

The Kite as a Symbol in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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Abstract. The aim of this paper is to highlight the kite as a major symbol in *The Kite Runner*, the best selling debut novel that introduced the Afghan American novelist Khaled Hosseini, to millions of readers to the world over. The novel follows the maturation of Amir, or from Afghanistan who needs to find his way in the world as he realises that his own belief system is not that of his dominant culture. *The Kite Runner* is a bildungsroman that illustrates the similarities as well as the differences between the two countries – Afghanistan and United States and the two vastly different cultures. It is the story of both father and sons and friends and brothers, and it is a novel about right and wrong and the nature of evil. The novel is considered a contemporary classic.

Keywords : Pride; prophecy; Hazara; redemption; betrayal; guilt.

The Kite Runner is the first novel of Afghan-American author Khaled Hosseini. The novel became a best seller after being printed in paperback and was popularized in book clubs. Reviews were generally positive, though parts of the plot drew significant controversy in Afghanistan. A number of adaptations were created following publication, including a 2007 film of the same name, several stage performances and a graphic novel. Born in Kabul, Hosseini draws heavily on his own experiences to create the setting for the novel, the characters however, are fictional. Hosseini's plot shows historical realism, as the novel includes dates for chronological accuracy, including the time of the changing regimes of Afghanistan. Amir's happy childhood days fall under the peaceful and affluent era of King Zahir Shah's reign, a time when Amir and his friend, Hassan could themselves feel like kings of Kabul, carving their names into a tree. In 1973, Dawood Khan becomes the President of Afghanistan. This era is reflected in the novel when the local bully, Assef, harasses Amir with his brass knuckles and hopes that Hazaras will be eliminated. *The Kite Runner* is a historical novel about the pre Russian invasion and pre Taliban rule of Afghanistan, as well life in Afghanistan under Taliban rule and life in post Taliban Afghanistan. It is a coming of age novel about finding one's place in a world of turmoil and transition.

The novel *The Kite Runner* was published in 2003 by Riverhead Books. It tells the story of Amir, a young boy from the Wazir Akbar Khan district of Kabul, whose closest friend is Hassan, his father's young Hazara servant. The story is set against a backdrop of tumultuous events, from the fall of Afghanistan's

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monarchy through the Soviet military intervention, the exodus of refugees to Pakistan and the United States, and the rise of the Taliban regime. Hosseini has commented that he considers the novel to be a father-son story, emphasising the familial aspects of the narrative, an element that he continued to use in his other works. Themes of guilt and redemption feature prominently in the novel, with a pivotal scene depicting an act of violence against Hassan that Amir fails to prevent. The later half of the book centres on Amir's attempts to atone for his transgression by rescuing Hassan's son over two decades later. In the year 2005, in an interview Hosseini said, "Because its themes of friendship, betrayal, guilt, redemption and the uneasy love between fathers and sons are universal themes, and not specifically Afghan, the book has been able to reach across cultural, social, religious and gender gaps to resonate with readers of varying backgrounds." (Interview)

The fiction has few characters as utterly loathsome as Amir. Hosseini takes an envy, hatred, and iniquity, bringing the reader to identify with a character so despicable that they shudder to recognise their own empathy. The opening chapters create an atmosphere that promise to be a much-needed deviation from typical narratives of heroism and goodness. Amir's character can also be read as a version of the author's younger self; some experiences seem too vivid to be imagined. The story takes nail-biting twists and turns, briefly adopting Dan Brown's story telling style. The final chapters however lack Brown's optimism, as the plot once again takes on a darker nature. Amir succeeds in liberating the young boy and bringing him to America, only to watch helplessly as the boy becomes suicidal and silent. As Hosseini brings the novel to a close, his conclusions are explained in an Old Zendagi Minzara saying: "Life goes on unmindful of beginning or end.... crisis or catharsis, moving forward like a slow dusty caravan of Kochis" (Hosseini 2003 : 327)

The Kite Runner is the story of Amir, a Sunni Muslim, who struggles to find his place in the world because of the after effects and fall out from a series of traumatic childhood events. An adult Amir opens the novel in the present day United States with a vague reference to one of these events, and then the novel flashes back to Amir's childhood experiences – Amir struggles with forging a closer relationship with Hassan, his Shia Muslim servant and eventually with finding a way to atone for pre-adolescent decisions that have lasting repercussions.

One of the biggest struggles for Amir is learning to navigate the complex socio-economic culture he faces, growing up in Afghanistan as a member of the privileged class. Hassan and his father, Ali, are servants, yet at times, Amir's relationship with them is more like that of family members. And Amir's father Baba, who does not consistently adhere to the tenets of his culture, confuses rather than clarifies things for young Amir. Many of the ruling-class elite in Afghanistan view the world as black and white, yet Amir identifies many shades of gray.

