

QUEST FOR REDEMPTION IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S "THE KITE RUNNER"

N. Nagapushpam¹

¹Arulmigu Palaniandavar Arts College for Women, Palani

e-mail: pushpamnp14@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Khaled Hosseini, Afghan born American novelist who was known for his vivid depictions of Afghanistan, most notably in *The Kite runner*. Hosseini's very fond memories of his childhood in peaceful pre-Soviet era Afghanistan, as well as his personal experiences with Afghanistan's Hazara people led to the writing of his first novel, *The Kite Runner*. Amir's quest to redeem himself makes up the heart of the novel. Early on, Amir strives to redeem himself in Baba's eyes, and he feels responsible for that. To redeem himself to Baba, Amir thinks that he must win the kite tournament and bring Baba the losing kite, both of which are inciting incidents that set the rest of the novel in motion. The more substantial part of Amir's quest for redemption, however, stems from his guilt regarding Hassan. The guilt drives the climactic events of the story, including Amir's journey to Kabul to find Sohrab and his confrontation with Assef. The moral standard that Amir must meet his redemption is set early in the book when Baba says that a boy who doesn't stand up for himself becomes a man who can't stand up to anything. As a boy, Amir fails to stand up for himself. As an adult, he can only redeem himself, by proving he has the courage to stand up for what is right.

Keywords: self-actualization, humanity, spiritual journey, betrayal and redemption, bildungsroman

1) INTRODUCTION

The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini was published in 2003. Initially published by Riverhead Books, an imprint of Penguin, *The Kite Runner* was said to be the first novel written in English by an Afghan writer, and the book appeared on many book club reading lists. The novel is set in Afghanistan from the late 1970s to 1981 and the start of the Soviet occupation, then in the Afghan community in Fremont, California from the 1980s to the early 2000s, and finally in contemporary Afghanistan during the Taliban regime.

The novel, *The Kite Runner* is the story of strained family relationships between a father and a son, and between two brothers, how they deal with guilt and forgiveness, and how they weather the political and social transformations of Afghanistan from the 1970s to 2001. *The Kite Runner* opens in 2001. The adult narrator, Amir, lives in San Francisco and is contemplating his past, thinking about a

boyhood friend whom he has betrayed. The action of the story then moves backward in time to the narrator's early life in Kabul, Afghanistan, where he is the only child of a privileged merchant. Amir's closest friend is his playmate and servant Hassan, a poor illiterate boy who is a member of the Hazara ethnic minority.

The Kite Runner is Khaled Hosseini's first published novel in May, 2003. It has been hailed as "A moving portrait of modern Afghanistan, from its pre – Russian invasion glory days through the terrible reign of the Taliban". "A sweeping novel of love, betrayal, loss and violence set in Kabul and San Francisco," the novel has been variously described as Devastating, Stunning, Unforgettable, Harrowing yet exhilarating, providing a gallery of memorable portraits. The number one bestseller of 2005, *The Kite Runner* is narrated by Amir four days after the final events of his decades-long story. The narrator speaks in the first person, primarily describing events that occurred months and years ago. The narrator describes these events subjectively, explaining how he experienced them. At one point, another character (Hassan) briefly narrates a chapter from his own point of view. The tone is confessional, expressing profound remorse throughout the story.

The Kite Runner is set primarily in Afghanistan and the United States between the 1960s and early 2000s. The setting of Afghanistan is particularly important to the arc of the novel because the violence and betrayal inflicted upon the country are reflection of the events that happen to the main characters.

Notably, there are multiple distinct Afghanistans described in the novel. There is the idyllic Afghanistan of Amir youth, before the military coup overthrows the king in those days, Amir and Hassan 'climb the poplar trees,' skip stones on the water, and climb up 'the bowel – shaped hill' to read under the pomegranate tree, Amir's childhood memories with Hassan are marked by the relatively stable nature of the country, and remain peaceful after monarchy is abolished.

When Soviet military forces invade Afghanistan a few years later, Amir is a young adult. Amir and Baba escape to America, and this setting represents not only a respite from persecution, but a potential exile from persecution, but a potential exile from the guilt Amir has felt towards Hassan for years. A community of displaced Afghans forms in California, and Amir finds himself able to easily assimilate.

