner*, this research will attempt to cover the internal and existential struggles faced by the characters of the novel i.e., the struggles of an immigrant.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, War, Diaspora, Trauma, Identity.

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## Introduction

Khaled Hosseini was born in Afghanistan, 1965. He spent the precious years of his childhood in Kabul in the district of Wazir Akbar Khan. Khaled grew up reading classical Persian poetry, Rumi, Saadi, and Hafez, and was thrilled by Indian and American movies. As a child, he remembers to love and enjoy kite fighting. He made the acquaintance of his family cook, a young boy named Hossein Khan, who was a Hazara. According to Tallan Donnie in an article states, "The Hazaras—an ethnic and religious minority constituting an estimated 20 percent of Afghanistan's population—have faced discrimination and persecution in Afghanistan for over a century and particularly during the last period of Taliban rule in the 1990s. The Taliban and other Sunni extremists, notably Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-KP), view the Hazaras as a sworn enemy primarily because of their Shi'a faith."

Khaled had lived in Iran and then in France as a result of his father's job demands. In 1973, just after the abolishment of the 200-year-old reigning Afghan monarchy by Daoud Khan. It marked the beginning of an era of instability and political turmoil. A communist faction overthrew the government, killing Daud Khan and his family and then the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979, as a result of which millions of Afghans fled their country. Hosseini was one of them. Perhaps it was what they call the "survivors guilt" that Hosseini felt considering how he and many others like him fled their homeland and left behind their whole life to start a new one, only to watch their loved ones and their people suffer in the deteriorating condition of their country from afar. In this context, *The Kite Runner*, although fictional, has autobiographical elements.

In the novel, Amir the protagonist flees Afghanistan with his father to America leaving everything behind to escape the brutal political situation. Amir is however driven with guilt and is haunted by his actions, particularly his betrayal of his only close friend Hassan. Many years later he returns to Afghanistan in hopes to atone for his sins and is successfully able to do so. Although Amir's life had changed for the better in the US, his whole existence remains stuck in the past, taking along with him the guilt and memories from his childhood.

In an interview with Farhad Azad, Hosseini says, "Afghanistan is full of storytellers, and I was raised around the people who were very adept at capturing an audience's attention with their storytelling skills. I have been told that there is an old-fashioned sense of storytelling in *The Kite*

*Runner*. I would agree it's what I like to read and what I like to write." (Azad 2004). Hosseini through his writing reflects on Afghanistan, his beloved homeland as he remembers as a child and how the selfish nature of war and violence have ruined the land and citizens post-Soviet invasion. In conversation with Razestha Sethna of Newline, Hosseini states that his memories of Afghanistan are, "untainted by the specter of war, landmines, and famines" (Saethna 2003). Perhaps it was Hosseini's strong will to tell the world about his people and culture, its beauty and values through his writing whilst reminding his fellow Afghans to remember and cherish the peaceful land that Afghanistan once was.

## Hyphenated Existence in Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

According to Miriam Webster dictionary, Hyphenates (noun) is referred to people who performs more than one function often represented with hyphen in their titles. For example, director-producer, German-American, etc. It relates to a person, group, or organization of mixed origin or identity. In the process of this mixing, an individual's identity is severed causing the person to be in a state of confusion and uncertainty. Their sense of identity becomes unstable and uncertain. A form of diasporic identity crisis that leads to an inner conflict following the huge transitional phase in one's life causing the individual to be in a state of existentialism accompanied by negative experiences such as anxiety, stress, despair, depression, and other such factors which places the individual in a state of Hyphenated existence. Khaled's novels are widely known for having elements of the Afghan diaspora. *The Kite Runner* reflects Khaled Hosseini's diasporic life in the United States directly through the character of Amir. He has projected fond memories of his childhood before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in his novel. "I remember the precise moment, crouching behind a crumbling mud wall, peeking into the alley near the frozen creek. That was a long time ago, but 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). In these lines from the novel, through the voice of Amir, Hosseini pinpoints the fact and realization that the experiences and memories of the past days had always stayed and it was still fresh like it had just happened yesterday. To remember something from the past of one's life this clearly and feeling deep emotions

are evident throughout the novel. It reflects the temperament of a diasporic person.

