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**Searching for Middle Ground:  
Connecting the East and West through Universal Themes in *The  
Kite Runner***

Senior Paper

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Afghanistan's reputation in the West, particularly following the events of September 11, 2001 and America's "War on Terror," has been marked by an ideology that reduces conflict to the idea of "Us" vs. "Them." Media portrayals of the Middle East often incessantly show images of violence, war, and destruction that support this idea. These portrayals, in conjunction with the 2001 attacks, may have contributed to the staggering increase in hate crimes against those of Muslim and Arab descent. Between 2000 and 2001, these crimes increased by 1,700 percent, and although they have since lowered, they still remain significant (Ecklund 1). Juxtaposed against these images comes Afghan-American Khaled Hosseini's novel, *The Kite Runner* (2003), which gives voice to a narrative that is neither exclusively "Us" nor "Them," but rather a middle ground. *The Kite Runner* intertwines the familiar and the foreign, allowing readers to identify with universal themes while also grappling with the nuances of a society that may be largely different than their own. This universality, paired with a reexamination of critical arguments challenging the novel, reveals Hosseini's ability to deconstruct common stereotypes about Afghanistan, terrorism, and Islam.

*The Kite Runner* tells the story of Amir, a young wealthy ethnic Pashtun living in Afghanistan's capital, and his friendship with an ethnic Hazara, Hassan, the servant's son. The crux of the novel occurs when Amir's childish naivety about how to win his father's affection in addition to the reality of divisive class and ethnic lines causes him to remain silent when he witnesses Hassan being raped by three neighborhood boys. Unable to bear the burden of his guilt, Amir accuses Hassan of stealing in order to push him and his father out of their household. Amir's guilt continues to haunt him, even as he settles into a new life in America, ultimately causing him to return to Afghanistan seeking "a way to be good again" (2).

Critics have had a variety of reactions to Hosseini's story; some see the novel as more harmful than beneficial when attempting to dispel stereotypes. There are four conversations in which critics engage when discussing the novel that are critical to this analysis: America as a representation of the "savior," Hosseini's omission of America's involvement in Afghanistan, negative portrayals of male characters, and the exotic portrayal of Afghanistan. Literary critic Kristy Butler rightly argues that storytellers risk the "danger that in creating worlds and the heroes and villains who inhabit them, instead of finding understanding and knowledge, one can also construct agents of power and control" (149). While almost *any* work of literature runs this risk, Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* does not lend itself to this construction. The "heroes and villains" of the novel, instead, portray the complex story of Afghanistan and of humanity. *The Kite Runner* is a story in which human beings are sometimes both good and evil and about a homeland that is both strong and weak.

However, critics such as Georgiana Banita, a professor of Literature at Germany's Bamberg University, contend that Hosseini's portrayal of his homeland is one that actually idealizes the values of the West. She writes that Hosseini opts "for a version of history that hails America as the uncontested "brash savior" (132) and liberator in ways that superficially endorse the rhetoric of the war on terror..." (320). However, the portrayal of America in *The Kite Runner* is not wholly positive and certainly not savior-like. Amir's father, Baba, has significant trouble adjusting to life in the United States. Baba shouts, "What kind of country is this? No one trusts anybody!" (128) when after two years of shopping at a grocery store, the owners still ask to see his identification card. Following this incident, Amir tries to convince his father to move to Pakistan where the culture is more similar to Afghanistan and where life would feel more familiar. Hosseini also symbolically details America's effects on Baba through the depiction of

his health. At the beginning of the novel, Baba is successful, rich, healthy, and respected. But after moving to America, Baba has no money, little reputation, and is diagnosed with cancer (which eventually kills him). America is also “a place to mourn his [memories]” and “a place to bury” Amir’s (Hosseini 129). This paints America as a country that allows you to hide from your problems instead of deal with them—hardly a positive depiction.