Finally, there is the Afghanistan that Amir returns to as an adult, which has been ruined by years of fighting and Taliban rule. This setting is the Afghanistan in which Amir fights Assef and rescues Sohrab, ultimately atoning for his sin against Hassan and finds inner healing.

The Kite Runner is considered a bildungsroman because it follows Amir's transition from childhood to adulthood, telling the story of his development primarily in flashback. Bildungsroman is a genre of coming –of –age stories, and their focus is on the growth – both moral and psychological – of a young protagonist. From the beginning, *The Kite Runner* establishes that the twelve – years old Amir's life was profoundly shaped by witnessing Hassan's rape. Throughout most of the novel, Amir wrestles with his inability to intervene in that moment and struggles to atone for his inaction. When Rahim Khan calls adult Amir and tells him that "there is a way to be good again," Amir leaves the life he has established in America to return to Afghanistan and make amends by rescuing Hassan's son, Sohrab. As is typical of bildungsroman genre, it is his return to his homeland that reveals Amir's maturity, and after fighting Assef for Sohrab's sake – something he couldn't do for Hassan as a child – Amir notes that he is "healed at last."

Amir, is the central character of the story as well as its narrator, has a privileged upbringing. Her father, Baba, is rich by Afghan standards, and as a result, Amir grows up accustomed to what he

wants. The only thing he feels deprived of is a deep emotional connection with Baba, which he blames on himself. He thinks Baba wishes Amir were more like him, and that Baba holds him responsible for killing his mother, who died during his birth.

“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 a little more like him. But I hadn’t turned out like him. Not at all”. (KR- 194)

Amir, consequently, behaves jealously towards anyone receiving Baba’s attention. His relationship with Hassan only exacerbates this. Though Hassan is Amir’s friend, Amir feels Hassan, a Hazara servant, is beneath him. When Hassan receives Baba’s attention, Amir tries to assert himself passively- aggressively attacking Hassan. He mocks Hassan’s ignorance, for instance, and plays tricks on him. At the same time, Amir never learns to assert himself against anyone else because Hassan defends him. All of these factors play into his cowardice in sacrificing Hassan, his only competition for Baba’s love, in order to get the blue kite, which he thinks will bring him Baba’s approval.

The change in Amir’s character we see in the novel centres on his growth from a selfish child to a selfless adult. After allowing Hassan to be raped, Amir is not any happier. On the contrary, his guilt is relentless, and he recognises his selfishness cost him his happiness rather than increasing it. Once Amir has married and established a career, only two things prevent his complete happiness: his guilt and his inability to have a Soraya.

Sohrab, who acts as a substitute for Hassan, to Amir, actually becomes a solution to both problems. Amir describes Sohrab as looking like a sacrificial lamb during his confrontation with Assef, but it is actually himself that Amir courageously sacrifices. Beaten with brass knuckles by Assef, Amir ironically, feels a sense of peace. He laughs, thinking that he has been looking forward to this moment.

“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’d been looking forward to this”. (KR- 201)

He knows that this movement will give him the chance to pay for his betrayal and open the way to redemption. He has been searching for this moment all along. He sees that living in safety in America has only delayed his crucial turning point in his life. When Amir finally gets custody of Sohrab after a long period to struggle and delay, Amir redeems himself. He also, comes to see Sohrab as a substitute for the child he and Soraya cannot have, and as a self- sacrificing father figure to Sohrab, Amir resumes the roles of Baba and Hassan.

If Amir’s character is about growth, Hassan’s arc is about not changing at all. From the start through his death, Hassan remains the same: loyal, forgiving and good- natured. As a servant to Baba and Amir, Hassan readies Amir’s books and his breakfast. While Amir is at school getting an education, Hassan helps Ali with chores and grocery shopping. As a result, Hassan learns that it is his duty to sacrifice himself to others. Furthermore, by nature he is not prone to envy, and he even he tells Amir he is happy with what he has, though he sees all the time how much more Amir has.

Hassan comes across as the personification of innocence as a result, and this innocence in creating the drama is crucial in creating the drama and symbolism of his rape by Assef. First, Hassan’s innocence gives Amir no justifiable reason to betray Hassan. Amir’s behaviour cannot be rationalised, making it consummately selfish and reprehensible. Second, Hassan’s rape becomes the

sacrifice of an innocent, a recurring motif in Islam, Christianity and Judaism that carries a great deal of symbolic meaning.