The story begins with Amir as a grown man settling in San Francisco with his wife Soraya. He recalls his life as a child in Afghanistan where he lived a luxurious, happy, and content life. He remembers the scenery, the people, and his best friend Hassan in particular in great detail. "I can still see Hassan up on that tree, sunlight flickering through the leaves on his almost perfectly round face, a face like a Chinese doll chiseled from hardwood: his flat, broad nose and slanting, narrow eyes like bamboo leaves, eyes that looked, depending on the light, gold, green, even sapphire I can still see his tiny low-set ears and that pointed stub of a chin, a meaty appendage that looked like it was added as a mere afterthought. And the cleft lip just left of midline, where the Chinese doll maker's instrument may have slipped; or perhaps he had simply grown tired and careless." (Hosseini 3) These lines show how vividly Amir remembers his friend and their time spent together as a child in Afghanistan even though many years had passed by.

Amir's father is a diplomat and his mother is a teacher. A Hazara man named Ali and his son Hassan worked as servants in Amir's home. Both Amir and Hassan were breastfed by the same woman as Amir's mother died during childbirth and Hassan's ran away just a few weeks after he was born therefore they both grew up without a mother figure and Hassan was like his brother. Amir looked up to his father, he had spent all his childhood trying to please him and seek his father's approval. Amir would get somewhat jealous at times when his father would acknowledge Hassan. Amir had more of a passive persona, he like reading and writing and would sometimes read to Hassan. Amir disliked confrontation, a personality trait that stays with him as he grows older. Hassan was bold and bright. He had strong instincts and would always stand by and for Amir. They were completely contrasting personalities and Amir felt Baba had always preferred and complimented Hassan for it. "Because the truth of it was, I always felt like Baba hated me a little. And why not? After all, I had killed his beloved wife, his beautiful princess, hadn't I? The least I could have done was to have had the decency to have turned out a little more like him. But I hadn't turned out like him (Hosseini 18).

However, everything goes downhill after the incident took place the day that the famous kite fighting competition took place. Hassan was raped by the infamous boys of the town, Assef,

Wali, and Kamal behind the end of an alley. This place, the scene, the trauma had never once left Amir's mind ever since. Amir could never forgive himself for being unable to save his beloved friend Hassan on that day. Amir's guilt drives the whole plot of this novel. "I opened my mouth, almost said something. Almost. The rest of my life might have turned out differently if I had. But I didn't. I just watched. Paralyzed" (Hosseini 69). "He flung himself at Hassan, knocking him to the ground. Wali and Kamal followed. I bit on my fist. Shut my eyes" (Hosseini 69). "Assef knelt behind Hassan, put his hands on Hassan's hips, and lifted his bare buttocks. He kept one hand on Hassan's back and undid his belt buckle with his free hand. He unzipped his jeans. Dropped his underwear. He positioned himself behind Hassan. Hassan didn't struggle. Didn't even whimper. He moved his head slightly and I caught a glimpse of his face. Saw the resignation in it. It was a look I had seen before. It was the look of the lamb" (Hosseini 71).

This incident changed the relationship between Amir and Hassan forever. The two boys who never left each other's side now barely saw and spoke to one another. Amir was sick to his stomach for being a coward and was completely guilt-ridden. He couldn't bring himself to talk to Hassan and would be withdrawn if Hassan tried to. Amir wanted Hassan to punish him and hate him for what he had done. But Hassan still treated Amir with the same love and care as he did before. Amir attempts to create situations for Hassan to hate him but to no avail. Hassan's innocence and goodness will forever haunt Amir for the rest of his life thereon. Amir eventually pushes the situation so far that compels Ali and Hassan to leave for good. And after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Amir and his father flee to America to start a new life, and the process to get there was all too traumatic for Amir. Adding to the horrible condition that the fellow Afghans had to travel in was Kamal who was among the passengers had passed away on their way from suffocation and to make it worse Kamal's father had committed suicide with a gun following his son's death. It had left Amir in shock and terror. Now, the facts and events or the back-story of the novel that were discussed above are crucial to understanding how and why the character Amir and his father (Baba) had different outlooks towards life and its meaning after moving to America. "For me, America was a place to bury my memories. For Baba, a place to mourn his" (Hosseini 120). Life had completely changed for Amir and his father in America. Baba, who for

