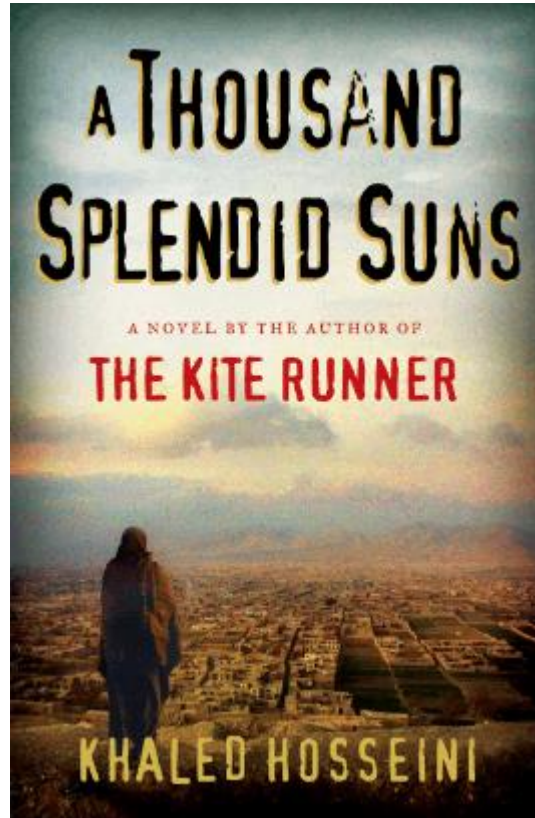


**Discrimination, War and Redemption in Khaled Hosseini's  
*The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns***

S. Shahira Banu, M.A., M.Phil.

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**Abstract**

This article discusses the themes of Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The novels deal with Discrimination, War and Redemption. The tragic war in Afghanistan and its impact on the lives of ordinary citizens of Afghanistan are reflected in these novels. We all begin to pray and yearn for peace and prosperity for Afghanistan when we read through these autobiographical novels of Khaled Hosseini.

**Key words:** Novels of Khaled Hosseini, Discrimination, War and Redemption, Afghan War.

### **Recent Afghan Literature**

In the tumult of the past three decades, Afghan writers have created a body of almost a homeless literature, which shows the plight of his countrymen and women. Furthermore, the major political and military confrontations of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries have also influenced novelists like Mahmud Tarzi, Ahmed Rashid, AsneSeierstad, AtiqRahimi, Ayesha Jalal, Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, HamidaGhafour, Khaled Hosseini, NadeemAslam and others.

The novelists of historical narratives would often include inventions rooted in traditional beliefs in order to embellish a passage of text or add credibility to an opinion. Historians would also invent and compose speeches for didactic purposes. Novels in Afghanistan depict the social, political and personal realities of a place and period with clarity and detail. These works can help the readers to understand them and their cultures in all their subtlety and complexity.

Modern writings have attempted to bring Afghans closer to understanding the changes associated with the modern world, and especially to comprehend the destruction of their country by war. In 1972, Sayyed Burhanuddin Majruh wrote several volumes in classical, rhythmic Dari prose about a traveler who joins his countrymen in exile, where they exchange ideas and narratives from ancient times in the light of modern concepts of reason, logic, science, and psychoanalysis. During the war with the Soviets, writings focused on the twin concerns of Islam and freedom.

### **Khaled Hosseini**

An expatriate living in the U.S, Hosseini is the first Afghan writer to represent through literature the conflicts and crises through which his country has been going for decades. The country is looked upon elsewhere as a land of terrorists, fundamentalists and fanatics. Hosseini's goal is to lay bare the soul of his country, which was hitherto not ventured by any other writer. Through his novels Hosseini shows the economic and political devastations created by the endless conflicts in his native country.