When Amir and Hassan are children, Hassan's favourite story is 'Rostam and Sohrab', foreshadowing his blood relation to Amir. In the tragic tale, the warrior Rostam kills his enemy Sohrab in battle, but then learns that Sohrab is his long-lost son. As he reads the story aloud, Amir marvels at the tears pooled in Hassan's eyes, wondering which character Hassan grieves the most. The boys' engagement with his story foreshadows how years later, Amir will learn that Hassan was his half-brother the whole time and that they had "fed on the same breast".

Amir and Hassan's brotherhood is also foreshadowed by the favour Baba shows Hassan. Growing up, Amir becomes jealous of the attention Hassan receives from Baba, often excluding Hassan so that he can have time with Baba all to himself. Baba treats Hassan with an affection Ali craves, going as far as gifting Hassan with cleft lip surgery for his birthday. This Amir later finds out is because Baba "could not love the way he longed to, openly, as a father". When Amir asks Baba if he has ever considered replacing Hassan and Ali, Baba's fury indicates that Hassan's is much more than the son of his servant; Hassan is actually his own son.

Though it is rarely the main focus, religion is nearly always present in Amir's narrative. It is part of the culture of Afghanistan, and is accordingly a fixture of the everyday life Amir describes. Amir creates a complex portrait of both positive and negative traits of religion, with the negative always stemming from fundamentalists who use their beliefs as an excuse to carry out violence against others and to limit people's freedoms.

From what we learn of Baba's feelings towards religion, this is not surprising. The first significant episode in the book involving around religion, for instance, occurs when Amir, who is still a child, tells Baba that the mullah at school, Mullah Fatiullah Khan, called drinking alcohol a sin as Baba pours a glass of whisky.

"Do you want to know what your father thinks about sin?... Then, I'll tell you,... but first understand this and understand it now, Amir: You'll never learn anything of value from those bearded idiots... Piss on the beards of all those self-righteous monsters... They do nothing but thumb their prayer beads and recite a book written in a tongue they don't even understand... God helps us all if Afghanistan ever falls into their hands". (KR- 307)

Immediately, this scene establishes a contrast between Baba and the mullah. Baba explains to Amir,

"Now, no matter what the mullah teaches, there is only one sin, only one. And that is theft. Every other sin is a variation of theft...when you kill a man, you steal a life... you steal his wife's right to a husband, rob his children of a father. When you tell a lie, you steal someone's right to the truth. When you cheat, you steal the right to fairness. There is no act more wretched than stealing, Amir ... A man who takes what's not his to take, be it a life or a loaf of naan... I spit on such a man. And if I ever cross paths with him, God help him". (KR- 310)

Baba obviously does not respect the beliefs of the mullah, yet he still has his own moral code, as when he risks his life to save the woman in the truck from a leering Russian soldier, when they are fleeing Kabul. Amir consequently grows up with a strong sense of morality, though it is not entirely separate from Islam.

Yet religion also has a major role in determining the direction that Afghanistan takes in the years after Baba and Amir flee to the United States. Although Amir's narrative does not give a clear step – by – step account of political events in Afghanistan, the reader does know that fighting

continued in the country even after the departure of the Russians, call the Shorawi. Ultimately, the Taliban emerged with control and from Amir's narrative we learn that many of the Afghans who left their country think the Islamist government the group has created is simply a means for them to justify their violence and authoritarian rule.

The character that represents the image of the Taliban is Assef, who tell Amir that he felt liberated by massacring Hazaras in their homes because he knew God was on his side; he was clearing garbage as a mission. He is, Assef says, in his element as a Taliban leader. He is not in it because of money. He has had a message from God, and God wants him to live for a reason. This gives him pride in his people, his customs, his language, to which, he says, Amir is a 'traitor.' 'Afghanistan,' says Assef, 'is like a beautiful mansion littered with garbage, and someone has to take out the garbage'. He is also in the forefront of people stoning an adulterous couple in Kabul's Ghazi Stadium in the name of Islamic justice. "Public justice is the greatest kind of show my brother Drama. Suspense. And, best of the all, education in masse". Ultimately, however, Assef's violence becomes his downfall when Sohrab shoots his eye out, and later, when Sohrab has tried to kill himself.

Amir has something of a religious conversion when Sohrab survives after Amir prays to God for help. Amir becomes an observant Muslim after that, but not a fundamentalist, making the case that religion is as good as the person practising it.

