

A Critique of Afghan Culture in Khaled Hussein's *The Kite Runner*

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Abstract

Afghanistan has witnessed dynamic culture for the last five decades. Defining culture is difficult and it is terser when one needs to define the culture of a country which has seen a variety of changes in its socio-economic-political condition. It is an attempt to analyze and inspect the dynamics of Afghan's culture through the lens of *The Kite Runner* written by Khaled Hussein with focus on its cultural shift, social discrimination, taboos and repressed desires in course of narration of conflict among Hazaras and Pashtuns, father-son relationship and guilt conscious mind.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Cultural Paradigm, Khaled Hussein, Pashtuns, Hazara, *The Kite Runner*

The term 'culture' is broader and complex which comprises the behaviour pattern and social activities of individual or group in particular location. The culture defines the way of greeting, cooking, mannerism, pride, and honour. It is mandatory form human's existence as it is the source of knowledge that permits them to endure in social setup. The human beings are offered "the material with which he or she develops habits, motor skills, attitudes, prejudices, aspirations, and capabilities... Culture controls and regulates the collective existence of society and guides the individual in deciding the definition and order of responses to future experiences" (Panopio and Rolda 30). The Kite Runner is full of the cultural artifacts of Afghanistan but seems the story of everyone. The reader feels connected to themselves as they believe that the plot of fiction is their own story. It can be one of the reasons for its high demand even in Europeans countries. Khalid reveals in an interview, "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, racial, religious and gender gaps to resonate with readers of varying backgrounds"(Guthmann n.p.). The Kite Runner opens a window to the world where they can relate the existing conditions of the nation. The paradigm shifts from rich culture to the fundamentalist-controlled by extremist group. Regarding this Jefferess says:

The Kite Runner, as much as it provides a window into Afghan culture, also projects back to the western reader the simple moral absolutes that inform the War on Terror as paradoxically both a "war", based on the fulfillment of vengeance or justice, and a humanitarian project of "sharing" western values, such as democracy and liberalism; for instance, saving oppressed Muslim children/women from misogynist, oppressive Muslim men. (398)

The text portrays the account of discrimination exercised on Hazara community from centuries due to their low social status by the extremist people in Afghanistan. Their religious identity is questioned multiple times. They had been dominated by the elites of the region. Afghanistan is a diverse state with many ethnic communities in which Hazara's are Shia Muslims and Pashtuns are Sunni Muslims. Pashtuns consist of 42% of the total population of Afghanistan and other ethnic groups are Hazara, Tajik, and Turkmen. The Majority, Pashtuns had conflict with non-Pashtuns. The "majority of the non-Pashtun population has remained largely aloof from the conflict, the current conflict is essentially intra-Pashtun. However, many among the non-Pashtun ethnic groups, such as the Tajik, Uzbek, Turkmen, and Hazara, populating mainly northern, central and western Afghanistan, have been relatively peaceful" (Saikal 14). Hazaras are described as flat nosed and owner of load carrying donkeys. Assef, the bully boy who hates Hazara, is very cruel towards them as he never misses a chance to insult them. Once he encounters Hassan and greets him by saying 'Aga'. The word denotes superiority in the

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hierarchy. At the same moment, Asef speaks about social hierarchy, "Afghanistan is the land of the Pashtuns... the true Afghans, the pure Afghans, not this Flat-Nose here" (40). Assef and other Pashtuns consider Hazara people impure and their presence on the land of Afghanistan has polluted it. Assef speaks in rage, "Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns. It always has been, always will be. We are the true Afghans, the pure Afghans, not this Flat-Nose here. His people pollute our homeland, our *Watan*. They dirty our blood" (44). Regarding such kind of aggression Freud exhibits:

The existence of this inclination to aggression, which we can detect in ourselves and justly assume to be present in others, is the factor which disturbs our relations with our neighbor and which forces civilization into such a high expenditure of energy. In consequence of this primary mutual hostility of human beings, civilized society is perpetually threatened with disintegration. The interest of work in common would not hold it together; instinctual passions are stronger than reasonable interests. (112)