Furthermore, when Amir is in Pakistan, the American government is the cause of many of the problems that he faces. When trying to adopt Sohrab, Hassan’s son who was orphaned after his father’s murder, he faces innumerable challenges. The adoption only goes through when Amir pulls the strings of a friend’s government connections, as navigating a legal process only leads to dead ends. And earlier, when Baba and Amir try to come to America as refugees, they wait for six months in Pakistan for the INS to issue them their visas. These portrayals of America are complex and signify an exchange. While they might have escaped the war in Afghanistan, in order for Baba and Amir to have a sustainable life in America, they must make significant sacrifices to their way of life.

Extending from criticism interpreting *The Kite Runner* as an idealization of the West, other critics, such as Mohan Ramanan of India’s Hyderabad University, also criticize Hosseini for failing to emphasize the United States’ involvement in Afghanistan during the historical timeline of the novel. He contends that the omission signals Hosseini’s support of Western influence and political control in Afghanistan. Ramanan writes that since Hosseini “is an immigrant Afghan writer living in the USA, [h]e cannot help being beholden to the Americans for his freedom and clearly a novel appearing post 9/11 which rubbishes the Taliban, as this novel does, cannot escape being seen as a support to the West’s ideas” (134). However, there is a large assumption being made here: residing in a country does not guarantee support for its

generalized ideals. There are certainly Americans born in the United States who may not agree with some Western ideals and America's foreign policy. Even if Hosseini supports these influences personally, they are not pushed forth in the novel. Later, Ramanan writes that because Hosseini critiques the Taliban he is confirming "the worst fears of the West about Islamic societies" (134). In response, one might ask what literary critic Manijeh Mannani eloquently does of *The Kite Runner*'s critics, "What is wrong with seeing the problems in one's country of birth and critiquing them?" (330). Hosseini did not write *The Kite Runner* to glorify nor vilify Afghanistan. Instead, as he explains in a 2007 interview, in writing the novel, he "hoped that [readers] would see a unique kind of window into Afghan culture: the way they eat and the way they live and the way they marry and the way they die and some other [depiction of] what life was like" (Beliefnet). This Hosseini does, while also rendering the tense political landscape of Taliban rule that is critiqued in the novel. This critique does not solely define *The Kite Runner*, but is an important part of the overall narrative.

Even Hosseini's heritage is often a point of contention as Ramanan points out when he writes that Hosseini is "an Afghan with half a foot in America" and is therefore "compromised" (133). As an Afghan-American (having lived in the US since he was 15), he is sometimes discussed as being not Afghan enough to write about Afghanistan and not American enough to be an American novelist. These simplistic evaluations do not give Hosseini, or any other American with a hyphenated identity, a voice in matters related to both facets of their identity. *The Kite Runner* takes place in *both* Afghanistan and America. Its historical narrative is informed from Hosseini's experiences in *both* Afghanistan and America. At the same time, Hosseini recognizes his own privilege and the influence of America on his life through some of Amir's experiences. When Amir returns to Afghanistan he mentions that he feels like a tourist in his

own country. This angers the taxi driver, who after already criticizing Amir for denying a home remedy in favor of “fancy American medicine” (229), says “You probably lived in a big two-three-story house...your father drove an American car...you had servants...your parents hired workers to decorate the house...and I would bet my son’s eyes that this is the first time you’ve ever worn a *pakol*...You’ve *always* been a tourist here, you just didn’t know it” (232). While the driver made many assumptions, his diatribe humbles Amir and forces him to remember the variety of people and experiences that make up Afghanistan. It also, again, reveals to the reader Amir’s multi-faceted identity and the opposition to his (and Hosseini’s) identification as an Afghan.

