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UNVEILING POLITICAL AND PERSONAL TURMOIL: "THE KITE RUNNER" BY
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ABSTRACT

The news that Taliban had banned kite flying in Afghanistan compelled Khalid Hussein to express his inner discontent with the situation in Afghanistan and share the plight of his countrymen with the world through his novel *The Kite Runner*. Khalid Hussein is an Afghan national but had migrated to California after the Soviet invasion, with the memories of his childhood days which he had enjoyed flying kites. There are a number of autobiographical elements in the novel which are intermingled with the political and social events in the country. Hussein wishes to convey the message to the world that Afgans are a peace loving race, with a rich heritage and the world should start a dialogue with this war torn-nation to help restore the human rights of the people of this forlorn country. He portrays the peaceful days of Afghanistan and also pens the days of turmoil after the invasion by soviets, the Mujahedeen rule and Taliban occupation.

Khalid Hussein deals with the themes of betrayal, guilt, redemption, father-son relationship, love, honour, and ethnicity by depicting the conflict between the Pushtoons and Hazaras in Afghanistan. He exercises his intellectual freedom and writes about pedophilia, drug-abuse, sexual discrimination, which has resulted in making the book the most challenged book of 2008 along with being a best seller.

Keywords: Turmoil, Betrayal, Redemption, Ethnicity, Kite Runner

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Khalid Hussein had conceived the grain of the novel in his brain for about twenty years, without even having realised that it is there. He was forced to deliver it when he heard the news that Taliban had banned the flying of Kites in Afghanistan in 1999. He found the restriction cruel (Craig 1) as he had grown up flying kites while living in Afghanistan. Kite flying was his childhood past time and gave him immense pleasure. He just could not let this news go off his mind, which he found to be grossly unjust and a violation of human rights, so he began writing "The Kite Runner".

Novel writing can be compared to making and flying a kite too, as both need a careful handling a creative and artistic mind. Khalid Hussein candidly constructed and flew his own Kite in the skies of the world, so that the whole world could witness and know about the pathetic life of the people of his country

Afghanistan. Khalid Hussein's *Kite* explores the impact of cold war, the Soviet invasion, Taliban rule, and refugee issue, heterogeneity of Afghan society, tribal tradition, religious extremism and cultural clashes.

Khalid Hussein was an Afghan, but he left Afghanistan when Russia attacked Afghanistan and settled in California to forget the past tumult and start a new life. The book has a number of autobiographical elements in it. Amir the protagonist of the novel too is an Afghan national who leaves his birth place and migrates to United States where he takes up writing as a career. Like Amir's father Hussein's father too was a diplomat and had servants before leaving Afghanistan. When Khalid Hussein is questioned about the autobiographical elements in the book he replies, "Well Yes and No", when I say some of it is me, then people look unsatisfied. The parallels are pretty obvious, but I left a few things ambiguous because I wanted to drive the book clubs crazy (Craig 2).

When one hears the word Afghanistan the picture that comes to his or her mind is that of a hilly desert, dusty, dusky terrain, chaos and anarchy, war torn people, bearded men, young children with sheep and goat, presenting a picture of utter poverty. We also picture American men moving about confidently, terrorism, disaster and of course the big word Taliban resounds in our ears. This is the Afghanistan today even in the twenty first century. For the first time the history of Afghanistan has been narrated through fiction by Khalid Hussein in his novel "The Kite Runner". The country of Afghanistan, our neighbor has been devastated and destroyed over the last thirty years. The novel is set against this background of war and demolition. The novel was published in 2003 and also adopted into a film by the same name. "Over the last three decades, Afghanistan has been ceaselessly battered by communist rule, Soviet occupation, the Mujahedeen and a democracy that became a rule of terror. It is a history that can intimidate and exhaust an outsider's attempts to understand, but Hussein extrudes it simply and quietly into an intimate account of love, honour, guilt, fear and redemption that needs no dry history book or atlas to grip and absorb". (Amelia 1).