The aggression is developed in the mind using several irrational views about the targeted group of the same society. The people are divided on the basis of concerned identity. The dominant one tries to hostile another less powerful. Hence, they are made to believe that they are destined to be inferior and pushed to the periphery. The same fate is destined to Hazara community who always stand on secondary position after Pashtuns even after acquiring better skills and knowledge. The social positioning of Hazara identifies them as low-grade. Amir is a friend of Hassan and lives with him in the same house. Hassan helps Amir many times when he is helpless. The attitude of Amir is also biased towards Hazara and he also speaks in an insulting tone, "What does he know, that illiterate Hazara? He'll never be anything but a cook. How dare he criticize you?" (35). In such a scenario, any person who tries to help the suppressed becomes the target of the same group. Amir faces the rage of the Pashtuns. Once Amir is stopped by Assef in the market and he inquires about Hassan. Amir is grilled for calling Hassan his friend. Wali and Kamal grunted on him. Assef says, "In fact, you bother me more than this Hazara here. How can you talk to him, play with him, let him touch you?" (41). Assef keeps himself involved in hot arguments with Amir:

You're part of the problem, Amir. If idiots like you and your father didn't take these people in, we'd be rid of them by now. They'd all just go rot in Hazarajat where they belong. You're a disgrace to Afghanistan. I looked in his crazy eyes and saw that he meant it. Here ally meant to hurt me. Assef raised his fist and came for me. (45)

The kite flying has been an integral part of Afghan culture from centuries. This festival is a true representation of pride, history, and freedom irrespective of religion. In *The Kite Runner*,

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this festival is predominantly projected that turn the reason for spreading brotherhood and advancing the relationship. Baba, father of Amir; becomes happy with his son as he wins the trophy of the tournament. Amir was in great need of winning the tournament expecting to gain honour from his father who considers him a submissive and aggressive. In the span of twelve years, he is not praised by his father contrary to it Hassan receives the love of his father that becomes the reason for resentment between Amir and Hassan. Amir asserts that the win was the great moment in his life, "I saw Baba on our roof. He was standing on the edge, pumping both of his fists. Hollering and clapping. And that right there was the single greatest moment of my twelve years of life, seeing Baba on that roof, proud of me at last" (66). The win is "key to Baba's heart" (71) for Amir as Baba begins to spend the quality time with him after the tournament. Unfortunately, kite flying tradition was banned as Taliban captured the power and declared it 'un-Islamic' considering it mere means of entertainment. Taliban forbade all the sources of amusement and strict rules were framed for the same.

The concept of kite running is aggressively flying your kite and using the glass coated string to cut the strings of your opponent's kites, the last kite in the air is the winner... Kite flying is more than a pastime in Afghanistan. It is a cultural obsession. For most of the citizens, inhabiting the city of Kabul, kite running is a form of religious expression. It is a way of the Afghan population to express their country's culture, and at the same time preserve a sense of honour in the household. The firstborn son of a family, typically the oldest is the one who participates in the kite running competition. (Santuccio n.p.)

Despite the fact that Hosseini doesn't divide the novel into parts, it very well may be finished by its topic. The initial segment of the novel is totally set in Afghanistan depicting Amir's and Hassan's formative years. The second part is Amir's life in America, his marriage and new climate. The last part is his adventure to the truth, and salvation for his wrongdoings. Both Amir and Hassan, without knowing their fraternity, share an uncommon relationship. Amir remembers, "Hassan and I fed from the same breasts. We took our steps on the same lawn in the same yard. And under the same roof, we spoke our first words" (Hosseini, 10). Hassan, destined to Hazara guardians, was constantly dismissed by society. Segregation among various gatherings in a similar religion represents the most exceedingly bad side of ill will between individuals. There is a long story of competition among Pashtuns and Hazaras. The Hazaras were not given any situation in the public eye. They were not considered as people and were dismissed from the pages of history. Once, Amir discovers a book in which one entire section is dedicated to Hazaras and that shocks him, "The book said that my kin had slaughtered the Hazaras, driven them from their homes, copied their homes, and sold their ladies.

