
Understanding the Collective Cultural Identity and Rich Heritage: A Reading of The Kite Runner

Dr. Alizehra Haider Raza B.A, M.A, M.Phil, Ph.D,Assistant ProfessorIn charge
Head of the DepartmentCareer Development CellParul University, Vadodara,
Gujarat

Article Received: 10/07/2024

Article Accepted: 14/08/2024

Published Online: 15/08/2024

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2024.6.8.74

Abstract:

The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini explores the complex relationships between two boys, Amir and Hassan, who are raised in the same household but belong to different ethnic and social backgrounds in Afghanistan. Amir, a Pashtun, and Hassan, a Hazara, navigate a society deeply divided by ethnic and religious discrimination, particularly against the Hazara Shia minority. The novel delves into the themes of father-son relationships, loyalty, betrayal, and the struggles of cultural identity. Central to the story is Amir's conflicted relationship with his father, Baba, who has high expectations of masculinity and bravery, contrasting sharply with Amir's literary inclinations. The narrative also highlights the Afghan tradition of kite fighting, symbolizing victory and social acceptance. As Amir and Baba migrate to the United States, the novel addresses the challenges of cultural assimilation and identity faced by immigrants in the Western world, emphasizing the enduring impact of one's homeland and cultural heritage.

Keywords: Ethnic conflict, father-son relationship, cultural identity, kite fighting, immigration, loyalty and betrayal

Introduction:

The reason behind writing *The Kite Runner* was the fact that Khaled Hosseini wanted to show the world the real picture of Afghanistan and its rich cultural history. He wanted to let the people of America know that Afghanistan is not just a war; it is a country that is proud of its rich cultural history and heritage. Through this novel, Khaled Hosseini wants to convey the message that Afghanistan is not a haven for terrorists but a home for so many people and their dreams, ambitions, and aspirations.

The protagonist of *The Kite Runner* is Amir, who is a rich, beautiful, delicate boy, "Amir was a boy with a thin-boned frame, a shaved head, and low-set ears" (Hosseini 14). The novel deals with Amir's life and the three crucial periods of his life. The first period is Amir's childhood in Afghanistan, the second period of his life starts in 1980 after moving to California, and the third and most important period is

his return to Afghanistan and freeing Sohrab, the son of Hasan from Assef, who is an extremist.

Amir was born in the area named Wazir Akbar Khan in Kabul, Afghanistan. Amir's mother, Sofia Akrami, had died after giving birth to Amir. His father was a well-known, rich, and established businessman in Kabul. As Amir narrates, "My father was 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, and a black glare that would drop the devil to his knees begging for mercy. At parties, when all six-foot-five of him thundered into the room, attention shifted to him like sunflowers turning to the sun. Baba was impossible to ignore. Lore has it my father once wrestled a black bear in Baluchistan with his bare hands. If the story had been about anyone else, it would have been dismissed as _laaf_, that Afghan tendency to Raza 192 exaggerates. But no one ever doubted the veracity of any story about Baba. Baba did have those three parallel scars coursing a jagged path down his back. After that incident, Baba got his nickname as 'Toophan Agha' or 'Mr. Hurricane' (Hosseini 07).

The story of *The Kite Runner* revolves around Amir and Hasan, the two boys who were born in the same house with the same father; they grew up together and stayed in the same house. Amir belongs to the Pashtun tribe, which is the most noble, royal tribe in Afghanistan. Hasan belongs to the Hazara community, a minority community in Afghanistan that is always treated badly by the rest of the communities of Afghanistan. Hazaras are Shia people, and that is why they are targeted, killed, ridiculed, and mocked by everyone. This hatred has been there for ages; by bringing the theme of this ethnic conflict in Afghanistan in the novel, Hosseini speaks for all the Shia victims who have been suffering in Afghanistan for generations. Hosseini is against this discrimination that is deeply rooted in the Afghanistani society.

Amir's father, Agha Sahib, once slept with Sanaubar, Ali's wife. Ali was Amir's father's servant; he used to live in a quarter of Amir's house and help Amir's father in his business. As Amir grew up with Hasan in the same way Agha Sahib had grown up with Ali. When Agha Sahib was very young, his father brought Ali to their home; Ali was also very young at that time. Agha Sahib's father treated Ali like his own son. For the last forty years, Ali had been staying in Agha Sahib's house.

