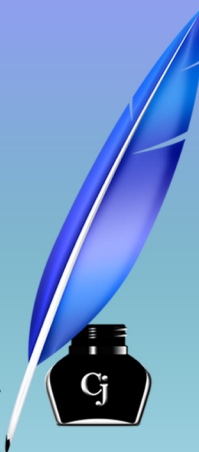


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Reinforcing the Stereotypic Binaries: Orientalist reading of Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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Abstract:

KHALED HOSSEINI has been widely acclaimed for his debut novel *The Kite Runner*, an international best-seller. The novel not only launched Hosseini into the limelight as an Afghan-American writer but also bridged the gap between Western literary audience and the culture of the Middle East.

The novel is about the friendship of two Afghan boys through the decades, and Amir, the narrator is an expatriate novelist, who like the author returns to Kabul after years of exile in California. While seemingly just a captivating story of Amir and his redemption through the heroic rescue of his childhood friend Hassan's son Sohrab, the entire plot is imbued with noxious Orientalist stereotypes and the inevitable conflict between the West and the Middle-East.

In 2006 Khaled Hosseini was honoured as a goodwill ambassador to the United Nations' Refugee Agency. And the very next year *The Kite Runner* was adapted to screen bearing the same title as the novel, presumably providing evidence that Afghans too could be people, just like you and me. This paper attempts to give an Orientalist reading of Hosseini's 2003 novel *The Kite Runner*.

Keywords:

Stereotyping, Binaries, Orientalist, Bildungsroman, Hybrid

Khaled Hosseini's debut novel *The Kite Runner* depicts a powerful and complex Afghan-American cultural identity against the backdrop of modern Afghanistan. Born in Kabul, Hosseini draws heavily on his own experience to create the setting for the novel; the characters, however, are fictional. Despite its coming from a foreign, relatively unknown Afghan author the novel was received well by Western literary audiences and held a steady spot on the *New York Times* best-seller list for over one hundred weeks. What made the success of the novel even more remarkable was how it even inspired the production of an Academy Award-nominated film of the same name. Obviously Hosseini's tale had struck an emotional nerve within readers, instigating powerful connections between themselves and the world that Hosseini describes with such blunt honesty.

Hosseini's plot shows historical realism, as the novel includes dates from 1960's to early 21st century. 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 on 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 Russian invasion in 1981, turns Kabul into a war zone, forcing many residents including Baba and Amir to escape to Pakistan. Even after the Russians had left the country, the unrest continued. In 1996 the Taliban had come to power and in the novel, Rahim Khan tells Amir that Talibs had banned kite fighting in 1996 and that in 1998, Hazaras had been massacred. Read in isolation, this story may indeed be inspiring and heart-warming, but the significance of its underlying message in the current geopolitical context cannot be ignored. Soon after the events of 9/11/2001 (terrorist attack of the World Trade Centre) images of a violent, demonic Middle East in need of humanizing was projected. Media discourses in the United States deployed useful binary paradigms for understanding complicated western relations with the Middle East. Despite its attempts to challenge these stereotypic binaries, Hosseini's novel only ends up reinforcing them.

If the historical realism in the novel is put aside, it is most often Hosseini's powerful characterization of Afghan cultural identity that continues to attract readers. Edward Said's well-known work *Orientalism*, is immensely useful in approaching problems of representation within this text. The term "orientalism" as Said defines it in his 1978 introduction, is "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience" (Said 1). Said defines an Orientalist early on in his introduction as "Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient—and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist—either in its specific or general aspects" and that "what he or she does is Orientalism" (Said 2). However, Hosseini occupying a hybrid position, being an Afghan-American only assists the imperial machine. Hence his work resists being classified as a "true" Orientalist by Said's terms.

It is important to note that the concept of Orientalism is an ideological creation that, in Said's words again, is "based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (2). Said's *Orientalism* exposed the European Universalism that takes for granted white supremacy and authority. Describing the "orient" as a western cultural construct, Said argued that it is a projection of those aspects of the West, that the westerners do not want to acknowledge in themselves, for instance, cruelty, sensuality and so on. The East is also understood as the fantastic realm of the exotic, mystical and the seductive. The Orient, Europe's other, was integral to the very formation of the European identity, it also justified the colonial presence in the East. The Orient is often used as a cultural backdrop against which to create and celebrate Western identity: a representation that echoes the Orientalist stereotypes defined by Edward Said. Over the course of the novel, the protagonist Amir actually becomes less and less "foreign" and begins to function as a sort of extension of the imperial self by using the East, in all its forms, for his own Westernized benefit. Sara Hunt elaborates on this notion that "Whereas the novel encourages Western readers to believe they are creating a "bridge of understanding" between themselves and Afghan culture, they are actually identifying with a stereotypical, or perhaps "orientalist" way of understanding the relationship between the East and the West." (Hunt 3).