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The book said that my people had killed the Hazaras, driven them from their homes, burned their homes, and sold their women. The book said part of the reason Pashtuns had oppressed the Hazaras was the Pashtuns were Sunni Muslims, while Hazaras were Shia's'. (Hosseini 9)

The honour and sin are also an inseparable part of Afghan culture. In the novel, Baba undergoes the tumultuous experiences that are considered sin. According to cultural values, extramarital affairs are forbidden. The guilty of the same loses the honour in the society. Baba does not reveal the secret of being in a relationship with Ali's wife under the pressure of losing the dignified position. Baba was not having a loving relationship with Amir as it is shared with Hassan. He controls his feelings of fatherhood in the fear that illegitimate Hazara son shall be the reason for destroying the ancestral reputation.

The role of women is fixed in every society and Women are supposed to behave in set patterns. Khaled Hussein illustrates the gender roles in the culture of Afghanistan and discusses the changes after Taliban comes in power. Taliban was an extremist group that imposed many restrictions on the living style of the people. Such practices are implemented to establish a kind of superiority to others. In the institution of family, Women were destined to be secondary, oppressed, recommended the dress code, denial of education and other social norms. The girls did have any inclination to decide with whom they should spend their life as the arranged marriages were preferred in tradition Afghan culture. The ability and potential of women are discarded, and they have to compromise with it to live in the house of the husband. There is no love between the couples before the wedding, but they have to live together. There are some couples as Ali and his wife, Amir and Soraya, Saraya's mother and General Taheri in *The Kite Runner* but women are never treated equally. The pent-up desires are never fulfilled, and it becomes the reason for conflict. Ali and his wife separated after Hassan's birth Jamila is destined with a beautiful voice. She was very good at singing but after the wedding, she could not continue her profession of singing. Amir reveals the belief of society that women need "needed a husband. Even if he did silence the song in her" (Hosseini 155). Even Amir and Soraya were not allowed to meet before their marriage. Thus, women could not sing, dance, drink wine, eye contact to any male, wear the assigned dress and talk to the husband in public. Soraya was fond of drinking, but she consumes liquor in the company of her husband only. She exposes the hypocritical attitude, "Their sons go out to nightclubs looking for meat and get their girlfriends pregnant, they have kids out of wedlock, and no one says a goddamn thing" (Hosseini 156). Taliban rule is defensive of the male figure that allows them to enjoy in nightclubs but restricts women not to wear the high heels and other things that can fascinate the attention of someone. The character of Farjana exhibits the torturous treatment of women under Taliban rule. Hassan's wife Farjana is beaten badly for talking loudly. As a young man observe, he run and hit her

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thighs. She kneels down due to the severe pain. The young boy threatens her to face the rage for not following the rule as a woman cannot speak so piercingly. Amir expresses the behaviour pattern an Afghan woman must follow under Taliban rule. He says, "So courteous she spoke in a voice barely higher than a whisper and she would not raise her pretty hazel eyes to meet my gaze. But the way she was looking at Hassan, he might as well have been sitting on the throne at the Arg" (Hosseini 180).

The Kite Runner exposes the Afghan way life before and after Russian invasion to Afghanistan soil. The encounter turned the culture and tradition; consequently, a fundamentalist group controlled all spheres of Afghanistan. It exhibits the condition of women, oppressed ethnic groups, festivals, rituals, and traditions. The conflict between Pashtuns and Hazara is observed on the basis of their belonging to the different land. The portrayal of different characters in Afghani culture reveals that the honour is attached directly to the landscapes as Baba do not want to do any work in Afghanistan but in California, he starts to work on a petrol pump and run a stall that was against his dignity in Afghanistan. Thus it can be expressed that The Kite Runner caricatures the Afghanistan culture.

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