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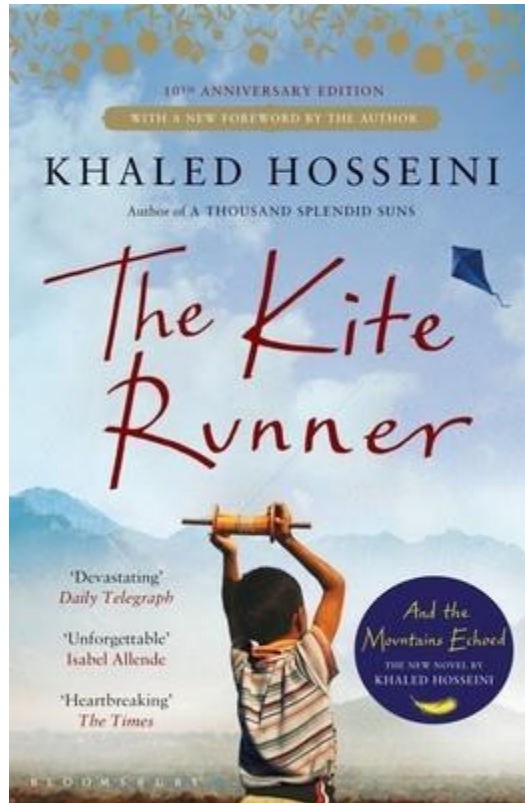
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In 2003, Hosseini released his first novel, *The Kite Runner*. The novel is set in Afghanistan. It describes many themes which include ethnic tensions between the Hazaras and the Pashtuns in Afghanistan, and the immigrant experiences of Amir and his father in the United States. Hosseini's second novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) is taken for the present study to delineate the factors that marginalize the Afghan women through the social, political and religious restrictions unwillingly forced upon them in reality. Hosseini explores the present state of social exclusion of the Afghan women through the characters of Mariam and Laila in the novel.

### ***The Kite Runner - Amir***

In *The Kite Runner*, Amir, as a boy, has often heard people in their neighbourhood taunting Hassan and Ali as 'Hazaras'. But for years he fails to capture the full import of the term. Then one day, he finds the answer in one of his mother's old history books. He realizes that he and his father are Sunni Muslim, who are the ruling majority, while Hassan and his father are 'Shia' Hazara, the "inferior" minority group. This is the reason behind the ethnic-religious, economical-social division between Baba and Ali, and Amir and Hassan.



This is the nature of tradition and culture in Afghanistan that has created schism between the people of the two communities at the levels of economic status, religion, and ethnicity. This apparently instills in Amir's mind a sense of 'otherness' of the Hazaras which is also deeply embedded in the Afghan society in general. It somehow legitimizes his own sense of superiority and also his acts of injustice to his friend and companion Hassan. The history of caste division makes a furrow in Amir's personal history of friendship with a Hazara boy. This division is endemic in the country.

The protagonist Amir belongs to the privileged Pashtun class, whereas his servant Hassan and his father Ali belong to the marginalized Hazara Class. Amir's father Baba betrays Ali and Amir too betrays Hassan by not helping Hassan when he is molested by other boys, while kite running for Amir. Ali and his son Hassan show their loyalty and respect towards their masters even after this betrayal, but both make amends later on.

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## Sense of Place

Bunce 2011 points out aptly:

The author creates a sense of place by being very descriptive and adding emotion from the characters for each area of the book. An example of this is seen where he is talking about the house that his father built, and how many people thought it was the prettiest house in all of Kabul. Amir then goes on to talk about the elaborate design. So, the reader can sense that Amir's family has money. Another time the author gives a very strong sense of place is when Rahim Khan finds Hassan and walks into his yard for the first time. He describes the bare area so the reader knows Hassan is living in poverty. Another example is when Amir arrives in Peshawar and has to take a smoke-filled taxi to Rahim Khan's house. The reader can almost smell the smoke, and instantly remember the first time Amir and his father had gone to Peshawar.

## Mariam

Like Hassan, Mariam is an illegitimate child of an epileptic mother Nana in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. She was made aware of her worthlessness by her mother, when she was just five years old "Mariam was five years old the first time she heard the term harami." (ATSS 3) Ironically, at that time she did not understand the meaning of the word. Nana made her understand that,

she, Mariam was an illegitimate person who would never have legitimate claim to the things other people had, things such as love, family, home, acceptance. (ATSS 4)

Mariam's father Jalil was one of the wealthiest businessmen, who never accepted her for the fear of losing his so called good name. Nana tells Mariam that her father did not have a good thought to do honourable thing. Though Nana makes her understand that her father Jalil cannot accept her as his own daughter because, he had a standing in Heart and also three legitimate wives and nine legitimate children. The embittered Nana reacts against patriarchal despotism-

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Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that Mariam. (ATSS 7)

### **Amir and Hassan**

On the other hand, though Hassan is Amir's best friend, Amir feels that Hassan, a Hazara servant, is beneath him. When Hassan receives Baba's attention, Amir tries to assert himself by passive-aggressively attacking Hassan. He mocks at Hassan's ignorance, or plays tricks on him. Likewise, Mariam is looked at as a Harami or 'bastard' because she is the daughter of a servant who had a child with a noble man. Both of these characters are treated unfairly merely because of something they were born in to, something that they had no control over. Hosseini is trying to show that something in life are uncontrollable and people have to do the best with what they have.

