



Research Paper

## “At the Crossroads of Central Asia”: Analyzing the Varied Aspects of Afghan Society and Its Representation in Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* and Nadia Hashimi’s *When The Moon Is Low*

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**ABSTRACT:**

Since its emergence to power in the mid-eighteenth century, Afghanistan had come under the monarchical reign of a number of monarchs, whose consolidation of power was constantly undermined by the civil wars and foreign invasions. While researching Afghan culture, Linda Merrill, Donald Paxson, and Thomas Tobey have observed that the position of the country at the crossroads of Central Asia has subjected it to constant invasion and conquest throughout its long recorded history. This paper aims to analyze the varied facets of Afghan society in terms of its literary representations in Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* (2003) and Nadia Hashimi’s *When the Moon is Low* (2015).

**KEYWORDS:** Afghan history, Politics, Culture, Migration, Hybridity, Crisis.

Received 05 Jan, 2021; Revised: 18 Jan, 2021; Accepted 20 Jan, 2021 © The author(s) 2021.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Since its emergence to power in the mid-eighteenth century, Afghanistan had come under the monarchical reign of a number of monarchs, whose consolidation of power was constantly undermined by the civil wars and foreign invasions. While conducting research on Afghan culture, Linda Merrill, Donald Paxson, and Thomas Tobey (2006) have observed that the position of the country at the crossroads of Central Asia has subjected it to constant invasion and conquest throughout its long recorded history. The country had been an issue of rivalry between two great European powers, Britain and Russia. A series of war was fought between Britain and Afghanistan, which resulted in the defeat of the British forces in the Third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919 during the reign of King Amanullah Khan (1892-1960). After gaining independence, this reformist monarch dispatched the first Afghan envoy to Washington – an initiative that established a relationship between Afghanistan and the United States. Diplomatic relation was not established until 1934-35 when the two nations designated their ambassadors to respective missions. However, the relationship between the two nations was far from being stable and had been characterized by a certain amount of inconsistency between tension and collaboration. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the United States provided active support to the Mujahedeen resistance fighters to destroy the Soviet troops. The Soviet regime in Afghanistan ended in 1989 with the takeover of a coalition of the United States supported mujahedeen under the military leadership of Ahmed Shah Massoud. The subsequent years witnessed the Civil Wars and the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, who would become the enemy of Afghanistan shortly thereafter. Thus, the turbulent condition due to the frequent shifting of power, civil wars and foreign invasions and the lack of employment, safety and security have compelled many people to escape from their country and migrate elsewhere in search of a new life and better future. This paper aims to locate the history of Afghanistan from the second half of the twentieth century till the present time to trace its culture, demography, and ethno-religious demarcations in Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* (2003) and Nadia Hashimi’s *When the Moon is Low* (2015).

Born on March 4, 1965, in Kabul of Afghanistan, Khaled Hosseini and his family moved to Iran in 1970, returning to Kabul after six years in 1976. They couldn’t return to Afghanistan because of the Saur Revolution of April 1978, in which the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) seized power. After

the beginning of the Soviet War in Afghanistan in the 1980s, Hosseini's family migrated to the United States and settled in San Jose. His novel *The Kite Runner* (first published in 2003) is written in the backdrop of 9/11 when the Twin Towers and the Pentagon were destroyed by Al Qaeda. Following Rushdie's technique in *Midnight's Children*, Hosseini has blended the political history of Afghanistan with the personal history of the novel's protagonist Amir, vis-à-vis his journey through Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the United States. Beginning in the year 2001, the novel moves backward in time through Amir's recollections of his childhood years in Kabul, his profound friendship with Hassan and the transition of Afghanistan from monarchy to parliamentary government. In a conservative, class-based society, Hassan is raped by some 'sociopath'. Inability to save his friend (who turns out to be his half-brother) from sexual harassment is what haunts Amir throughout the existence in San Francisco. The redemption from guilt comes with his decision to visit his homeland, meet Hassan's son and bring him to the States. This *bildungsroman* incorporates not only the development of its protagonist but also that of Afghanistan under Taliban rule. With its clear narrative technique, the novel provides a picture of America in the post 9/11 world, vis-à-vis the existence of the Muslims.