Hosseini continues to explore identity through the many male characters in the novel. Sunaina Maira, professor of Asian American studies at the University of California Davis, characterizes Hosseini’s narrative as “evoking images of perverse Muslim masculinities” (Maira 649) and continuing to confirm, as Ramanan states, the West’s fears of Islamic societies. These fears include understanding men as sexist, brutal, violent, and domineering forces of Afghan households. While it is true that some of Hosseini’s characters fit this depiction in part, not all do, and like his depiction of Afghanistan he instead assembles an authentic picture of humanity that includes its flaws. In an introduction to *The Patience Stone*, a work from Afghan author Atiq Rahimi, Hosseini calls out “the ironclad rule of patriarchal, tribal law” (Hosseini IX) found in some parts of Afghanistan. As an author he is once more critiquing the actions of *some* men in Afghanistan. However, *The Kite Runner* gives plentiful examples of men who do not fit this depiction.

Male characters such as Rahim Khan, Hassan, Ali, and even Baba demonstrate caring, mercy, forgiveness, and other positive qualities. Khan, Baba’s best friend, supports Amir’s

writing as a child and writes him a letter saying “my door is and always will be open to you...I shall hear any story you have to tell” (33). Hassan demonstrates loyalty (beyond his duties as a servant) to Amir many times, but most strikingly when he retrieves the last kite that Amir cuts during a tournament. Ali never yells at the children who make fun of his disability and call him names in the streets. And Baba risks his life to confront a Russian soldier who intended to take a woman off of a bus to rape her. These examples and numerous others from the novel do not fit into the aforementioned stereotypical Afghan man.

Instead, characters like Khan and Hassan are easy for the reader to relate to and uphold the fabric of universality in the novel. But, many critics disagree that universality is a positive element of the novel. Butler claims that the universality of *The Kite Runner* induces a “satisfaction” that “reinforce[s] particular feelings and attitudes in its reader rather than an opportunity to challenge preconceived ideas” (153). She continues by citing this relationship as an example of literary theorist Edward Said’s “orientalism,” where discussion of the region of the Orient becomes a focus on the self (in the West). Orientalism describes the exotic coloring of the Orient from Western perspectives, a lens that promotes narcissistic appropriation instead of cultural understanding and respect. What Butler does not take into account is what literary critic and professor of Comparative Literature David Damrosch describes as an alternative mode of reading where the reader “stay[s] alive to the works’ real difference from us without trapping them within their original context or subordinating them entirely to our own immediate moment and needs” (Aubry 177-178). Further he writes that, “an emphasis on universality can be a powerful aid in protecting the work from either of these extremes, so long as this universality isn’t created by a process of stripping away much of what is really distinctive about the work” (Aubry 178). The universal themes found in the novel—themes like love, redemption, and loss—

only help to bridge cultures when read this way. Hosseini does not falsely construct Afghan culture to appeal to Westerners. Afghans, like Westerners, experience love and loss. When reading *The Kite Runner*, the audience is able to see themselves in the experiences of the characters in a broad sense, but may *also* reflect on their differences. Readers may have never lost a best friend to targeted ethnic cleansing, but they might have, like Amir, lost a friend that they never had the chance to apologize to or tell how much they cared for them. It is also clear from the novel that individual experiences are not necessarily universal in Afghanistan. Just because Amir loses Hassan, does not mean that all Afghans have had this experience. *The Kite Runner* adeptly shows the multitude of people who consider themselves Afghan: those who are rich, those who are poor, those who stayed in Afghanistan, those who fled, those who are educated, those who are not, and so on. Like Western society, the novel shows that there are both national and individual experiences.

In his seminal work, *Orientalism*, Said calls the region of the Orient “the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (Said 1-2). The fear, suspicion, and avoidance of the “Other” established in every day media prevents many from interacting positively with the peoples and cultures of the Middle East. In *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini tears down barriers to bring the East and West together again by establishing universality even within a foreign context.

