

On culture, clashes, and kite running essay



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On Culture, Clashes, and Kite Running In his novel, *The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini depicts his homeland Afghanistan as a host to many different cultures and classes, such as Pashtun and Hazara, Sunni and Shiite, with this dichotomy of beliefs and attributes being powerful enough to shape diverse, sometimes negative relationships amongst the characters of the novel and their behavior to each other, as well as establish that individual's identity. Each person interprets the impact of the role of belief and social status differently, while all living in the same setting, adding to their complexity and depth as a character in the novel with many different figures tied together by the same geographical and cultural conditions. Hosseini provides the reader with a wide gamut of personalities, some fitting in, and some contrasting the conservative nature of Afghanistan presented in the novel. Baba, Amir's father, is an example of an individual that stands out as a rather liberal character given the context of his setting.

Ignoring the rigid doctrine widely accepted regarding right and wrong, he boldly states: " Now, no matter what the mullah teaches, there is only one sin, only one. And that is theft. Every other sin is a variation of theft...

When you kill a man, you steal a life. You steal his wife's right to a husband, rob his children of a father. When you tell a lie, you steal someone's right to the truth. When you cheat, you steal the right to fairness..

. There is no act more wretched than stealing, Amir". (Hosseini 17) In a society where adultery was punished by death,, as seen by those being stoned in the stadium, and Mullahs hold citizens to a certain moral expectation, Baba, rather than succumbing to a dogmatic view of ethics,

finds his own meaning in how to judge the actions of others. It is because of this sense of self determination that Hosseini celebrates Baba as a well respected, well off figure, possessing an exceptionally secular nature in a God fearing society. However, his constant burden of having to pay for his adulterous act, considered one of the ultimate sins in his conservative Sunni Islamic environment, coupled with the tragedy of his wife's death leads Baba to also be portrayed as a less of a father and more of having an immature personality in the way he deals with his son.

Hosseini's purpose in this complex relationship with Amir was to highlight how different the circumstances were in Afghanistan given more extreme social conditions Americans are unfamiliar with. This conflict leads Hosseini to somewhat reconcile Baba's bad parenting as being a product of the trade-offs necessary to living in context of that particular belief system. His preoccupation with relieving his guilt prevented him from being the father Amir secretly desired him to be. Quite the antithesis of Baba, an outspoken liberal, is Assef, best described in Hosseini's eyes as a local radical. Radical not in his strict obedience to Islamic jurisprudence, but ironically in his dedication to the perversion of it, being a part of the Taliban that "reigned over years of theft, rape, murder and torture under the pretense of abiding by Islamic Law" (Sandstrom 2). He uses religion as nothing more than a pretext for the pathological cruelty he shows to others he deems more inferior, despising minorities like Hazaras who idolized the idea of ethnic cleansing practiced by Hitler and the Nazis.

The way he saw it, Hazaras "didn't look the way Afghans should look and didn't worship the way Muslims should worship" (Zabriskie 1). Despite Baba

and Assef both claiming to practice the same core Sunni Islam, both of their interpretations lead to drastically different results, with Baba being portrayed as a relative moderate in the eyes of our society today, and Assef ending up as a hypocritical, drug intoxicated, sadistic member of the Taliban movement. The stark contrast serves as a means by which to mark the extreme ends of the Afghan society at the time, Baba being one end, and Assef the other. And while Baba and Assef, both of the Pashtun race, may have varied social attitudes, their story is much different than Hassan, a Hazara. Hassan, as well as most Hazaras was a victim of discrimination, bigotry, and the unfortunate cruelty of the Afghan class structure. The Hazaras are best described as follows: " Accounting for up to one-fifth of Afghanistan's population, Hazaras have long been branded outsiders.

They are largely Shiite Muslims in an overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim country. They have a reputation for industriousness yet work the least desirable jobs. Their Asian features - narrow eyes, flat noses, broad cheeks - have set them apart in a de facto lower cast, reminded so often of their inferiority that some accept it as truth. (Zabriskie 1) The Pashtun, as well as the Hazaras, of the time were indoctrinated to believe that the Hazara were inferior because they were Shiite, a smaller sect of Islam. This minor difference came to be the pretext under which Hassan, as well as most Hazaras, were physically, emotionally, and psychologically abused by the likes of Assef and radical Taliban.

Amir's relation to Hassan was only limited because of this social barrier, in fact it was the same barrier that prevented Amir from helping Hassan when he was being abused by Assef while retrieving his kite. This cruel social

standard, imposed by a radical perversion of Islam by the religious authority of the time, actually deprived Afghanistan from the morality it sought through social order. The root behind the ethical conflicts can all be traced to how people interpret their beliefs. Despite basing it off the same substance, as in Baba and Assef's case, the result can go any way, from reserved liberalism, to blind radicalism. For Amir, most of his interpretation about the importance of cultural and religious values came from observing his father.

Baba's example was that of not possessing too much regard for traditional religious values, and more of a self determinant path, which allowed Amir to find his happiness with Soraya. Amir does occasionally revisit the realm of traditional spirituality, such as when his father gets sick, but Hosseini makes it clear by his character that he does so seldomly, and in more of a private fashion, probably more out of assuaging his sense of guilt and repenting rather than firm belief. When Amir confronts his past and tries to find a way to be good again, he realizes that his detachment from religion and culture has contributed to his problem, and becomes somewhat of a reborn Afghan in his visit back. His shifting emphasis on his beliefs and sense of patriotism are done in an attempt to find what is right for him.

" Hosseini deftly turns Amir's struggle with race into a parable for Afghanistan. Amir's prejudices contribute to his downfall, much as the Afghans' rigid adherence to tribalism led to the country's implosion after the Soviet withdrawal. (Baker 1) All these examples show different characters and different relationships; each of them being heavily influenced by their interpretation of the role of culture and belief in their daily lives. The spectrum is wide. Some, like Assef, choose to publicize and universalize their

beliefs, putting other people's lives in harm's way for the sake of their view on social order, or whatever other goals they may achieve from it. Some, like Baba, view religion as a social norm, and abide by it without letting it dictate too many walks of their life.

And some, like Hassan unfortunately, are a product of the viewpoints that others choose to adopt. Understanding the fundamental influence that culture and religion has in the Kite Runner is fundamental in comprehending and appreciating the forces Hosseini puts to work for his American audience. We, as Westerners, live in a more liberal society, with social pressures and expectations taking different shapes, like aesthetics and school performance. " In the United States, I think people try to avoid conflict, in Afghan culture, everything is about fighting. It was a very educational experience". (Semple 3) In order to walk in the shoes and understand the mindset of the people of Afghanistan, which is Hosseini's intent in writing this to an English speaking audience, one must factor in that identity can take many different shapes.

Some are born into their identities, and some must build one. In Afghanistan, Islam, as well as the cultural practices and behaviors, are an expectation for every Afghan to uphold. The extent to which each Afghan utilizes these extensions of their personality, however, is completely up to them. By keeping the scenario and conditions for all the characters as a constant, Hosseini is able to not only allow the reader to interpret the characters actions and decisions from our frame of right and wrong, but also judge each individual on the basis of what is and is not acceptable to Afghan society at the time. Works Cited Baker, Aryn.

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