In addition to the issues affecting his personal life, Amir must also contend with the instability of the Afghan political system in the 1970s. During a crucial episode, which takes place during an important kite flying tournament, Amir decides not to act – he decides not to confront bullies and aggressors when he has the chance – and this conscious choice of inaction sets off a chain reaction that leads to guilt, lies and betrayals. Eventually because of the changing political climate, Amir and his father are forced to flee Afghanistan. Amir and his father are forced to flee Afghanistan. Amir views coming to America as an opportunity to leave his past behind. Although Amir and Baba toil to create a new life for themselves in the United States, the past is unable to stay buried. When it rears its ugly head, Amir is forced to return to his homeland to face the demons and decisions of his youth, with only a slim hope to make amends.

The kites are obviously an important image in *The Kite Runner*; and for Amir they act as symbols of both his childhood happiness and his betrayal of Hassan. When he tries to remember something happy in the fuel truck, Amir immediately thinks of his carefree days flying kites with Hassan. After Hassan's rape kites become a reminder of Amir's betrayal and guilt. In the novel's political theme, kites represent Afghanistan's glorious days of the monarchy, as kite flying is later banned by the Taliban. At the end Amir flies a kite with Sohrab, symbolising hope for redemption for both Amir's sins and those of Afghanistan.

Traditionally kites symbolise both prophecy and fate. The Afghan kites with their glass strings symbolise the dichotomy between beauty and violence, simultaneously representing Afghanistan and the Half brothers, Amir and Hassan. The two main kite fights in the novel – the tournament Amir wins and the one at the end of the book – not only represent Amir and Hassan but also symbolise the juxtaposition of roles, for at the end Amir has become the kite runner. Thus kite also symbolise the thematic topics and inter relationship between betrayal and redemption.

The kite running here also indicates the class distinction between the two boys, because one job is more grand than the other. In kite running, competitors coat their kite strings with glue and cut glass for this enables them to cut down the kite of a competitor. One boy holds the kite, and his partner runs to chase down his opponents in the streets. Here Amir holds the string, his own hands getting cut as he works to cut down the kites of other as Hassan runs down the street. In Chapter 6 of the novel, Amir says,

I was going to win...and I was going to run that last kite. Then I'd bring it home and show it to Baba. Show him once and for all that his son was worthy. (49)

The kites are a matter of honour and pride. The winter tournament is an opportunity for Amir to finally impress his father. Hassan's kite running instincts make him the best in the city, but his running of the last kite to fall leads to his assault and humiliation. The kites are banned shortly after the Taliban take over. Kites are what finally bring Sohrab and Amir together, however, back in the United States. It's the first time Sohrab smiles since being adopted by Amir and Soraya. Again in Chapter 6 of the novel Amir says,

The curious thing was, I never thought of Hassan and me as friends either... Never mind that we spent entire winters flying kites, running kites. Never mind that to me, the face of Afghanistan is that of a boy with a thin boned frame... a boy with a Chinese doll face perpetually lit by a harelipped smile. Never mind any of these things. Because history isn't easy to overcome. Neither is religion. In the end, I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara. I was Sunni and he was Shia, and nothing was ever going to change that. (22)

The Kite Runner is a simple straight to heart kind of story. It does paint a wonderful almost poetic picture of friendship. In a strange way the tale echoes and resembles *Pather Panchali*, the Bengali classic made eternal by Satyajit Ray. The novel too tells the tale of the journey of a boy from his home or roots to a country far beyond and different from where he grew. It tells the story of Amir, like Apu who grows up and faces the changing world around him. A journey from tradition to modernity here symbolised by Afghanistan and America respectively. Here too, Amir becomes a writer just like Apu in *Apu Trilogy* by Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay. However, *The Kite Runner* depicts a much harsher reality, a much horrifying state of things where war, rape, bloodshed etc., resonate viciously in the pages.

Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* revolve around the central axiom of personal selves permeated by political prejudices and permutations. They converge at the point of return of the protagonists but diverge at the causes and motives of return, they eloquently portray the trauma of return and the sweet nostalgia of homecoming. While in Mohsin Hamid's narrative, despite the promise of becoming a cultural hybrid, the protagonist is impelled to cling on to his primordial identity, in Hosseini's novel, the protagonist is drifting away from his ethnic identity and embraces an existence in third space. The combination of Hosseini's narrative technique, his character development, stylistic devices (insertion of Afghani words, the use of rhetorical figures) and his

extreme incorporation of symbolism resulted in both critical accolades and popular success of *The Kite Runner*, a novel that is simultaneously embraced by academia and the general reading populace.

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