

Good example of marxist criticism of the kite runner and king lear research paper...

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



The relationship between rich and poor, and the examination of class issues, in literature and art is always a fascinating proposition. Many works, through their structuring, messaging plot and characters, can be read through a Marxist lens - namely, the literary perspective which aligns with the philosophies and teachings of socialist writer and thinker Karl Marx. In Marxist criticism, works are viewed as lenses through which to view the sociopolitical worlds in which they were created (or are being viewed) (Eagleton, 1976). Art is political, particularly in a Marxist lens, and the works *The Kite Runner* and *King Lear* are no exception. Both of these works show the problematic nature of the upper class, capitalism and the bourgeoisie, each doing so in different ways. Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* tells the tale of two young boys, Amir and Hassan, who must live with the harsh realities of the oppressive Taliban regime in Kabul, Afghanistan. Conversely, William Shakespeare's *King Lear* shows the gradually disintegrating psyche and sanity of a king who absolutely refuses to give up his power. Both of these works show the unsustainability and moral bankruptcy of these divided class systems, as the world of the Taliban allows unspeakable crimes to happen to Hassan and Amir's friends and family; at the same time, *King Lear* in the titular play is a power-mad member of the elite who finds his own life meaningless, and is defeated in the face of revolution.

The Kite Runner's Quest for Egalitarianism

The Kite Runner is an inherently pro-socialist text, as it showcases the victimization of the weaker through the abuse of those in power; those who subscribe to this ideology are punished for it, while the hard-working proletariat are rewarded for their rebellion with a peaceful life in a

community. The book takes the perspective of the poor, in the face of Amir, a disenfranchised boy of what Marx would call the “proletariat” – the working class who are given little social and political agency in the society in which they live (Eagleton, 1976).

The Kite Runner has a strong theme of community recurring throughout the novel. In this context, community depends on interdependent individuals, and selfless action for the sake of the community – a Marxist utopia if there ever was one. One repeated refrain in the book is the platitude “For you, a thousand times over”; this is a statement that is said between Amir and Hassan on many occasions to illustrate their loyalty and friendship to each other (Hosseini 319). However, Amir’s primary journey is to learn to become less selfish; in the beginning of the novel, he takes advantage of Hassan’s admiration of him, learning to be individualistic in order to survive and stay out of trouble. This does keep him out of conflict, but also betrays his vow to Hassan through acts of cowardice, such as when he keeps quiet when witnessing Hassan’s rape and assault. Amir’s explanation for his motivation is far from a justification, but instead shows the folly of individualistic and selfish thinking: “I actually aspired to cowardice, because the alternative, the real reason I was running, was that Assef was right: Nothing was free in this world. Maybe Hassan was the price I had to pay, the lamb I had to slay, to win Baba” (Hosseini 82). A true egalitarian would have done something, but instead he chooses to betray his fellow man in order to get the approval of his father, Baba.

There is an imbalance of respect and equality which occurs between the major characters that is only corrected when Amir, in the latter half of the

novel, attempts to make recompense for this emotional debt after becoming responsible for his own family in America. Amir figuratively runs away from his responsibilities to the social order by fleeing to the United States (itself a symbol of individualism, selfishness and capitalism in this reading), only returning when he learns from his mentor, "There is a way to be good again" (Hosseini 325). To that end, Amir chooses to return to Kabul in order to make equal his injustices with Hassan in order to solidify his notion of community and egalitarianism.

While the micro-level conflict of the novel is the struggle of Amir to do right by his friend Hassan, even in death, the bigger conflict in the scope of the novel is the issues of the Taliban's religion-based extremism and strict control over its people. Religion is harshly criticized in the novel, as it is used as a weapon to control the masses - the Taliban government utilizes a particularly radicalized form of Islam to keep the people in line, something the main characters (especially Hassan) must struggle with. While Hassan and Sohrab are controlled by their religion, Amir's indifference to his Pashtun brethren showcases a greater level of autonomy, as he is freed from the restrictions that radical Taliban-centric Islam places on him and his people. The Marxist conflicts in *The Kite Runner* are probably best expressed by the book's depiction of Afghanistan's constantly changing social systems and leaderships. Throughout the book, Afghanistan itself goes through many regime changes, from the monarchic state of Kabul during Amir's childhood, to the creation of the republic, to the invasion of the Soviets and the squabbling between the different groups of Afghan political factions after the fact. All of these things happen in the background, not really allowing the

characters to influence events in a direct way. When the Daoud Khan coup occurs, and Amir, Hassan and Ali hear gunfire in the streets, Amir thinks, “Huddled together in the dining room and waiting for the sun to rise, none of us had any notion that a way of life had ended” (Hosseini 36). This absence of affect is doubly significant - these political changes occur between the military and religious groups, never involving the people in any significant way. Through this refusal to involve Amir or Hassan in the greater political conflicts, the novel shows the futility of each new regime change, as none of them have the capacity for settling the major problems of class conflict and egalitarianism that are still present in the country.