In the use of a foreigner-as-protagonist Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* has close resemblance to Rudyard Kipling's 1901 novel *Kim*. This association between the two novels may prove to be a useful point of reference as to how the so-called "foreign" protagonists work as internal

Orientalists. In Kipling's novel, the protagonist Kim is living in India as the orphan son of an Irish soldier. Although he is marked by his dark skin and described as "burned black as any native," Kipling reinforces the fact that Kim is "white – a poor white of the very poorest" (Kipling 49). His occupation of both Eastern and Western spheres grant him access to both cultures. This hybrid aspect of Kim actually enables him to work as a powerful internal Orientalist. However, one important difference between *Kim* and *The Kite Runner* is that while Hosseini's Amir retains part of his Afghan identity even at the very end of the novel, Kipling insists on keeping Kim genetically and culturally "white" even after he reaches a point of maturation at the end of the novel.

Another point of similarity between *Kim* and *The Kite Runner* is in the structure of the plot, namely the bildungsroman. The bildungsroman is the name affixed to those novels that concentrate on the development or education of a central character. This genre intends to lead the reader to greater personal enrichment as the protagonist journeys from youth to psychological or emotional maturity. The protagonist's adventures can be seen as a quest for the meaning of life or as a vehicle for the author's social and moral opinions as demonstrated through the protagonist. The presence of the bildungsroman structure is in itself significant, since it is widely known as a novelistic genre present in many English novels. Its function in both *Kim* and *The Kite Runner* is to assist a Western reader in understanding the Orient.

To return to *The Kite Runner*, the Orientalist stereotyping is used in the characterization of both Amir the protagonist and Assef, the antagonist of the novel. While Western readers attempt to deal with the "otherness" of Amir through self-recognition, they rely on the Orientalist stereotypes to cast Assef into a position of Oriental inferiority. Instead of finding a reflection of themselves in Assef, the Western readers come to find a character that is "Demonic Other" represented as pagan, savage, criminal and needing reform. Thus Oriental characters are always inferior to their Western counterparts and allow the Orient to be used as a "subject" for an overall Western benefit. Amir's Western identity progresses and develops throughout the course of the novel becoming a more modern, liberal, Western character whereas Assef only develops by becoming an increasingly inferior and villainous "Oriental" character. Thus over the course of the novel, the function of the modern American West and a traditional Muslim world are juxtaposed, creating binary opposition, which in turn inflames the differences between the two opposites and ultimately sustains the dominance of Western power structures over the East.

Said distinguishes the functions of the West and the East in their relations with one another in the following excerpt:

For a number of evident reasons the Orient was always in the position both of outsider and of incorporated weak partner for the West. To the extent that Western scholars were aware of contemporary Orientals or Oriental movements of thought and culture, these were perceived either as silent shadows to be animated by the Orientalist, brought into reality by him, or as a kind of cultural and intellectual proletariat useful for the Orientalist's grander interpretative activity, necessary for his performance as superior judge, learned man, powerful cultural will (Said 208).

This passage makes it clear that the Orient can only exist in relation to the West as an “incorporated weak partner” and while observing the relationship between Amir and Hassan within the text it is obvious that Hosseini is delivering to his readers an “Orientalized” Afghan culture that uses an internal Orientalist to reflect specifically American political and psychological needs.