most of his life was wealthy and well respected in society, contributing to the welfare of his community, was now working at a gas station in America. Tirelessly working to secure his son's education. Even though the circumstances that Amir and Baba had to live in were not like that of the days in Kabul, Baba's moral values and ethics had never been shaken once. He lives a proud and independent life posing as an example and an ideal man for Amir. Baba is skeptical about religion, he believes that act of goodness and kindness is greater than anything. Amir notices Baba hopelessly missing Afghanistan but is helpless. He sternly rejects the way of the Americans and refuses to learn the English language and culture and instead proudly embraces the ways and takes pride in being an Afghan. Baba is diagnosed with cancer but refuses to stay in the hospital and receive treatment. He accepts their fate and continues to work hard until his last breath, if not for him at least for his son Amir.

Amir on the other hand blends in well with American life. Amir is driven by guilt all his life, he is guilty of being unable to please Baba by being more like him, he feels responsible for his mother's death and now sees Baba working 9-5 for him. He sees America as an opportunity to bury the guilt he felt for what he did to Hassan. There are also several scenes in the novel where Amir would take long pointless drives when he feels low as if he is running away from his problems and miseries. Nevertheless, he fails to run from them, and towards the end of the story, he finally faces his biggest challenge by bringing back Hassan's son from Afghanistan to America with him. Amir's marriage to Soraya plays a significant role in his life. He had a reason to move on from Baba's death and be happy. He was somehow content and yet Soraya's inability to conceive had once again created a kind of hollowness in the couple.

In the second half of the novel, Amir returns to Afghanistan in hopes to atone for his sin and the guilt he felt throughout his life. He attempts to rescue Sohrab, Hassan's son as Rahim Khan requested, and is successfully able to do so. This fills the huge void in Amir, the void that he was unable to get rid of. "What was so funny was that, for the first time since the winter of 1975, I felt at peace. I laughed because I saw that, in some hidden nook in a corner of my mind, I had been looking forward to this" (Hosseini 265).

When he leaves for Kabul, Amir finds Sohrab in his old mansion and sees Sohrab being physically and sexually abused. He meets Asef, who was now a Taliban leader, Assef and Amir get into a

brawl in front of Sohrab and is beaten mercilessly, but Amir does not fight back. It was almost as if he had wanted this beating for all the many reasons, the wrongdoings that he had committed against Hassan, he felt at peace. In the end, Amir takes Sohrab to San Francisco and raised him as his own.

### Conclusion

*The Kite Runner* is basically about the people of Afghans, their culture, values, and morals beautifully woven into words. Khaled paints his homeland in a melancholic and nostalgic tone, mirroring himself in the character of Amir. Hosseini in his novel uses the language of the Afghans often and describes the men and women of his community in minute detail, this shows us how deeply rooted he is in the Afghan culture and how determined he is to tell the world about his country and people through his writings.

An immigrant himself, Hosseini represents millions of others like him who are displaced geographically, mentally, physically, and emotionally like him in general and particularly the Afghans in this novel. While touching on the social, political, and cultural aspects, Hosseini has skilfully written a story while merging these aspects and how they affect the personal lives of people, providing us with an idea of a conflicted and troubled mind of an immigrant and glimpses of the struggle they face towards finding their identity. Eventually, *The Kite Runner* ends with the notion that though the people of Afghanistan have been through political and social turmoil, forced displacement, and loss of political, social, and personal identity, each of them remains deeply rooted in their culture, ethnicity, and moral values and it is what makes them a true Afghan. "You can take Afghans out of Paghman, but you can't take Paghman out of Afghans" (Hosseini,334)

The novel determines the density of the Afghan's love for their culture and traditions. After the Taliban and Russians had ruled Afghanistan, the country had drastically damaged and changed. Leaving its people nothing but disparity and yearning for the land that Afghanistan once was. Left with nothing but stories of the past to reminiscence and rejoice in the country before it was tainted by greed and war. Such a delight is evoked in reading Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner*.

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