### **Marginalization**

Marginalization occurs when people are pushed to the edge of a society, usually as an effect of discrimination making the person stand out and look different from everybody else. They consequently feel alone and left out from the rest of society. Marginalization creeps into the minds of people of various nations due to various reasons in different periods, as the Africans were marginalized by the Americans because of their colour while the Indians were discriminated among themselves based on the community they were born into.

### **Solace and Encouragement**

The book, even as it presents the hardships and humiliations and so on, also offers us solace and encouragement, and points out that redemption is possible. For example, there are "sayings from many different wise characters" of the past, and "we learn from this book are that sometimes your past is important to your future, and again, like Rahim Khan said, "there is a way to be good again" (Bunce, 2011).

### ***A Thousand Splendid Suns***

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*A Thousand Splendid Suns* follows the lives of two women characters Mariam and Laila who struggle due to the violent nature of their husband. Both the women characters are treated badly and are abused physically, sexually and emotionally. Continuous sufferings make them lose all hope in life. It discusses themes of women's rights and discrimination. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* both Laila and Mariam lack freedom and rights.

The legal marrying age for women in Afghanistan is sixteen, however, people in rural areas either ignore the law or claim they are not aware of it. And, after the death of Mariam's mother Nana, Jalil and his wives force her into a *nikah* with Rasheed, a shoe maker from Kabul, who was thirty years older than her. He doesn't allow Mariam to go outside without him.

Mariam quickly learns from her husband, Rasheed, that he too will enforce the traditional practice of wearing burqa, saying,

But I'm a different breed of man, Mariam. Where I come from, one wrong look, one improper word, and blood is spilled. Where I come from, a woman's face is her husband's business only. I want you to remember that. Do you understand?  
(qtd. in Dar 73)

Women are to be completely covered by their burqas at all times, unless at home with their husbands, separated and secluded from society.

### **Kite-flying**

Hosseini connects between the two books through the theme of discrimination against minorities within communities. Amir, consequently, behaves jealously toward anyone receiving Baba's affection. His relationship with Hassan only exasperates Amir. Kite-flying is the basic motif that runs through the entire novel. It indicates the chief cultural, recreational habit prevalent at the time, but through the graphic representation of the 'kite-flying' or 'kite-running', Hosseini also catches the glimpses of the time that has passed. Although the 'kite-running' is primarily linked up in the novel with the personal story of 'faith and betrayal', it is also intricately connected with the nostalgia that the author/protagonist feels for the lost phase of

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the Afghanistan history. It is this sense of belonging that provokes Hosseini to recreate the journey of Afghanistan to its present existence where the readers notice an overwhelming sense of loss.

### ***The Kite Runner***

In *The Kite Runner*, the character of Assef first expresses his disgust towards the Hazara community. This notoriously violent boy with Nazi sympathies blames Amir for cultivating friendship with Hassan, a Hazara, an inferior race to be confined in Hazarajat. He scornfully asks Amir how he can call Hassan his friend. At this remark, Amir also feels, “But he’s not my friend... He’s is my servant!” (qtd. in Mallick 207) He, therefore, never contradicts the abusive comments on Hassan as he too has imbibed this “master-slave” (qtd. in Mallick 207) socio-cultural hierarchy.

Hosseini delineates a forceful but nuanced portrait of patriarchal situation where women are agonizingly dependant on fathers, husbands and sons. A misogynist, Rasheed confines Mariam within the four walls of his house and insists her to wear burqa when they go out. To him, her honour, his *namoos* is something worth guarding. Laila, the educated daughter of a teacher and a progressive mother, his blissful life in Kabul during the eighties when women in Afghanistan enjoyed some freedom, is disturbed by war. The readers are also made aware of a friendship changing to love between Laila and Tariq.