Nadia Hashimi was born in New York in the year 1977 to Afghan parents who immigrated to the United States in the early 1970s. Her parents' desire to return to Afghanistan remains unfulfilled as the country becomes vulnerable and unsafe after the Russian invasion. Hashimi is raised and educated in New York and New Jersey, eventually becoming a pediatrician. She also holds the position of an advocate working for the empowerment of women in society and has authored a number of fictional works that have become international bestsellers. Her second novel *When The Moon is Low* (published in 2015) revolves around the life and hardships of an Afghani woman named Fereiba Waziri, a school teacher by profession, who finds herself widowed, without any moral and economical support, after the country comes under the control of the terrific and ruinous Taliban. After her husband's abduction and assassination in the hands of the Taliban supporters, Fereiba makes up her mind to escape from the tragic fate without which the country has nothing to offer so that her children can have a life of freedom and prosperity. Written in the first person, this *bildungsroman* recounts Fereiba's journey of escape with her children from her motherland Afghanistan, crossing the borders of different countries, till she reaches England. A tale of bloodshed, suffering and hardships, Fereiba's story moves out of the level of the personal and reflects the plight of every Afghan refugee, who is forced to leave his/her country in search of a better, safe, and relatively peaceful life ahead.

## II. A DILEMMA BETWEEN THE HOMELAND AND THE HOST LAND

'Home' is an issue of foremost concern in the literary works of the diasporic writers. The issue is more complicated for the members of Afghani ethnic communities, who were forced to leave their country due to some socio-political or historical upheavals. Haunted by the memory of the homeland, and the consequent feelings of alienation in the host land, these authors nurture a desire for the construction of an alternative 'home' that is mostly imaginative. Salman Rushdie's statement in his essay "Imaginary Homelands" is significant in this respect:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or immigrants and expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back...our physical alienation from almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost, that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind (10).

Moreover, through their writings, the diasporic writers want to make people aware of the hardships and sufferings that the people of their country had faced. Therefore, it can be argued that both Hosseini and Hashimi through their respective works want to present a picture of their country and the plight of the people so that the world knows about their history and the condition through which the citizens underwent.

## III. HISTORY AND POLITICS

History forms an integral part of the narratives of escape, migration and trauma. Both *The Kite Runner* and *When The Moon is Low* represent the history of modern Afghanistan since the 1960s, when Mohammed Zahir Shah was on the Afghan throne. In *The Kite Runner*, Amir's father's birth coincides with the beginning of the reign of Zahir Shah in 1933. During the reign of this diplomatic and generous monarch, Afghanistan has experienced political stability, economic prosperity and social peace, and this is reflected in Amir's recollections of his country towards the beginning of the tale of his life. His rule ends abruptly during his absence from the country, as he is overthrown by his cousin and the former Prime Minister Mohammad Daoud Khan in 1973, over the course of a single night, the country becomes a republic with Daoud as its President. Amir recalls:

For the next couple of years, the words *economic development* and *reform* danced on a lot of lips in Kabul. The constitutional monarchy had been abolished, replaced by a republic, led by a president of the republic. For a while, a sense of rejuvenation and purpose swept across the land. People spoke of women's rights and modern technology (40).

During this time, the country is found to dominate over the citizens through the “ideological state apparatuses”. Gradually, the political unrest and internal conflicts are found to develop which pave the way for the empowerment of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), the members of which would overthrow the government of Daoud and come to power in April 1978. The end of 1979 experiences the Soviet invasion and an outbreak of a violent war which leads to the destruction of the country and its resources. In *When The Moon is Low*, Fereiba’s marriage coincides with the Russian invasion. She recalls:

“Mahmood and I were married in 1979, a year after our engagement and just as Soviet Union’s first baby-faced soldiers landed their heavy boots on Afghan soil...When Saleem turned four years old, the last of the Soviet troops retreated. It was 1989. We prayed for tranquility”(89, 91).

During this time, thousands of Afghanistan citizens flee to the neighbouring countries, such as Iran and Pakistan, and a portion of people migrated to the United States. Amir and his father leave their family home in the darkness of the night to escape the torturous fate after the Russian invasion, in a truck and land up in Pakistan, from where they migrate to Fremont in California.

The mid-1990s witnessed the beginning of the destructive and rigid Taliban regime, when people were deprived of almost every fundamental right, including the right to survive, and dominated the country and its people through the mode of repression. *When The Moon is Low* represents the condition of people at that time through Fereiba’s words :

The new rising regime, the Taliban insisted that women dress more modestly and men grow beards in accordance with Islamic tradition. Every day, they issued a new set of decrees and meted out swift punishment for those who disobeyed. As a woman, I was not allowed to teach. Girls were not permitted in school (93).

