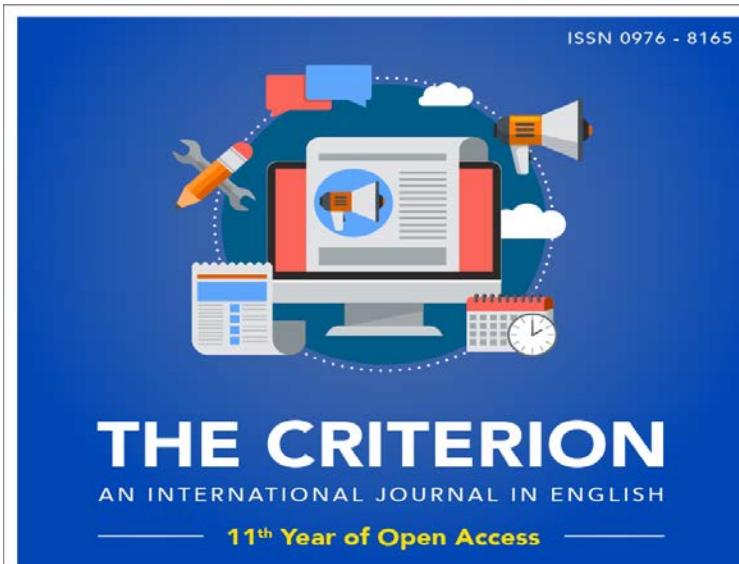


ISSN 0976 - 8165



THE CRITERION
AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH
— 11th Year of Open Access —

**Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed
Open Access e-Journal**

Vol. XI, Issue-1 (February 2020)

Editor-In-Chief : Dr. Vishwanath Bite
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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Exploration of Afghan Cultural Crisis: Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

Dr. Vibhavari Kulkarni

Dept of English,
Karnatak Arts College,
Dharwad.

Article History: Submitted-19/12/2019, Revised-25/02/2020, Accepted-27/02/2020, Published-29/02/2020.

Abstract:

Khaled Hosseini , one of the most popular contemporary writers, is an Afghan – American novelist. In his debut novel, *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini narrates the story of Amir and through Amir's experiences, gives a picture of Afghan culture in all its glory and freedom during the Monarchy and its devastation through the changing political circumstances that the country faced. The novel reveals the glorious days of the Afghan past through its sprawling narrative of Amir's life with his father and with his childhood friend Hassan. With the Russian infiltration, the peacefully settled Afghans are forced to migrate to unknown lands, which lead to crisis – both at the cultural level and on the individual psyche. The novel also narrates the complete destruction of the earlier Afghan life and culture during the Taliban Rule .The Afghans who had dreamt of better days when the Russians were taken over, get disillusioned by the cruel, fanatic and insensitive Taliban. The paper attempts to analyse *The Kite Runner* as a representation of the cultural crisis of Afghanistan.

Keywords: Exploration, Afghan culture, Kite Runner, Monarchy, Russian infiltration, Taliban.

Khaled Hosseini, one of the most popular contemporary writers, is an Afghan – American novelist. In *The Kite Runner*, his debut novel, he narrates the story of Amir, and through the experiences of Amir, explores Afghan culture in all its glory and freedom during its Monarchy, and its eventual devastation through the Russian infiltration and then under the Taliban regime. The Russian infiltration forced the peacefully settled Afghans to migrate to unknown lands leading to the crisis – both at the cultural level and on their individual psyche. The novel also portrays the country under the Taliban rule where in all the traces of its past lifestyle are destroyed. The Afghans who had dreamt of better days when the Russians were taken over by the Taliban, get disillusioned by the cruel, fanatic, insensitive Taliban Rule.

The Kite Runner brings forth the story of Afghanistan in a sprawling narrative of Amir's life with his father and with his childhood friend Hassan. Apart from the glorious days of Afghan life during the Monarchy, the novel also throws light on the drawbacks of that society, through the character of Hassan who belongs to the Hazara Community. The Hazaras were subjugated and oppressed by the rich and powerful Pashtun Community. Amir is the privileged son of a rich Pashtun living a life of luxury and freedom. In a sudden turn of events, Hassan is sexually abused and Amir helplessly witnesses it. As a result of the Political upheaval Amir is eventually forced to leave his land along with his father, and settle in America, leaving behind, his memories of his motherland. Amir suppresses his haunting sense of guilt of not trying to rescue his friend during the time of the ghastly incident and tries to lead a comfortable life in America. But the repressed feelings spring up again when he visits Uncle Rahim, his father's friend and his own father –figure, on the latter's death bed and listens to what happened in Afghanistan after he left. Uncle Rahim tells how the Taliban killed Hassan and his wife and took over Amir's house .He also urges Amir to go and bring Hassan's son who is living in an orphanage. Amir is told how Hassan sacrificed his own life in an attempt to protect Amir's house. Amir rushes to Afghanistan to see how the whole country has undergone a complete change under the Taliban .The glorious days of its past have become things of past. Amir finds not a trace of the country he lived, in the present scenario full of fanaticism, insensitivity and cruelty. He rescues Hassan's son from the clutches of Assef who having threatened the manager of the orphanage, had taken the boy to his own house and was continually abusing him. In his attempts to rescue the boy, he is mortally injured by the more powerful Assef. He is saved by the boy himself who injures Assef with his sling shot. After getting operated for his severe injuries Amir recovers and takes the boy to America .He has to face many legal problems before getting the boy to America. He also has to deal with legal issues in order to adopt him as American law is not favourable to the adoption of an Afghan national. The boy is unable to recover from the memories of his dreadful experiences in Afghanistan and once even attempts suicide. Amir tries to make the boy normal and the novel ends with a hopeful note when the boy happily runs after a kite during a Kite running festival. The novel also leaves behind, a sense of hope for a better Afghanistan in future.