Violence was rearing its ugly head everywhere. People are fleeing the country; even Tariq’s family decides to flee to Pakistan. Tariq asks Laila to come along but she denies for the sake of her parents. Tariq leaves in a short time. Laila’s parents and her brothers die when a rocket hits their house. Taken under shelter into Rasheed’s household, her life takes a trajectory towards ruin when she recoups from her trauma. He forces her into marriage-a grotesque union sans joy or love.

### **Struggle of Women: Laila and Mariam**

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Hosseini depicts the hopeless struggle of the two women to have a decent life with the boorish Rasheed whose violent misogyny is endorsed by law. The marriage to Rasheed is a cover for Laila who is carrying Tariq's child and there was no better way to guard her honour. However she "often felt lost, casting about, like a shipwrecked survivor, no shore in sight, only miles and miles of water." (qtd. in Barathan 207) The birth of a girl child further infuriates Rasheed that he never calls her by her name, Aziza.

After a rancorous relationship initially, Mariam and Laila becomes allies. Initially, Laila could sense, "a hurtful silence...the wordless hostility radiating from Mariam like waves of heat rising from asphalt." (qtd. in Sinha 131) Tyrannical tortures and abject humiliation only serve to tighten the bond between these two women, and sacrificial love conquers in an environment replete in hostility and degradation.

Laila and Mariam find consolation in each other; their friendship grows as deep as the bond between sisters, as strong as the ties between mother and daughter. When Laila's second pregnancy makes her and Mariam visit the hospital, they are forced to travel around Kabul due to the shifting of the hospital system, separating men and women into separate hospitals. Laila gives birth to his son, Zalmai through a caesarian. Zalmai's birth was followed by a drought which incurs an acute shortage of food. Their financial position forced them to send Aziza to an orphanage.

### **Hosseini's Depiction of Tragedy of War**

Afghanistan has suffered continuous and brutal civil war since the late 1970s. The war brought about terrible changes and ravished the beautiful land beyond recognition. Hosseini's novel traces the history of disaster with a series of war, bombings, homelessness, starvation, life-destroying struggles, etc. The conflicts in Afghanistan's political atmosphere begin when Daud Khan overthrows King Zahir Shah. The political instabilities become intertwined with the lives of people, like Amir, Hassan, Baba, and Rahim Khan in *The Kite Runner* and Mariam, Laila, Mammy, Babi, Rasheed, Tariq, Aziza and Zalmai in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Hosseini shows how for the people of Afghanistan, the political becomes personal. In *The Kite Runner* there are

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only minimal descriptions of the war and its horrors. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* on the other is set against the background of the violent history of Afghanistan, which enhances the poignancy of the narration.

First, there came the Russian invasion which threatened the very dignity of the natives and created fissures within the society never seen before. The new dispensation showed the menace in symptoms of being driven by fundamentalist ideology. People's lives undergo tumultuous changes as the country's atmosphere becomes chaotic. The new political upheaval in the nature of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan forces Amir and his father flee to Pakistan and then to America, where Amir and Baba are offered political asylum in the U.S. Baba and Amir's life in Fremont, California is very different from their life in Wazir Akbar Khan. Baba works long hours at a gas station and he loves 'the idea of America'. For Amir, America represents a fresh beginning.

### **Return to Afghanistan**

The memory of the old days comes flooding back when Amir receives the fateful call from Rahim Khan, Baba's old business partner, who has been taking care their house in Wazir Akbar Khan street. Rahim Khan implores Amir to visit him Pakistan and Amir decides to return to his homeland. Amir's second coming to Afghanistan is a voyage to the country of blood and terror as to create a nostalgic world of love and redemption. His spatial and temporal displacement allows for a recollection of the pre-war Afghan.

When Amir returns to Afghanistan, Kabul is on the brink of Soviet invasion and is structured around loss. Amir visits Afghanistan and reaches Peshawar. Here the reader learns about the second half of Hassan's life from Rahim Khan. After Amir and his father left Afghanistan, Hassan lived with his father and wife in Hazarajat. Ali dies and Rahim Khan brings him and his wife to Kabul to live at Baba's house. Their son, Sohrab, is born there. Hassan has also learned to read and write. Rahim Khan also tells about Assef's ill-treatment of the Hazaras and the other ethnic minorities not only presents him as cruel but also reveals the double standard of the Taliban government.

