

Assef: why is he the way he is?

Literature, Russian Literature



In the novel *The Kite Runner*, author Khaled Hosseini focuses on many critical parts of life. The main character, Amir, struggles to find redemption throughout the story, and finally finds it when he rescues Sohrab, his half-brother Hassan's son, from the man who also tormented Hassan in childhood. That man, Assef, is the primary external antagonist of the novel. In the beginning of the novel, he rapes Hassan because Hassan is a Hazara and refuses to betray Amir by giving Assef the kite that Amir won. When Amir returns to Afghanistan after years of living in America, in order to rescue Sohrab, he finds that Assef has joined the Taliban. Amir also learns that Assef is the man who took Sohrab and has abused him. In contrast to Amir, who constantly strives for a redemption which he feels is unattainable, Assef never feels that he needs to be redeemed. With everything that Assef did in the novel, how can he not feel guilty and not be actively seeking redemption?

Merriam-Webster defines a sociopath as “ someone who behaves in a dangerous or violent way towards other people and does not feel guilty about such behavior.” Over the course of the novel we, as readers, are given plenty of evidence that Assef is clearly a sociopath. It could be argued that because he believes that he is doing the cruel things that he does in the name of his religion, he should not be considered a sociopath. However, for the majority of what he does, he simply uses religion as a front, so it seems only to his twisted mind that he is right. The first time we see Assef do something truly cruel is when he rapes Hassan for not giving him the kite. One of his friends, Wali, says ““ I don't know...My father says it's sinful”

(Hosseini). His religion clearly doesn't condone this action, so that is not a valid explanation for his actions or lack of guilt.

Later, when Amir returns to Afghanistan, his first reintroduction to Assef is the sight of Assef stoning a man and woman who committed adultery. The majority crowd was appalled, but could do nothing to stop it, if they themselves wished to remain unharmed. This scene clearly has a religious overtone, with the cleric quoting the Koran and explaining to the masses why the couple needed to be punished. It is interesting, though, that rather than listening to the cleric speak and treating the event as a religious ceremony, Assef remains in the truck until the cleric finishes speaking. He only gets out of the truck to actually be the one who gets to throw the stones, and clearly delights in the act of killing the couple.

As westerners growing up in the time of the war on terrorism, we have almost been trained to associate Assef's cruelty and lack of empathy solely with the fact that Assef is a terrorist. We have been raised on the concept that "terrorists must be crazy, or suicidal, or psychopaths without moral feelings or feelings for others" (McCauley). Many studies, however, have discovered that this is not actually the case. In fact, "thirty years of research has found psychopathology and personality disorder no more likely among terrorists than among non-terrorists" (McCauley). This isn't to say that Assef doesn't have any psychological disorders, but rather that they are not directly linked to him being in the Taliban.

While Assef being in the Taliban doesn't directly correlate to why he is a sociopath, this factor may still help us to assess how he became to be one. In

his article “ Understanding the Sociopath: Cause, Motivation, Relationship,” Seth Meyers tries to understand and explore the mind of of sociopath. Mainly what the article emphasizes is that we really haven’t discovered very much about what sociopathy is, except a lack of empathy and morals and an overabundance of rage (Meyers). An experiment conducted in 2010 by Christopher J. Ferguson shows that around 56% of Antisocial Personality Disorder (the medical terminology for sociopathy) diagnoses are related to genetic influences (Meyers). Since there is no clear way of knowing whether Assef inherited his sociopathy, or whether it was brought about by external circumstances, it is impossible to determine why Assef is a sociopath. However, we can still apply this information to discover why Assef joined the Taliban.

In 2003, an Algerian illegally living in London named Rachid wrote an article entitled “ Inside the Mind of a Terrorist” for the Guardian. He explores what leads people to terrorism, and provides a first-hand account of what it is like to live under terrorist rule. He explains that terrorists are essentially the equivalent of gangsters (Rachid). They wear the most expensive designer brands, and receive their nicknames and “ street cred” based on things such as “ the speed at which he could kill policemen and then run away” (Rachid). The key to people becoming terrorists is not only people like Osama bin Laden recruiting people and calling them to arms, but also an underlying anger at being suppressed and abused for believing in a religion (Rachid). When all of these factors are considered, it is easy to see why a sociopath such as Assef would want to be a part of this group. Sociopaths have an “ astonishing” sense of entitlement fueled by rage and resentment (Meyers).

In a terrorist group this mentality is easily exploited, and is even considered an outstanding trait. While terrorist groups are not directly linked to psychological disorders, they are the perfect place for sociopaths indulge themselves, in the name of their religion, without risk of consequences.

There is no doubt that Assef is a sociopath or that he exploits his role in the Taliban to indulge his worst tendencies. While the terrorist groups are not breeding grounds for mental disorders, they are still definitely sanctuaries for those who veil their disorders with a front of religion. Assef never has to strive for redemption because his sociopathy allows him to detach himself and feel above redemption, while Amir, who is still connected to his emotions, has to ceaselessly strive for redemption because of his overwhelming empathy for others.

Works Cited

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