Analyzing the specific ways in which the components of both Amir and Assef’s cultural identity function in *The Kite Runner*, ethnic divisions and tensions, friendship and loyalty, and religion and redemption are found to be the major markers. Each of these markers is individually important, yet they are at times intricately interwoven. These particular aspects of cultural identity profoundly affect the two characters and can be depicted as reinforcing a “West versus East” binary, thus sustaining the Orientalist stereotypes. The relationship between Amir (a Pashtun) and his best friend Hassan (a Hazara) represents a major ethnic division and tension within the plot of the novel. The historical relationship between Pashtuns and Hazaras is briefly summarized towards the beginning of the novel when Amir discovers a history book in his father’s study:

[I] was stunned to find an entire chapter on Hazara history. An entire chapter dedicated to Hassan’s people! In it, I read that my people, the Pashtuns, had persecuted and oppressed the Hazaras. It said that the Hazaras had tried to rise against the Pashtuns in the nineteenth century, but the Pashtuns had “quelled them with unspeakable violence.” The book said that my people had killed the Hazaras, driven them from their lands, burned their homes, and sold their women. The book said that part of the reason Pashtuns had oppressed the Hazaras was that Pashtuns were Sunni Muslims, while Hazaras were Shi’a. The book said a lot of things I didn’t know, things my teachers hadn’t mentioned. Things Baba hadn’t mentioned either (Hosseini 9).

Amir belongs to the privileged class and is of dominant and preferred ethnicity, yet he is weak in spirit and takes advantage of Hassan’s less privileged status for his own benefit. In their later lives Hassan, on the other hand embodies the ethnic minority, physically blemished, and less fortunate companion of Amir, yet he also happens to be the more spiritual, traditional, and wholesome of the two boys. Hassan will continue to live an impoverished, though spiritually fulfilling life in Afghanistan; meanwhile Amir will eventually move to America, get an education, and settle down in San Francisco, California. As discussed earlier, this identification with a foreign character can occur in one of the two ways; the character can either become an internal Orientalist that assist the imperial machine, or the character is the Oriental subject who is used for the benefit of both the internal Orientalist as well as the West. Amir undoubtedly becomes the internal Orientalist as previously discussed and Hassan the Oriental subject for the purposes of a Western audience, reiterating the observation by Said that the Orient only exists in relation to the West as an “incorporated weak partner”.

Ethnic and social distinction plays an important role in *The Kite Runner* yet it is also easily translatable into a binary between the stereotypical “East” and “West”. Amir and Hassan’s opposing ethnic groups and Amir’s struggle to live up to his father’s expectations severely strains their friendship. In one of the scenes three older Pashtun boys confront and

threaten to beat up Amir. The ringleader of the pack and antagonist of the novel, Assef, taunts Amir by asking him how he can call Hassan a “friend” considering that he is a Hazara. ““Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns,” Assef claims. “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” (Hosseini 40). Amir nearly retorts by blurting out “He’s not my friend! ... He’s my servant!” but holds his tongue instead (41). Hassan comes to the rescue by standing up to Assef and his crew, which will later come back to haunt him, but for the time being leaves both Amir and Hassan unscathed. This pivotal point in the novel shows both Hassan’s unwavering defence of Amir and Amir’s conflict over accepting Hassan as an equal. Once again we see how ethnic tensions play an important role in characterization and also lead to the formation of binary paradigms which stereotype the characteristics of both East and West.

The above scene also illustrates the demonic portrayal of Assef who serves as a foil for Amir’s Western development. His support of racial hygiene is a recurring motif of characterization. Assef’s claim that Hazaras are “polluting our homeland” and “dirtying our blood” draws strong parallels to the ideologies of Nazi Germany and the historic figure of Adolph Hitler. ““Too late for Hitler... but not for us,” Assef warns Amir right before Hassan steps into defend his ethnic superior (Hosseini 40). This alignment of Assef and Hitler periodically resurfaces within the text, and becomes a particularly powerful image. The connection between Assef and Hitler only becomes more apparent as the novel progresses, and plays an important role in creating binary paradigms that distinguish the West from the East in the violent last encounter between Amir and Assef.

To continue with Amir-Hassan relationship, Amir becomes more resentful of Hassan as he becomes more aware of his own racial superiority, despite the latter’s unpretentious obedience and undying respect for the former. This awareness leads to Amir using Hassan’s ethnic inferiority in devastating ways to win his father’s affection. Amir’s inner conflict culminates in another encounter with the three older Pashtun boys when, after a kite-fighting tournament, Hassan is cornered and raped by Assef. When Amir accidentally stumbles upon the scene and has the chance to prevent the assault, he instead runs away for fear of losing the winning kite and subsequently the long-awaited approval of his father. This scene sets off Amir’s feelings of guilt and betrayal throughout the rest of the story, and serves as an overt example of how Hassan as an Oriental figure is exploited for the benefit of what is becoming the Westernized subject of Amir.