One important example occurs in Hosseini’s depiction of Amir’s relationship with his father. Amir’s mother, Sofia, dies while delivering him and he cannot help but think that his father “hated [him] a little. And why not? After all, [he] *had* killed his beloved wife, his beautiful princess, hadn’t [he]?” (19). This fact, that Amir was directly a cause of Sofia’s death, hangs



between father and son unspoken, but like an immovable boulder. This does nothing to help that Amir is *nothing* like Baba. After mulling over his mother's death, Amir thinks to himself: "The least I could have done was to have the decency to have turned out a little more like him" (19). Knowing his father's feelings, Amir still *worships* the larger-than-life Baba and becomes jealous of anybody who captures his attention. Amir's jealousy is most apparent in his relationship with his best friend, Hassan. Baba treats Hassan almost as a second son. When Amir gets a new kite, goes to a movie or on a trip, so does Hassan. When Baba pays for a surgery to repair Hassan's cleft lip, Amir wishes that "he had some kind of scar that would beget Baba's sympathy" (46). The latter statement is clearly irrational and childish thinking, yet completely normal coming from a twelve year old. Later, Amir's misunderstanding of his father's motivations, fear of Assef, ethnic discrimination, and most of all *desperation* for Baba's love keep him silent as he watches Hassan refuse to give up Amir's fallen kite and then endure the terrible consequences.

Amir's complicated relationship with his father is nothing new to audiences and literature across space and time. However, to understand Amir is also very personal. Being a child is difficult, but so too is loving someone who will never love you back the same way. Readers can relate to Amir, and perhaps even understand, how his feelings of inadequacy, his guilt, and his naïve idea on how to win Baba's love contributed to "sacrificing" Hassan. It does not make Amir's actions right or justified by any means, only more comprehensible. The pressures that Baba puts on Amir to be a certain type of boy are not limited to Afghan father-son relationships. Children often feel they are living in the shadow of their parents' legacy and unable to adequately meet their expectations. The recognition of this relationship to be somewhat universal is imperative to Hosseini's overall ability to connect readers—regardless of their background—to the novel.

Geography and setting are an integral part of *The Kite Runner* and make up part of what might be a “foreign” yet familiar background to readers. Hosseini carefully “fleshes out the cartoonish picture many Americans have of Afghanistan as a culture of warlords and cave hideouts” (O’Rourke). Amir’s own home is very far from the picture of a cave hideout with its “broad entryway flanked by rosebushes...marble floors and wide windows...intricate mosaic tiles...gold-stitched tapestries...[and] a crystal chandelier [hanging] from the vaulted ceiling” (4). While there are military barracks in Kabul there are also creeks, pomegranate trees, walls of corn, and lakes where “the water was a deep blue and sunlight glittered on its looking glass—clear surface” (14). Daily life, too, does not seem so unfamiliar: Amir and Baba eating a picnic by the lake, afternoon trips to the movie theater to see American Westerns, and Amir cheering on his father who gives a speech at the opening of an orphanage. While these events may be more relevant to an affluent Afghan class, there are other daily events that appeal to the broader Afghan culture: children aiming slingshots, flying kites, and playing soccer in the street.

Readers also get a sense of how war changes daily life and erupts physical landscapes, leaving behind painful memories. On returning to Afghanistan, Amir reflects, “when Kabul finally did unroll before us, I was certain, absolutely certain, that he had taken a wrong turn somewhere...Rubble and beggars. Everywhere I looked, that was what I saw” (244-245). The shock of seeing your old life changed by time or conversely being the one left behind may also trigger a sense of familiarity with readers. This reaction is what literary critic and professor of English at Baruch College, Timothy Aubry, writes about in a study he conducted that analyzed Amazon reviewer’s responses to *The Kite Runner*. He writes that “the sympathy articulated by reviewers of *The Kite Runner* often synthesizes a sense of sameness and a sense of otherness, exemplifying a fertile tension, which mediates both their perceptions of the represented foreign

characters and, at least in the moment of reading, their perceptions of themselves” (181). The hope then is that the memories of this connectedness follow readers into other realms of their lives and into other instances of interacting with the Middle East.