Khalid Hussein has successfully shown how Afghans have suffered at the hands of foreign invaders, and their own people, through its history, particularly in the past thirty years, through the story of two boys Amir and Hassan. Amir belongs to a majority community and is a high class well to do Pushtoon boy from Wazir Akbar Khan district of Kabul. He befriends Hassan who is believed to be the son of his father's servant Ali belonging to a poor minority Hazara community. The events of the story take place in Afghanistan in 1973, to the rule of Daud Khan a cousin of the King, the soviet invasion in 1979, the mass influx of refugees to Pakistan and the United States and the rise of Taliban in 1996. The novel has a number of themes of guilt, redemption, friendship, betrayal, father-son relationship, love, fear and sacrifice. The book "reveals the beauty and agony of a tormented nation as it tells the story of an improbable friendship between two boys from opposite ends of society and the troubled but enduring relationship between a father and a son". (Tony 1)

Hassan is a successful kite runner for Amir knowing where the kite will land without even watching it. Hassan is very devoted to Amir and says "for you a thousand times over" (Hussein 2). Both boys spend a free life flying kites. This was before the Russian attack on Afghanistan. Amir betrays Hassan by merely being a spectator and not saving Hassan when he is molested by Aseef, a sociopath, that too for merely procuring Amir's kite. Amir further betrays Hassan by falsely accusing him of theft and thus making him leave his house and getting rid of him, as Hassan again and again reminds him of his betrayal thus becoming a live reminder of his guilt. "This event leads to the end of 'happy family' and sows the seeds of self hatred that will grow in Amir as he becomes a man creating an ever-widening divide between himself and his father" (Spiegel 2). Even after Amir and his father Baba leave Afghanistan and settle in California, when the soviets attack Afghanistan, along with the feeling of being alienated and uprooted, Amir cannot forget his guilt and betrayal.

Khalid Hussein deals with the theme of father-son relationship in a very subtle manner. Amir pined for his father Baba's appreciation of him, "suffered and yearned for his affections" (Hussein, 258) but always finds him drawn more towards Hassan their Hazara servant boy. Amir tries a lot to impress his father, who criticizes him for not being athletic and lacking in something. Amir loves to spend time with Baba, at the same time tries to keep him away from Hassan. Amir adores his father for his bravery but misses his adoration of him as a son. There are references to the ninth century Persian epic the *Shahnamah* by the Persian writer Firdawsi. The chapter of *Shahnamah* that is mentioned in *The Kite Runner* refers to the story of Rustom and

Sohrab. Rustom the king and a brave warrior wounds Sohrab his rival. After a battle when Sohrab is dying, they enter into a conversation which reveals that Rustom is in fact Sohrab's long lost son. The novel quotes, "If thou art indeed my father, then has thou stained thy sword in the life-blood of thy son. And thou didst't of thy obstinacy. For I sought to turn thou unto love... But I appealed unto thy heart in vain, and now is the time gone for meeting..."(Amardeep 2).

Amir like Sohrab had been trying to gain his father's praise and in trying to do so he even betrays his best friend Hassan. Father-son relationship is important in "the beginning of the novel as the protagonist feels neglected by his father and it becomes important again at the end, in an interesting way" (Amardeep 2). In the end when Amir comes to know that Hassan was his half brother and Baba was his father he feels betrayed. From the beginning Amir is torn between feelings of admiration, fear, love and hatred for his father.

Amir goes to Afghanistan twenty years later to redeem his sin, when he comes to know that Hassan and his wife have been shot dead by the Taliban men, and their son Sohrab is in an orphanage. Rahim Khan, Amir's father Baba's friend and his childhood mentor suggests Amir that 'there was a way to be good again' (pp. 1, 192, 126). This time Amir takes a difficult journey though Afghanistan as the Taliban has taken over. He is clean shaven but has to wear a fake beard and moustache to prevent the punishment Taliban would deliver otherwise. He rescues Sohrab with a lot of difficulty, who has been taken away by the pedophile Aseef, his boyhood enemy who is now a Taliban official. Amir also feels betrayal at the hands of his father when he comes to know that Hassan was his half brother, still he forgets and forgives and tries only to redeem himself by adopting Sohrab.

Khalid Hussein demonstrates how societal structures can deny younger generations of a bright future and fill a sense of meaninglessness in their lives. How the struggle for ethical superiority between different lineages, the dominating Pushtoons and the marginalized Hazaras are spoiling the nation. He also tells us about the allegations against Taliban and Afghan males in treating their own countrymen inhumanly, pedophilia, drug abuse, sadism, ill-treatment of women. After the Taliban came into force in 1996, he reminds us of the massacres of the Hazaras by the Taliban in Mazar-e-Sharif and the execution of people who were treated very unjustly.