The social order of religious and social power is rebelled against by Amir, especially, in his search for Hassan's son Sohrab. His conflict with Assef is essentially a fight against state or religion-induced class systems; Assef has wholeheartedly embraced the harmful, evil lifestyle of the Taliban, having Hassan's son Sohrab perform sexual favors for him due to his personal power and ability to enforce his will. By becoming victorious, Amir is eventually proven to be selfless and willing to contribute to an equally-shared community (his family in America). While there are problematic elements to the idea of America being a community-based haven instead of a capitalist class system not dissimilar to the religious castes of Afghanistan, the move is still progressive in its own way. The novel adds an additional element of spite to capitalist or state-stratified governments by having the American immigration process nearly drive Sohrab to suicide. However, Amir is able to help him overcome the process by forming a community around him, allowing his newly egalitarian point of view to give the proletariat a voice

they did not have before (ending the book by running kites with Sohrab just as he did with Hassan). The phrase “ For you, a thousand times over” is repeated, solidifying his earning of that phrase (Hosseini 319).

The Kite Runner, from a Marxist point of view, showcases the trials and tribulations that befall the proletariat when they fall victim to individualism, selfishness and political or religious class stratification. Amir and Hassan are on opposite ends of the spectrum (Amir being selfish and irreligious, Hassan being religious but community-minded), but neither have power in society due to the overwhelming class forces that surround them. While Amir’s selfishness essentially costs the innocence and life of Hassan, he is able to reconcile that by facilitating Sohrab’s resistance to the class forces that oppress him. In this way, Hosseini’s novel showcases just how political systems can prey on the weak and disenfranchised, and the way communities must form in order to protect themselves and see to their own needs.

King Lear and the Power-Mad Elite

While The Kite Runner shows the indignities and vagaries inflicted upon the poor by political systems that do not support or care about them, King Lear shows what happens to the rich when they are confronted with the possibility of giving up their power. Lear, an elderly king who wants to bequeath his vast kingdom to his three daughters, suffers through a series of unfortunate and untimely events that test his temper and his vanity. To that end, he slowly succumbs to madness and even pushes away the only family he has. By the end of the play, Lear and his daughters are all dead, showing

the futility and cannibalism that occurs between elites when they are forced to give up their power and privilege. In essence, King Lear shows a Marxist revolution that happens virtually from the inside; in another, more essential way, Lear himself can also be read to be the victims of an even more ever-powerful group of elites - the gods.

The relationship between the human characters and the gods is not unlike the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in a Marxist context. One of the most important quotes from the play is Gloucester's line, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport" (IV. i. 37-38). In essence, the gods are portrayed as ever-powerful beings with no sense of morality or justice, allowing bad things to happen even to good people. Granted, there are other characters who oppose this viewpoint, like Edgar, who believes that "the gods are just" (V. iii. 169). However, this is simply a justification for the good things he himself has enjoyed as a member of Lear's court; the privilege he believes he is granted due to the charity of the rich is a hollow gesture, as it does not truly enhance his situation. The amoral world of the play showcases the lack of care the gods/the bourgeoisie has for the humans/proletariat, sending the crystal-clear message that the rich and powerful almost take pride and pleasure in subjecting the poor to horrors, if not outright ignore them altogether.

In a more direct sense, despite the god's presence as the highest social class conceivable (so entrenched in their privilege that their actions and presence are invisible in the world of the play, only discussed), King Lear is more directly about the uncertain transition between feudal power and emerging capitalism in 1600s England. King Lear is, essentially, a member of the elite

who wishes to hold on to his power instead of give it up to the proletariat. Lear himself is effectively a member of the aristocracy, holding vast tracts of land, who must give up that land just as he gives up his power. Lear is wary of the proletariat, whom he sees as “vassal” and “recreant,” lacking loyalty or motivation by being focused on leisure. As the people begin to resist his authority over his lands, his grip on power starts to loosen. He is essentially fearful of revolution, and wants to do whatever he can to maintain the old social order in opposition to the changes that might come with the rising of the people.