. Amir's life and his experiences reflect the life and experience of every Afghan and thus the novel generalizes the individual experiences of Amir and presents a detailed picture of his country and its culture. Amir's childhood days of happiness with his father,

playing with Hassan are the days of peace and happiness for Afghanistan. Amir, his daring father, Rahim Khan his father's friend , Hassan the son of the servant Ali, are all portrayed realistically. Amir and Hassan, though born in different communities and though there is a sea change in their economic and social positions, are play mates who are almost inseparable. However, Amir never treats Hassan as his equal. Deep inside he is influenced by the cultural norms of his society about the Hazaras. When Amir shows his first story, Hassan appreciates it but points out one of its loopholes , and Amir recounts how he felt `` On the same night I had learned about one of writing's objectives , Irony , I would also be introduced to one of its pitfalls : the Plot Hole .Taught by Hassan , of all people....A voice , cold and dark , whispered suddenly in my ear , `` What does he know , that illiterate Hazara ? He will never be anything but a cook . How dare he criticise you ?''(Pg. 32)

Thus as he himself admits, Amir like many others of his society, is not free from the prejudices against the Hazara Community. However his reading of the cultural history has made him aware of how the Hazaras were exploited by the Pashtuns. His father too was a liberal, who had always treated Hassan and Ali well. Due to these influences Amir is sympathetic toward the Hazaras. Assef , a neighbourhood bully ,tries to assault Amir merely because Amir is friendly with a Hazara boy. Assef argues that the Hazaras should be eliminated from his country so that his land will be pure and beautiful. It is Hassan who saves Amir from Assef's attack with the help of his sling shot. The narrative reveals the attitude of the powerful Pashtuns toward the Hazaras. This is also brought forth through the sad story that Rahim Khan tells Amir, of his love for a Hazara girl. Rahim Khan tells how this affair was opposed by his family and how the girl was sent to Hazarijat along with her family. While Rahim Khan remained single throughout his life.

The rich Afghan life style, its customs and festivals are brought forth through Amir's story. Kite Flying was the National festival which was played with great enthusiasm. There is a detailed description of Kite Flying and Kite Running Tournament

The writer describes winter in Kabul during the good days – it was every kid's favourite season as they used to shut down schools for the season. For Amir it was three months of playing cards by the stove with Hassan, movies, sweet turnip kurma over rice and kites - flying kites and running them. Every winter all the districts in Kabul had kite fighting tournament. Khaled Hosseni writes "... if you were a boy living in Kabul, the day of the tournament was undeniably the highlight of the cold seasonfighting kites was a little like

going to war If the kite was the gun then *tar*, the glass coated cutting line, was the bullet in the chamber " (pg. 43). The kite fighting tournament was an old winter tradition in Afghanistan. It started early in the morning on the day of contest, and didn't end until only the winning kite flew in the sky – once the tournament had outlasted day light of the next day. People gathered on sidewalks and roofs to cheer for their kids. The streets filled with kite fighters jerking and tugging on their lines squinting up to the sky, trying to gain position to cut the opponent's line. The real fun began when a kite was cut. That was where the kite runners came in, those kids who chased the windblown kite. When a kite runner had his hands on a kite, no one could take it from him. That wasn't a rule- that was custom. For the kite runners the most coveted prize was the last fallen kite of the tournament. It was a trophy of honour.

Amir wins the tournament and Hassan gets the last fallen kite for him. That was the last winter tournament for them because, with the Russian infiltration everything changed. As Khaled Hosseini writes , `` Suddenly Afghanistan changed foreverSomething roared like thunder The earth shook a little and we heard ...gunfireA siren went off in the distance. Somewhere glass shatteredheard people on the street, jolted from sleep..., before none of us had heard gunfire on the streets .They were foreign sounds to us then. The generation of Afghan children whose ears would know nothing but the sounds of bombs and gun fire, was not yet born. A way of life had ended.` Our ` way of life ... it was the beginning of an end." Thus the novel describes the Russian infiltration into Afghanistan and how that had a devastating impact on the Afghan way of life. The official end of the old Afghan life and culture came first in April, 1978 with the communist coup, and then in December 1979, when Russian tanks rolled into the very same streets where Amir and Hassan played, bringing the death of the Afghan lifestyle and marking the start of and a still ongoing era of blood-letting.

