

# The kite runner: the feminist critique



## The Kite Runner: The Feminist Critique

In Khaled Hosseini's novel, "The Kite Runner", Hosseini displays how conservative Afghan society views women as being innately inferior to their male counterparts throughout the novel. He displays the lack of female agency in many ways. Hosseini uses the character of Sanabur; Hassan's mom, Khanum; General Taheri's wife and Soraya; Amir's wife to represent the many different ways sexism is carried out in the Afghan society as well as the injustices in which women in Afghanistan are subjected to on the daily basis. When analyzing Khaled Hosseini's, *The Kite Runner* through a feminist perspective it evidently showcases the impact that gender has on society and the characters through the male chauvinist perspective, sexism, enforced gender roles, double standards and patriarchy present in the novel.

In Khaled Hosseini's novel, "*The Kite Runner*", women are viewed and degraded as sexual objects by men. The first act of oppression that occurs in this novel is when Hassan and Amir are walking along a Soviet military barrack on their way back from the movie theaters and that is when suddenly a group of soldier's yell absurd things regarding Hassan's mother, Sanaubar. : " I knew your mother, did you know that? I knew her real good. I took her from behind by that creek over there. [...] What a tight little sugary cunt she had!" (Hosseini, Page 7). The Soviet Union soldiers are using very explicit language referring to Sanaubar and are completely dehumanizing her by only addressing her as some type of sex object that's sole purpose is for her to give them pleasure and not referring to her as an actual human being; an equal. The soldier also doesn't look past Sanaubar's physical attributes. Not only does he objectify Hassan and Sanaubar he also uses his

position in society as a male and as a soldier knowing well enough that he can degrade women and taunt individuals that are Hazaras who are the targeted minority in Afghanistan without any repercussions. The soldier also knows that Hassan won't stick up for himself because if he ever did he would have suffered severe consequences from the presumably armed soldiers. The second act of sexism that occurs in this novel is when Baba and Amir were fleeing Afghanistan as refugees in a truck with many other families. When they passed an Afghan-Russian checkpoint a Russian soldier dehumanizes and humiliates a woman as a form of payment or tax to let them pass the checkpoint: "The soldier wanted a half hour with the lady in the back of the truck. [...] It's his price for letting us pass, [...] he says every price has a tax." (Hosseini, Page 115). The truck with the smuggled refugees was supposed to have no trouble crossing through the Soviet Union-Afghani checkpoint due to connections that the driver Karim had. But as soon as they ran into one of the checkpoints all of the Afghan soldiers let the truck pass with no conflict, but one of the Soviet Union soldiers eyes a woman in the truck and demands that in order for him to allow the truck to pass by that he would have to have half an hour with the lady as some kind of payment. In this situation the woman was dehumanized and humiliated in front of everyone, with predatory glances that everyone in the truck saw directed at her that displayed that the soldier only viewed her as an object for him to fulfil his sexual fantasy. The soldier uses his gender and authority as an advantage to oppress and dominate the women knowing very well that she cannot reject him without any serious consequences being inflicted onto her. Without Baba's (a dominant male) interference there would have been no doubt that women would have been sexually assaulted by the corrupt

soldier. Overall in the novel it is evident that males are dominant over females. Males abuse their authority and power in order to oppress females, which leads males to see females as the inferior sex and thus treat them as subhuman.

In Hosseini's novel, "*The Kite Runner*" women's roles are dictated by men whether it be male relatives or a husband and if a woman decided to not obey they are subjected to several consequences. Men in the novel are raising their daughters to be domestic figures such as being a submissive wife, mother and daughter but they are belittling them for not having the ability to critically think: "While you're busy knitting sweaters, my dear, I have to deal with the community's perception of our family" (Hosseini, Page 360). In this case this quotation displays that men in the novel are expecting women to do great feats with little to no support. They are raising their own daughters to become submissive to men; to only exist in the domestic and private sphere. In this specific quotation the General Taheri is talking to his daughter Soraya belittling her saying that all she has to do is do household chores when he has to carry the family's reputation which he considers is the tough job. Secondly, when women get married their husbands are the ones that make the decisions for what they can and cannot do and the women are expected to obey which results in women giving up many of their hobbies that they partake in their lives in order to please their husbands and male relatives. A quote that highlights this point is: "That she could never sing in public had been one of the general's conditions when they had married [...] Khanum wanted to sing at our marriage but the general gave her one of his looks and the matter was buried." (Hosseini, Page 177). This quotation is in