The inner turmoil Amir wrestles with after betraying Hassan drives the entire plot of *The Kite Runner*. This struggle is a conflict between the kind of man Amir believes he is, and the kind man Baba is. By allowing Hassan's rape, Amir fails Hassan profound and fundamentally. Even worse, Amir never corrects his failure for the rest of Hassan's life. Amir views Baba as just, strong and sure, and finds him lacking in comparison. Baba seems to share this perception of his son, but Amir ultimately learns that Baba too has deeply betrayed Ail in sleeping with his wife, and that much of what Amir perceived as Baba's strength was Baba's trying to atone for his failings.

The inciting incident that set the plot in motion is Assef's raping of Hassan after Hassan recovers the defeated kite of Amir's victorious kite - fight. Though this specific event sparks all the important plot developments to come, it is not the beginning of Amir's betrayal of Hassan. The reader knows that Amir tends to be petty and disrespectful towards Hassan, sometimes even lying to Hassan to keep him illiterate and on the periphery of Baba's favour. Amir regrets his treatment, but for him, the power struggle has always been a familiar mark of their relationship.

Amir betrays Hassan again by growing distant after the rape, and eventually by framing Hassan for stealing his watch and birthday money. These betrayals prove unendurable for Hassan and Ali, who leaves Baba's household and never return. Throughout the next quarter-century of Amir's life, not even his escape from the war-torn Afghanistan into his new American life can fully keep haunting of his past at bay. When Baba offhandedly mentions Hassan's name, Amir says "a pair of steel hands closed around my windpipe," indicating that there is still much to be atoned for.

The climax of the novel and resolution of Amir's inner turmoil comes when Assef brutally beats Amir for attempting to rescue Sohrab. Assef brass-knuckle punching is literally the beating that Amir was unwilling to take decades earlier to defend Hassan. Hosseini leaves an ambiguity about the importance of this moment as Amir Laughs uncontrollably throughout the fight, due to how good it feels to be "healed at last."

Though this atoning fight is the climax of the plot, it is not the end of story, because it only reflects half of Amir's betrayal of Hassan. Amir knows he must atone for his failure to support

Hassan after the rape, which is why he fights to bring Sohrab home to America. At no point does Hosseini guarantee that Amir's difficulties are over or that Sohrab will fully heal, but by the end of *The Kite Runner* - as Amir care-freely runs after a kind "with a smile as wide as the Valley of Panjsher" - there is a clear sense that Amir is moving forward with responsibility and compassion, and there is reason to hope for these characters' futures.

Another important historical and cultural context of the novel is the diverse and variegated world of contemporary multicultural America, particularly in California. Hosseini, the son of a diplomat and a teacher, left Afghanistan with his family in 1981, much like Amir. Likewise, Amir's experiences in the Afghan immigrant community of Fremont, California, familiarly known in the San Francisco Bay Area as 'Little Kabul,' may reflect the author's experiences of the area from arrival in San Jose in the 1980s. Amir's life as a young immigrant in the multicultural space of the Bay Area illustrates the increased mixing of diverse ethnicities in the 1980s and 1990s within U.S. popular culture.

The novel also gives a detailed account of how one ethnic group formed a cultural enclave within American culture so that its members could help one another and preserve Afghan cultural traditions. Detailed descriptions in the middle and late chapters give the reader a window on some cultural practices, both formal and informal, that help define the Afghan community in Fremont. Amir's and Soraya's lives are certainly taken up with the broader American culture. Both attend public schools and (we presume) mix with non-Afghan students; Amir takes creative writing classes in which he must read about the experiences of a diverse group of young writers; and Soraya has a career as a writing instructor at a community college. Still their identities as Afghans or Afghan Americans are defined in part by the ceremonies and practices of their families and their community. The Saturday swap meets, for example, exemplify the well-documented strategy of immigrant groups to adapt already existing institutions in the United States as ways to preserve their cultures of origin.

REFERENCES

1. Hosseini, Khaled. "The Kite Runner". New York: Riverhead Books, 2013.
2. Batra, Shakthi. "The Kite Runner, a critical study". Shelley Printer. 2021
3. Grossman, Lev. "The Kite Runner Returns Home". Time Magazine. 2007.
4. Sethna, Razeshta. "Interview with Khaled Hosseini". New York. 2007.