Unfortunately, these instances are often violent news images of terrorism in the region. Sometimes, these portrayals are the only images that a person has seen of the region and lead to dangerous misconceptions. These misguided perceptions include seeing the majority of Afghans as terrorists who target Western countries and their ideals. Extremism is seen as the norm and as something welcomed by the citizens of Afghanistan. However, the novel does a great deal to dispel these ideas. One significant example is the portrayal of Assef, who as a boy rapes Hassan and as a man becomes a leader in the Taliban. Assef is clearly labeled a “sociopath” (38), someone who “might not be entirely sane” (39), and who could not hide the “madness” (97) in his eyes. This designation is important because it signals that Assef is not normal. He lacks a social conscious and moral responsibility. It is clear that everyone, including adults and Assef’s own parents, are either afraid of him or completely deluded by his false charm. Hosseini also draws parallels between Assef and Hitler. Assef sees Hitler as a role model, giving Amir his biography as a birthday gift. He believes in ethnic cleansing, wanting Afghanistan to be free of the Hazaras “who dirty our blood” (40). Eventually, as a leader of the Taliban in Kabul, Assef executes Hazaras mercilessly. This depiction of Assef, a continuous symbol of terrorism in the novel, shows that he is a powerful exception and not the rule. Other children in the novel do not spend their days plotting the demise of the “less worthy”—they play soccer, chase animals, and fly kites.

Beyond terrorism, Hosseini’s depiction of war in the novel is nuanced, complex, and thought provoking. When Amir goes to Peshawar to meet Rahim Khan, he learns of all that has

occurred since he and his father fled to America. As Rahim is telling his story, he reflects back to 1995 when “the *Shorawi* were defeated and long gone and Kabul belonged to Massoud, Rabbani, and the *Mujahedin*” (212). He recounts that the fighting was so fierce that nobody thought that they would live through it. However, when the Taliban arrived and ended the fighting they (Afghanistan) thought that there would be “no more rockets, no more killing, no more funerals” (213). After giving this account, Hosseini draws attention to how much worse the conflict became and how Hazaras were murdered in masses, including Hassan. Choosing the “lesser of two evils” of government is nothing new to Westerners. Although the stakes may be different, audiences can relate to having to this kind of choice. Here, however, he also shows the kind of unintended, but perhaps inevitable, consequences of those same choices. Afghans in *The Kite Runner* are not begging the Taliban to govern their country; they are begging to be alleviated from the atrocities of war. Taliban rule, at first, seems to be the way out. This nuance and complexity is important to understand for readers who have internalized a simplified version of what causes and continues war. After all, *The Kite Runner* narrative is not far-fetched in broad terms. The historical backdrop is real and partially formed from Hosseini’s own childhood memories of Afghanistan.

These memories are vastly different from stereotypical perceptions of childhood in Islamic societies. Part of the West’s fear of Muslim societies such as Afghanistan comes from a conflation of terrorism and the religion of Islam. Hafsa Kanjwal, a graduate of the Edmund Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, writes that, “the fact that Islam exists within the West, and...in America, is often overlooked” (133) but that “American Muslims have a unique historical opportunity to constructively situate the relationship between Islam and the West through a more micro-level diplomacy” (134). She cites one these forms of

“micro-level diplomacy” to be art. Hosseini’s art, his literature, covertly deconstructs stereotypes of Islam in several ways. Perhaps most importantly and as Hosseini mentions in an interview “the faith of [his] characters is essentially incidental to the reason why they’re in the story” (Beliefnet). Essentially, Hosseini’s characters are Muslim, but unlike many other portrayals of Muslims in popular media, their religion does not define their character but rather they “serve some [other] kind of purpose in the story” (Beliefnet).