Sanaubar gave birth to Hasan; since Ali was a loyal servant and a kind human being, he never questioned Agha, accepted Hasan as his own son, and loved him the way he would have loved his own son. Sanaubar eloped after five days of giving birth to Hasan, and Agha Sahib hired the same nursing woman to breastfeed Hasan, who had breastfed Amir. The way Ali was loyal to Agha was so Hasan to Amir, as Amir recalls at a place in the text: "Hassan never denied me anything" (Hosseini 03).

One of the major parts of *The Kite Runner* deals with the father-son relationship, Amir does not get along with his father very well whom Amir Addresses as Baba he is also referred to as Agha Sahib in the novel. Most of the time Amir is seen hating his Baba and having negative thoughts and feelings about Baba. Baba considers Amir responsible for his wife's death as she had died while giving birth to Amir.

Baba always forces Amir to act like a brave and strong Afghan boy who is not afraid of anyone or anything. Baba wants Amir to indulge in activities like playing soccer, flying kites, hunting animals, and not being afraid of fighting whenever required. In one of the incidents mentioned in *The Kite Runner*, the readers get to know that Baba becomes unhappy and angry when he sees Amir crying when a horseman falls on the ground and dies. Amir recounts the above incident in the following words: "I remember one time Baba took me to the yearly _Buzkashi_ tournament that took place on the first day of spring, New Year's Day. Buzkashi was, and still is, Afghanistan's national passion. A _chapandaz_, a highly skilled horseman usually patronized by rich aficionados, has to snatch a goat or cattle carcass from the midst of a melee, carry that carcass with him around the stadium at full gallop, and drop it in a scoring circle while a team of other _chapandaz_ chases him and does everything in its power--kick, claw, whip, punch--to snatch the carcass from him. That day, the crowd roared with excitement as the horsemen on the field bellowed their battle cries and jostled for the carcass in a cloud of Raza 194 dust. The earth trembled with the clatter of hooves. We watched from the upper bleachers as riders pounded past us at full gallop, yipping and yelling, foam flying from their horses' mouths. But at the moment, I watched with horror as one of the _chapandaz_ fell off his saddle and was trampled under a score of hooves. His body was tossed and hurled in the stampede like a rag doll, finally rolling to a stop when the melee moved on. He twitched once and lay motionless, his legs bent at unnatural angles, a pool of his blood soaking through the sand. I began to cry. I cried all the way back home. I remember how Baba's hands clenched around the steering wheel. Clenched and unclenched. Mostly, I will never forget Baba's valiant efforts to conceal the disgusted look on his face as he drove in silence" (Hosseini 12).

But since his childhood, Amir has not been interested in any of these activities, which would make him look like a real Afghan boy, according to Baba. Amir found all these activities uninteresting as his interest was in reading and writing; he used to write poetry and read classics. Baba does not approve of his passion for reading, and he says with anger to Rahim Khan, "Amir is always buried in those books. I wasn't like that, and neither were any of the kids I grew up with. There is something missing in that boy. Do you know what always happens when the neighborhood boys tease him? Hassan steps in and fends them off. I've seen it with my own eyes. And when they come home, I say to him, 'How did Hassan get that scrape on his face?' And he says, 'He fell down.' I'm telling you, Rahim, 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. If I hadn't seen the doctor pull him out of my wife with my own eyes, I'd never believe he's my son" (Hosseini 13). Baba wanted Amir to behave and act like the other children of Afghanistan; he wanted him to grow up into a fearless, strong boy who would look after his business. That is why he gets angry when he finds Amir with a book or a pen.

The title of the novel draws its inspiration from the kite flying festival celebrated in Afghanistan every year. Kite flying is a social event and it is celebrated as a national festival every year in Afghanistan. The person who runs to catch a kite is called a Kite Runner, as he runs to catch the kite and that kite is considered as a reward trophy. Flying a kite and catching a kite is considered a symbol of victory by the Afghanistani society.

The boy who manages to win the competition and catches the kite is considered a brave and courageous boy. Amir narrates that "every winter, districts in Kabul held a kite fighting tournament. And if you were a boy living in Kabul, the day of the tournament was undeniably the highlight of the cold season. I never slept the night before the tournament. I felt like a soldier trying to sleep in the trenches the night before a major battle, and that wasn't so far off. In Kabul, fighting kites was a little like going to war. Hassan and I used to build our own kites. (Hosseini 27).