Amir recounts his journey, along with several other strangers, in a cab to Pakistan. The brutality of the Russian soldier, the helplessness of the Afghan passengers, the driver and the Afghan soldier is given in detail. The sudden change in the life of Amir, as also of most of the Afghans, from a peaceful life to a disturbing and challenging one, is brought forth through Amir's experiences --- in the cab, in Pakistan as a refugee and later in America as a Diaspora. Amir's father works hard in a gas station in America that takes a toll on his health; Amir graduates from high school. Amir marvels at the size of the US and compares it with Afghanistan in to which the Russian army had marched , burning houses, destroying schools

and planting mines like seeds of death where children were buried in- rock piled graves. Amir gets married, his father dies of cancer and many years later he gets a phone call from Rahim Khan from Pakistan. Rahim Khan reveals the secret that Hassan was Amir's half brother. He also tells of how the Taliban had taken over Afghanistan and how Hassan had been killed along with his wife, in an attempt to save Amir's house from being taken over by the Taliban authorities. Rahim Khan narrates the events that took place in Afghanistan after Amir left. When the Northern Alliance took over Kabul, the country underwent complete disintegration. Different factions of the Alliance claimed different parts of Kabul. It was so risky even to go to a neighbourhood that people knocked holes in the walls of their homes and moved down the block from hole to hole. In some parts they moved about in the underground tunnels. The people were so tired of the constant fighting, of the rockets , of the gunfire , that they danced on the streets when the Taliban rolled in .But soon after taking control , the Taliban began to harass people in the name of religion , they banned Kite Fighting and many innocent enjoyments and massacred the Hazaras in large number. Rahim Khan gives a letter addressed to Amir written in Farsi by Hassan. Hassan had written, `` Kindness is gone from the land and you cannot escape killings... . The savages who rule our `watan' don't care about human decency.'' The Talibs had killed Hassan and had moved into Amir's house. Rahim Khan urges Amir to go to Afghanistan and bring Hassan's son who is in an orphanage.

Amir goes to Afghanistan to find a completely different nation. He witnesses the signs of poverty everywhere.—Chains of villages with broken mud houses and huts, children dressed in rags. In some places the whole villages were burned down .When Amir enters Kabul, there was rubble and there were beggars everywhere. The beggars were mostly children sitting on the laps of their mother. The wars had made father a rare thing in Afghanistan. The beautiful place where Amir used to buy kites had turned into a sand castle. Not a single tree was visible; most of them were cut by the Russians as snipers used to hide in them. Amir gives some money to an old beggar in rags who turns out to be a university professor, a colleague of Amir's mother. Then the orphanage, the pitiable condition of the children there, the way a Talib official comes once in every month or two and takes away a child are all touching..Amir comes to know that Hassan's son Sohrab is taken away .He is directed to a stadium where that person comes at halftime. On the way to the stadium Amir sees a dead body near the restaurant where Amir used to go with his father for its tasty kobab. There had been a hanging. The young man dangled from the end of a rope tied to a beam, his face was puffy and blue, and his clothes were bloody. Hardly anyone seemed to notice him.

There were several pickup trucks with armed bearded men crammed into the cabs. Amir remembers how green the field was when he used to go there with his father. Now the pitch was a mess, with holes and craters, and there was no grass at all, just dirt. The players wore long pants despite the heat and it was difficult to follow the ball in the clouds of dust kicked up by the players. Young, whip-totting Talibs roamed the aisles, striking anyone who cheered too loudly. After the halftime whistle blew, a pair of red pickup trucks rode into the stadium. A woman sat in the cab of one truck, a blindfolded man in the other. A third truck loaded with stones entered. The man and the woman were forced into two holes dug at the end of the stadium. Then after a cleric spoke of Islamic rules and about the punishment to be given for adultery, a tall Taliban entered and picked up a rock from the pile of stones they had unloaded from the third truck. And, like a baseball player, hurled the stone at the blindfolded man in the hole. Amir closed his eyes and sat with his face in his hands. It went on till both the man and woman were reduced to a mangled mess of blood and shredded rags. When the bloodied corpses were tossed into the trucks a few men hurriedly filled the holes and a few minutes later, second half of the game started. There is a picturesque description of the horrible incident. A land of beauty, peace and freedom had turned into a poor barren land of cruelty, hypocrisy and fanaticism.

Thus the novel gives a realistic portrayal of Afghanistan through the various periods in its history, and in the process brings forth the cultural crisis that the country underwent.

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