The book is an impressive and memorable one both as a touching personal story about how our childhood mistakes affect our adult lives. Through the first part of the kite flying days in the novel Khalid Hussein wishes to give the message that the Afghans are a peace loving people. He said that he wanted to write about Afghanistan before the bloody Soviet coup which according to him has become a forgotten history. He writes "I wanted to remind people that Afghanistan had managed to live in peaceful anonymity for decades that the history of Afghans in the twentieth century has been largely peaceful and harmonious" (Khalid 1). He says that for a long time his countrymen have been struggling to triumph over the forces of violence. He portrays Afghans as an independent, loving, proud people who have defended their country against many foreign invaders. The novel suggests to begin a conversation between Afghan people and the world. He presents Afghanistan as a country which has a great intellectual capacity, which had once hosted the Bamian Buddhas. Pre-revolutionary Afghanistan was rich in its warmth and humour and Hussein wishes to regain the same peace and harmony for his country.

A noteworthy thing about novels written after nineteen eighties is that the novelists have more than ever recognized and practised their intellectual freedom. "Intellectual freedom can exist only where two essential conditions meet, first that all individuals have the right to hold any belief on any subject, and to convey their ideas in any form they deem appropriate and second that society makes an equal commitment to the right to unrestricted access to information and ideas, regardless of the communication medium used, the content of work and of the view points of both the author and the receiver of information" (Intellectual freedom manual 1). Khalid Hussein has exercised his right to intellectual freedom to convey his beliefs and conveyed his beliefs and ideas in the form he thought them to be correct, shedding aside his timidity.

Khalid Hussein ((222) has addressed the cause of Afghan children and women boldly. He has written frankly about pedophilia or child abuse. In the novel when he goes to Aseef's house to free Sohrab a boy of about twelve, he is stunned to see Sohrab dressed in woman's clothes, with makeup and bells in his feet.

Sohrab later tells Amir that "I'm so dirty and full of sin... the bad man and the other two... did things to me" (Husseini 277). Sohrab is emotionally shattered.

When Amir meets Zaman the director of the orphanage, visited by him while searching for Sohrab he says "many of the children lost their fathers in war and their mothers can't feed them because the Taliban don't allow them to work.... There is very little shelter, here, no clean water, what I have in ample supply here is children who have lost their childhood" (Husseini 217). Later on in the novel Sohrab says "there are a lot of children in Afghanistan but little childhood". (Husseini 217)

Novel has been charged of being a pedophilic one, and even the general public considers it to be a taboo and wishes to sweep it under the carpet. Intellectuals feel that there should be a grave concern about pedophilia in our society because it destroys the innocence and purity of children. Pope Benedict and Michael Jackson too have faced charges of molesting young children. So Khalid Husseini chose not to be quiet on "the dirty little secret about Afghanistan" (Joel 1). Sociologists and anthropologists have stated that Afghanistan is the pedophilic capital of Asia. Afghan men take boys between nine and fifteen as lovers and use the term bacha-baz for the older man. It has become a custom and way of boasting about one's self.

"Addressing the cause of mistreatment of Afghan women remains a primary goal for the coalition government as it should be. But what about the boys thousands upon thousands of little boys who are victims of serial rape over many years destroying their life and Afghan society" (Joel 1). A small boy in an Afghan town told the Reuters reporter "Once I grow up, I will be an owner and I will have my own boys" (Joel 2). One reason assigned for pedophilia in Afghanistan is that women are unapproachable as they are covered from head to ankle.

When a novelist writes he does not care for the consequences. The famous soliloquy in Shakespeare's Hamlet raises the question of "to be or not to be", but for a novelist writing a novel is a question of to be as well as not to be, because he has to live as well suffer and even die with his characters, if he has to present the truth. The novel "The Kite Runner" became a best seller along with being the most controversial one. The novel has been accused of hindering the western understanding of Taliban because it has portrayed Taliban members as representatives of various evils like pedophilia, Nazism, drug abuse, sadism and being executioners exemplified through Aseef who is a Taliban official. American Literacy Association's office of intellectual freedom reported that it was one of the most challenged books of 2008, with multiple attempts to be removed from libraries, shelves, classroom on account of offensive language, explicit sexuality and unsuited to age group. (Intellectual Freedom Manual) Afghanistan's ministry of culture banned the film The Kite Runner citing the possibility that the movie's ethnically charged molestation scenes might, incite racial violence (New York Times).

The novel ends with a note of optimism for the people of Afghanistan hoping that their human rights would be protected and all class conflicts would end. Khalid Husseini (328) does so by showing Amir the high class Pushtoon man in the end not only adopting but also becoming a kite runner for Sohrab, a Hazara boy belonging to a lower class, in order to bring Sohrab out of emotional stress and saying "for you a thousand times over".

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