reference to General Taheri when he forbid Khanum Taheri to sing in public as an agreement for their marriage, but Khanum asks him if she could bend this one rule for her daughter's marriage ceremony but he shoots her a glare and that the matter was over. This specific quotation showcases that men have the highest power out of the two sexes and that women in the novel are treated as their husbands property where the husband makes all the decisions for her and the women is expected to be submissive. Women also have no voice and say on anything that they do it has to run through a male figure and be approved before they carry on with it. They are also expected to be very obedient to their husbands like in this case how Khanum's idea to sing was shot down completely by one look from her dominant husband with Khanum not discussing or arguing the topic after.

In Khaled Hosseini's novel, female characters are subjected to many cultural stereotypes that they are required to abide by or they risk shunning or alienation from their own families, relatives and their communities leaving them with no support. Double standards are present throughout this novel more specifically when Soraya decided to run away with her Afghan boyfriend and start a new life with him many years ago. Soraya states: "Their sons go out to nightclubs looking for meat and get their girlfriends pregnant out of wedlock and no one says a goddamn thing. Oh, they're just men having fun! I make one mistake and suddenly everyone is talking [...] I have to have it rubbed to my face for the rest of my life." (Hosseini, Page 179) Over here Soraya (Amir's Wife) is seen in the novel slamming Afghan culture for its double standard between males and females. She has witnessed this double standard herself when she decided at the age of

eighteen to run away with her boyfriend off to a disclosed location and start a new life there together but she quickly became the new gossip of the Afghan community in the United States, where they would say many disrespectful phrases and terms behind her back to one another. When she decided to return back to her parents home she gets completely shunned by the Afghan community in her region. Fast forward to five years later people are still gossiping and keeping their distance away from Soraya due to the fact that she ran away off with a boyfriend which in her case is completely ignoring the cultural stereotypes and rules of the Afghan society. Moreover, this quote voices Soraya's frustrations about the double standards in the Afghan community and how males can go out and do whatever they please like go out to clubs and have relationships with people of the opposite sex and engage in sexual activity and not fear being shunned by their entire family and community but as soon as a female decides to interact with the opposite sex or have a long term boyfriend and engage in sexual activities then suddenly there is a pandemonium and they are either shunned by their communities or are the topic of gossip within the community for years to come. Throughout the novel it is very evident that Amir is aware of the double standards that are present within the Afghan community and culture. A passage in the novel reads: " I heard you write. How did she know? I wondered if her father had told her, maybe she had asked him. I immediately dismissed both scenarios as absurd. Fathers and sons could talk freely about women. But no Afghan girl – no decent and *mohtaram* Afghan girl, at least – queried her father about a young man. And no father, especially a Pashtun with *nang* and *namoos* , would discuss a *mojarad* with his daughter, not unless the fellow in question was a *khastegar* , a suitor, who had done the

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honorable thing and sent his father to knock on the door. (Hosseini, Page 128-129). Amir is well aware of his privilege as a male and that he has more leniency than other women in the novel as he states later on: “ *I cringed a little at the position of power I’d been granted, and all because I had won at the genetic lottery that had determined my sex.*” (Hosseini , Page 157) Even though Amir is an Afghani male he was brought up by a very liberal father and that is why he sees that there is a clear double standard in the Afghan community. Soraya asks him if he writes and he quickly believes that she only knows this because her father had told her that but he quickly realises that in the conservative Afghan culture fathers cannot talk to their daughters about men because that would show that the Afghan girl does not have decency for her self and the only time where it was allowed for a father and daughter talk about a man was if the man was bachelor that her father thought would be suitable for her as a husband. But on the other hand fathers and sons can talk freely about other women and nothing is presumed negatively about the son.

## References

1. Hosseini, Khaled. *The Kite Runner*. Anchor Canada, 2003.
2. <https://www.shmoop.com/kite-runner/principles-quotes.html>