Hosseini’s characters also represent a variety of people who consider themselves to be Muslim. Baba, for example, is a secular Muslim. Amir once confronts him about drinking (after learning in school that it is a sin) and Baba tells him that he sees he has “confused what you’re learning in school with your actual education” (16) and that he will “never learn anything of value from those bearded idiots” (17). Conversely, Ali and Hassan are devout Muslims. They pray five times a day and the only decoration in their simple home is a hanging tapestry with a religious inscription. Amir as a child and adult is confused, not knowing whether to believe as his father does or to seek something further. These characterizations speak more truly to the experience of what it means to be Muslim: there is no one way of experiencing Islam. Readers can see this too in their own worlds as there is no one way to be a Christian, Jew, Hindu, Atheist, etc. Hosseini does not need to proclaim this outwardly in the novel. Instead, it quietly lives in the background, breaking apart the stereotype of Islam as a religion of violent extremists.

Religion also fluctuates in *The Kite Runner*, as it does in life, with characters becoming more or less devout. In the second half of the novel, Amir returns to Afghanistan to find his way to be good again. Amir learns that Hassan was his half-brother, has been killed, but has a young son in Afghanistan. Through a series of trials, Amir is able to rescue Sohrab from the hands of Taliban officials. Later, when Sohrab attempts suicide and is in critical condition in the hospital,

Amir for the first time in fifteen years turns to God for help. He prays that God will “forgive that I have betrayed, lied, and sinned with impunity only to turn to Him now in my hour of need” (346). As Amir prays for Sohrab’s life, he promises God to be faithful, to memorize the Qur’an, to fast, and to complete all the requirements of Islam if He would only grant him this wish. Amir’s desperation in this passage is palpable. He is hurting two-fold, for his transgression to Hassan and now for Sohrab. People make mistakes, think too hard or too little, regret, and sometimes when they are at their lowest they reach out for help. For Amir, and many others, religion is where they turned for forgiveness, help, and perhaps a new future.

These themes contribute to *The Kite Runner*’s mass audience appeal. The novel is also an incredibly popular book for English teachers to use in high school classrooms despite the fact that it has appeared multiple times on the American Library Association’s lists of most frequently challenged books (Banned and Challenged). Making connections between the foreign and the familiar are particularly important for students in American classrooms where interactions with diverse literature are sometimes infrequent. Critic and educator Patricia Goldblatt poses that examining diverse literature allows students to avoid “the perpetuation of stereotypes and simplistic polarity of good and evil” (41). *The Kite Runner*’s beautiful deconstruction of this “simplistic polarity” helps students and teachers engage in important discussions around current events. Kiran Qureshi, a Muslim American high school English teacher, describes students’ experiences with these events as “desensitized by images of terrorists...suicide bombings...violent rallies, and war [and] their defense mechanism is blissful ignorance or jaded cynicism” (35). Reading texts like *The Kite Runner* moves students and arguably *any* reader away from this ignorance and cynicism and towards a fuller, nuanced understanding of what it means to be human.

At the same time, reading *The Kite Runner* does not make anyone an expert on Afghanistan, Islam, or any other topic. One novel is not the end all be all of reducing stereotypes and understanding cultures. Rather, it is one work that chips away at the foundation of stereotypes and replaces them with new understandings. The process is time consuming and “we can never achieve such familiarity [with world literature] unless we can make some real sense of the first novel we read, and then the second one, and on through the tenth and the hundredth” (Damrosch 4). Hosseini’s works may be that first Afghan novel or it might be Chimamanda Adichie’s from Nigeria or Arundhati Roy’s from India. Regardless of where we start, “A view of the world is always a view from wherever the observer is standing, and we inevitably filter what we read through our experience of what we have read in the past...if we don’t simply overlay our prior expectations wholesale onto the new work, its distinctive qualities will impress themselves on us, enlarging our field of vision and giving us a new purchase on things we knew before” (Damrosch 3). Literature, then, becomes essential to improving our interactions as humans in a global world. It facilitates a process in which tolerance, understanding, peace, and community prosper over war and hatred. And perhaps, too, while reading to find others we will also always find a piece of ourselves.

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