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## **Author's Voice**

Hassan's and his son Sohrab's endurance of repression and severe conditions and the prevalent injustice in the society of Afghanistan accounts for their support to the individual voice of the author. During their stay in the big house in Wazir Akbar Khan for the second time, Hassan, his wife Farzana and their son Sohrab became the victims of the Taliban. The readers thus further learn that after Rahim Khan's departure to Peshawar for medical treatment, Hassan and his wife are murdered by Taliban officials.

Taliban take over Baba's house. And, Sohrab is sent to an orphanage. Rahim Khan tells Amir his last wish – he wants Amir to go to Kabul, and bring Sohrab with him. When Amir shows his unwillingness, Rahim Khan not only asks him to pay off for his previous act of cowardice, but also tells him the truth about Hassan's real identity. Hassan is his half-brother. Amir is outraged. However, after some time, Amir feels that both he and his Baba “had betrayed the people who have given their lives for us.” (qtd. in Mallick 112)

## **Father-Son Relationship**

During his childhood Amir wasn't attracted towards his father, because his father believes that due to Amir's birth only his wife was dead. In contrast with this, the most loving relationship between father and son is that of Hassan and his son Sohrab. Hassan, however, is killed, and toward the end of the novel, the readers notice Amir trying to become a substitute father to Sohrab. The new structure took an anti-ethnic and anti-feminine stance. In the name of discipline, all kinds of luxury were prohibited.

True redemption can only be found within the soul, and for each person redemption requires a separate definition and asking price. This book carries within it a whirlwind of human emotions, and a universal link to what we are intrinsically connected. Any thought of separateness is created within the mind. Amir compartmentalized his connections with Hassan for variety of personal and socio-cultural reasons, and as a consequence, he consistently experienced cognitive dissonance. When he was finally able to confront himself with the Truth

he realized that there always was a very real connection between himself and Hassan. (qtd. in Aubry 37)

Their relationship experiences its own strains as Sohrab, who is recovering from the loss of his parents and the abuse he suffered, has trouble opening up to Amir. The hope for this transformation is effectively portrayed at the conclusion of the novel; this is a poignant picture of clinging to one's cultural roots and vestiges:

I ran [with the kite]. A grown man running with a swarm of screaming children. But I didn't care. I ran with the wind blowing in my face, and a smile as wide as the Valley of Panjsher on my lips. I ran. (TKR 324)

Both of these events factor into Amir's mission to save Sohrab and his redemption by confronting Assef, subtly implying that Afghanistan will similarly have its own redemption one day. He shows that these two words take on a very important part of every person's life in their true definition. Hosseini also crafts the story of two strong Afghan women of different ages from different areas whose lives intersect for a while. Continuous sufferings make them lose all hope in life. Stress, fear and anxiety make Mariam to take an extreme step like murdering her own husband and Laila to flee the country.

### **Road of Redemption**

Thus in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam travels the road of redemption. Mariam always felt the guilt from her mother's death that was caused by her running away to her father, Jalil. After all those years living a horrible life bearing tyrannical tortures and enduring so much pain by her husband Rasheed, "she was able to be loved and love back" (qtd. in Gomathi 122), when she finally befriends Laila and her children, Aziza and Zalami. It did not matter to Mariam that she was going to die. Because, even though she kills Rasheed, she saved Laila and her children so that they could live a better life with Tariq. She sacrificed herself for her befriend, which in the end redeemed herself.

### **Touching the Hearts of People from Diverse Cultures**

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Hosseini's both novels, *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* have the power of exiting emotions, provoking thoughts and touching the hearts of the readers of diverse cultures. Khaled Hosseini subtly describes Afghan culture along with giving the readers an insight into the personal gains and losses of individual characters. He writes about large scale global sufferings and assaults on the human rights, intricately weaving it with small painful moments in the life of the victims. In the novel, he incorporates a large number of themes of invasion, adventure, intrigue, rivalry, betrayal, friendship, suppression and oppression. Both books show the good characters as good Muslims. Khaled Hosseini has made a beautiful connection between the characters' actions and the people and things that they were 'loyal and devoted'.

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