After Amir returns home with the winning kite, Amir’s relationship with his father temporarily improves, while his relationship with Hassan diminishes steadily and becomes increasingly strained and uncomfortable. That summer, Amir’s father throws a birthday party for Amir’s thirteenth birthday and invites over four hundred guests – including Assef and his family. At the party, Assef’s characterization is once again closely linked to Hitler. Assef’s charisma is sickening to Amir, and his birthday gift to Amir, prefaced by a confession that it’s “one of [his] favorites” is a biography of Hitler (97). These historical connections demonize the character of Assef and further widen the gap between the “Eastern” and “Western” identities. The inherent goodness of Amir’s father, Baba and evil of Assef is repeatedly reinforced for the reader in some of the most dramatic and graphic scenes of the entire book. Baba valiantly lays his life on the line to protect the women who is about to be raped, while Assef brutally rapes children and

performs gruesome public executions in the local soccer stadium. Yet, perhaps the most telling attribute if these two characters is the particular national ideologies that they express affinity for: Baba loves America, while Assef is an admirer of Hitler.

Decades later, nemesis starts taking its course. Amir's settled, established life is turned upside-down after receiving a phone call from one of his father's old business partners Rahim Khan. Amir the successful western expatriate writer has to leave his safe, idyllic existence in the U.S.; return to an Afghanistan that has been ravaged by the Russians and the Talibans; to rescue the innocent, orphaned son of his childhood friend from the incarnation of evil itself, Assef. Even more devastating, he discovers the true link between himself and Hassan: that Hassan is actually Amir's half-brother. This quest becomes Amir's penance for his past sins, while also fitting into the familiar structure of the bildungsroman which functions as a sort of gateway that makes it easy for the Western reader to begin to impose Orientalist stereotypes on the text.

Amir's pilgrimage back to Afghanistan does not leave him unscathed; by this time, Assef has joined the Taliban and resembles every bit of a demonic Taliban war-lord. Cruel and sadistic in nature, yet justified by religious fanaticism and extremism, Assef has become the ultimate antithesis to Amir's Western identity. He recalls the 1998 Hazara massacre in Mazar with pride: "You don't know the meaning of the word "liberating" until you've done that, stood in a roomful of targets, let the bullets fly, free of guilt and remorse, knowing you are virtuous, good, and decent. Knowing you're doing God's work. It's breathtaking.' He kissed the prayer beads, tilted his head" (Hosseini 277).

Assef's pro-Nazi ideologies represent the antithesis of Western liberal ideologies of Amir. Both are found to be intriguing and of great importance. This collision of ideologies between Assef and Amir leads to the actual physical fight between them in Kabul for the Hazara boy Sohrab. The following passage exemplifies how Amir's cultural identity is shaped by the ways in which he uses the modernity of the present to confront the issues of his traditional past.

"But there are things traitors like you don't understand" [said Assef].

"Like what?"

Assef's brow twitched. "Like pride in your people, your customs, your language.

Afghanistan is like a beautiful mansion littered with garbage, and someone has to take out the garbage."

"That's what you were doing in Mazar, going door-to-door? Taking out the garbage?"

"Precisely"

"In the west, they have an expression for that," I said. "They call it ethnic cleansing" (Hosseini 284).

We can also read this passage as Amir representing the progressive, modern Pashtun who travels to the West to physically escape the fanaticism of his counterparts. Once again Afghanistan and all those who belong to it have become a mere backdrop against which Amir's Western identity is celebrated, reinforcing the stereotypical binary opposition of the "West" versus the "East".

This adventurous and engrossing story neatly functions as an allegorized version of the colonial / neo-colonial /imperial imperative of “intervening “ in “dark “ countries in order to save the sub- human Others who would otherwise be lost in their ignorance and brutality. To conclude, while readers of Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* are led to believe that there is a “bridge of understanding” between the western audience and Afghan culture, they are actually identifying with a stereotypical way of understanding the relationship between the East and the West. This is also assisted by the fact that these “foreign” characters with which the Western reader identifies are in reality not “foreign” at all; they have been constructed in accordance with Western political and psychological needs. The novelistic genre of the bildungsroman provides Western readers with a familiar structure that assists them in understanding the “otherness” of the Orient, and providing a gateway that makes it easy to impose Orientalist stereotypes on the characters.

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