Amir further adds that "the kite-fighting tournament was an old winter tradition in Afghanistan. It started early in the morning on the day of the contest and didn't end until only the winning kite flew in the sky. People gathered on sidewalks and roofs to cheer for their kids. The streets were filled with kite fighters, jerking and tugging on their lines, squinting up to the sky, trying to gain position to cut the opponent's line. Every kite fighter had an assistant; in my case, Hassan used to hold the spool and feed the line (Hosseini 28).

One of the main themes in *The Kite Runner* is the cultural clash that Eastern immigrants face in the Western World. Because when people move from one place to another, they do not live alone, but with them, they carry the culture, rituals, customs, traditions, etc, of their homeland. After moving to a new land, they face a lot of challenges in Raza 196 because all the people of the new land they have moved into are not welcoming; they come across the people and policies who do not appreciate their existence in their land, they are being ridiculed on the basis of skin color, the race they belong to, the language they speak, the religion they follow, the social customs they observe and so on.

Every now and then, in the new land they have migrated to, they are reminded that they are different from the rest of them and are treated as the other. The following words from *The Location of Culture* by Homi K. Bhabha simply justify Amir and his father Agha Sahib's dilemma while adjusting to the American society as Bhabha asserts that "these in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of

selfhood; singular or communal, these strategies initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (02).

After migrating to America, both father and son had become victims of cultural differences; they were having difficulty articulating their identities in the new world. For example, in one of the incidents in the text, Amir narrates an incident where his father gets into an argument with their American neighbor. Amir tells the neighbor, "My father is still adjusting to life in America. It has been a year and a half since we moved here, and Baba is still adjusting. He missed the sugarcane fields of Jalalabad and the gardens of Paghman. He missed people milling in and out of his house, missed walking down the bustling aisles of Shor Bazaar and greeting people who knew him and his father, knew his grandfather, people who shared ancestors with him, whose pasts intertwined with his. For Baba, America was a place to mourn his memories" (Hosseini 69).

Arshley Karuther, in his article titled 'National Multiculturalism: Transnational Identities,' suggests that "Amir's character is all about multiculturalism; for him, multiculturalism is nothing but a fixed set of movements and settlements that occurred as a consequence of transnationalism. At the heart of multiculturalism lies fear, fear of not getting accepted, and fear of doing better than the rest of others. Amir feels both fears as well as guilt. As Amir was running away from his past, he voluntarily accepted the terms and conditions of the multiculturalism policy, but people like Agha Sahib failed to adjust to such a society where citizens are restrained in the name of being disciplined" (Karuther 216).

Hosseini's narration is not only about depression, trauma, alienation, war, and conflict. Khaled Hosseini writes extensively about the traumatic experiences of the Afghanistan people under the Taliban rule and the U.S. invasion, but he also writes about the beautiful, varied culture of Afghanistan; Hosseini's narrative is about hopefulness, positivity, and the celebration of life. Hosseini starts his narration from the time when the Soviet invasion took place, as this period is generally considered a forgotten period in Afghanistan's history. Hosseini writes elaborately about the internal conflicts Afghanistan has faced along with the external interventions.

References:

- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Nation and Narration. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Hosseini, Khaled. 'The Kite Runner's Author On His Childhood, His Writings, And The Plight Of The Afghan Refugees: Interview by Courtney Brooks.' Radio Free Europe. 21 June 2012.
- Hoskins, Andrew. *Televising War: From Vietnam to Iraq*. London:

Continuum, 2004.

Hosseini, Khaled. *The Kite Runner*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2003. Print.

A Thousand Splendid Suns. New York: Riverhead Books, 2007. Print.

And the Mountains Echoed. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. Print.

Sea Prayer. New York: Riverhead Books, 2018.

Junger, Ernst. "War and Photography." *German Critique*. No 59, Spring-Summer 1993.

Karuther, Arshley. 'National Multiculturalism: Transnational Identities.'

Journal of Intercultural Studies, vol, 34, issue 2, May 2013, pp. 214–28.

Montero, D. 'Film also Ages: Time and Images in Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*.'

Studies in French Cinema. Vol. 06, issue, 02, 2006, pp 107–115.

'*The Kite Runner's* Author On His Childhood, His Writings, And The Plight Of The Afghan Refugees: Interview by Courtni Brooks.' *Radio Free Europe*. 21 June 2012