In the first scene of the play, Lear is choosing between two different lords, giving the audience a glimpse into the self-perpetuating aristocratic systems of power, in which people of lower rank must depend on favors handed down from on high to progress in society. However, this sense of loyalty and fealty are challenged by the ambitions of the individual, and a throwing away of the old traditions of duty and trust, facilitating a decidedly capitalist revolution.

The disconnect between Lear and the new systems at place can be seen clearly in the dowry scene, in which he favors obligation and relationships when meting out his daughter's dowries, using the capitalist ideas of market exchange to try to make his daughters put in bids for land. These bids are then exchanged for love and affection, which he uses as emotional currency in this strange market system. People are treated like commodities - as Regan says to Lear, “Prize me at her worth,” asking an individual to be ranked in terms of monetary value, which is dehumanizing (I. i. 78). The proper ideals of aristocracy are upheld by Lear's daughter Cordelia, who

rebels against this system by saying she will give him “ Nothing, my Lord,” as flattery does not mean anything compared to her actual love for him. This angers Lear, making him disinherit her for not following on the capitalist ideal of market exchange (which is itself a new violation of aristocratic law for him). In the old aristocracy, value was inherent to itself, but now it has to be compared to market prices and is always in flux; this first scene shows how corrupt and amoral the capitalist system can be.

The new sense of capitalism that invades the play is represented by Edmund, who looks at the feudal system as being the “ plague of custom,” believing that old traditions and the inherent sense of authority is foolish and out of style. He is a skeptic and a rational thinker, rejecting religion in favor of reason and logic (“ we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon the star”) (I. ii. 444-445). He is ambitious, and seeks to rise in the ranks through his own efforts, not through the inherent favor-dealing of the aristocracy, betraying whomever he feels like in order to make his own way on his life’s journey. He prophesies the old system’s breakdown when he says, “ the younger rises when the old doth fall” (III. iii. 1780).

Unlike *The Kite Runner*, where the characters learn to become a community, Lear’s refusal to consider community in favor of individual wants and needs becomes his downfall. This is also indicative of the tragic triumph of capitalism over aristocracy, which is seen as a negative from a Marxist point of view. When Cordelia returns after her disenfranchisement to bring back the aristocratic ideals of loyalty by banding together with Lear against her sisters Goneril and Regan, she makes a statement that loyalty and trust in family is more important than the empty ambitions of capitalists. While she

did not acquiesce to Lear's capitalistic contest for his love, she proves her real love to him in her healing of him: " No blown ambition doth our arms incite/ But love, dear love and our aged father's right" (IV. iv.)

All of this defense of the values of aristocracy is not to say that this existing system is not without its problems; both Lear and Edmund are in the wrong. Neither system does anything for the actual poor of Lear's kingdom, as it turns out to become a conflict between aristocrats and ambitious mid-level capitalists, with the serfs and beggars basically being invisible to them: " O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars / Are in the poorest thing superfluous. / Allow not nature more than nature needs, / Man's life's as cheap as beast's" (II. iv. 259-263). The play takes the side of the nobility, but consistently pokes holes in the just nature of their rule. When Lear is contemplating his fate and raging against the storm, he has an extreme moment of clarity where he recognizes that he has ignored the plight of the poor:

“ Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,

That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,

How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,

Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;

Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,

That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,

And show the heavens more just.” (III. iv).

Through this monologue, Lear is strangely humanized, as he is at least cognizant of the injustices he has perpetuated.

In conclusion, both *The Kite Runner* and *King Lear* have interesting things to say about the plight of the poor and the inequities of the rich in unfair capitalist and aristocratic systems. *The Kite Runner*'s Amir is a moral individualist who must learn to accept the values and responsibilities of living in a community, while being ignored or oppressed by the various religious and political systems he must live in. *King Lear* shows the horrible and selfish natures of the aristocracy and capitalists alike, by embroiling them in petty squabbles over love and emotional currency while the poor implicitly starve. In both works, it is clear that the stratified systems that keep people apart through partisan politics and class distinctions lead only to ruin and misery, and only a focus on community and egalitarianism can alleviate these injustices.

Works Cited

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