Her husband becomes the target of the Taliban because of his subversive opinions and is captured and assassinated by them. The third half of *The Kite Runner* represent Afghanistan at the wake of the twenty-first century when the Taliban regime is established in a powerful form and has caused vehement massacre. The novel refers to the murder of innocent people, and the destruction of the resources which result in a rapid increase of beggars and orphaned children who have nothing except the vast sky upon their heads and the muddy streets beneath their feet. Assef, with whom Amir shares a relationship of enmity, becomes the ultimate prototype of the Taliban and his torture that he does upon Amir and Sohrab is reflective of the Taliban’s’ cruel tortures upon the common people.

#### IV. RELIGION AND CULTURE

The Islamic religion was introduced in Afghanistan in the seventh century by the Arabs. However, the country was made the center of Islamic power and civilization at the beginning of the eleventh century by the Turks. A major portion of the Afghan population is Muslim, except a limited number of Sikhs and Hindus. The Afghan Muslim population is divided into two denominations: Sunni and Shia. Through their research, Merrill, Paxson, and Tobey have found that the Sunni Muslims cover approximately 84% of the Afghan population, while the Shia’s are the minority groups, holding 15% of the total Muslim population. Being the minority, Shias have to face immense oppression and marginalization in the hands of the dominating Sunni populace.

Despite the divisions, the Islamic rituals are celebrated with extreme vigour. The most notable of the festivals are *Eid al Fitr* and *Eid –e- Qurban*. While *Eid al Fitr* marks the end of Ramadan, the month of ritual fasting associated with the lunar calendar, *Eid –e- Qurban* ( also known as *Eid al-Adha*) marks the preparation for hajj, which takes place during the 12<sup>th</sup> month of the Muslim calendar, between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> days. In *The Kite Runner*, Amir recalls the celebration of Eid in his home country:

On Eid, the three days of celebration after the holy month of Ramadan, Kabulis dressed in their best and newest clothes and visited their families. People hugged and kissed and greeted each other with “*Eid Mubarak*”. Happy Eid. Children opened gifts and played with dyed hard boiled eggs (41).

There are certain games which have become symbolic and integral part of Afghan culture. One of such notable games would be “Kite fighting” or “Fighter kites”, which is a very “competitive pastime in Afghanistan and is a source of great pride for the winners” ( Merrill, Paxson, and Tobey 2006). These participants are generally men whose masculinity is often determined in terms of their performances in the play. This game of “Kite fighting” occupies a central place in Hosseini’s novel, where Amir compares the game to a war:

“Every winter, districts in Kabul held a kite–fighting tournament. And if you are a boy living in Kabul, the day of the tournament was undeniably the highlight of the cold season.... In Kabul, fighting kites was a little like going to war” (46,47).

Amir and Hassan in the competition and it is Amir who becomes the winner. The day of kite-fighting in the novel is also the day in which the friendship and fraternity in the Amir- Hassan relationship alters as Hassan is sexually exploited by the neighbouring mafia, Assef.

Marriage is another significant aspect of Afghan culture. In the narrative concerning her life, Fereiba gives a detail of the marriage rituals, the bride-seeing, *bagdan*, *shirnee*, and the ultimate *nikah*. Amir talks about his marriage with Soraya in *The Kite Runner*:

I remember our *nika*. We were seated around a table, Soraya and I dressed in green – the colour of Islam, but also the colour of spring and new beginnings... The Mullah questioned the witnesses and read from the Koran. We said our oaths. Signed the certificates(156).

## V. RACE, ETHNICITY AND RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic society, consisting of a wide variety of ethnolinguistic groups, and this has been a cause of conflict among the people, ultimately hindering their relationship. The dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan, that covers more than half of the entire Muslim population, is Pashtun. Although the conflict persists among the members of every ethnic group, the conflict between the Pashtuns and the Hazaras has taken a serious turn over the centuries. The source of the conflict can be traced back to the latter half of the nineteenth century when Abdur Rahman Khan became the ruler of Afghanistan (in 1880). Being a Pashtun himself, he was in favour of the people of his own ethnic identity, and despised the Hazaras and restricted them to the mountainous areas of Kazarsjat.

Religion was another source of conflict between the two groups because the Pashtuns belong to the Sunni sect while the Hazaras are the Shias. Moreover, the physical features of the Hazaras, their Mongoloid looks, have made them easily distinguishable from the rest of the Afghan populace. Geographical location and language, occupation and modes of living, are the other important factors that affected their relationship. Pashtuns inhabit the South-east and the Northeast parts of Afghanistan, while the Hazaras reside in the central mountainous region of the country. While the Pashtuns speak in the Pashtu language, the Hazaras speak in a Persian dialect. Generally, the Pashtuns occupy the upper class and are mostly merchants, traders, farmers and animal breeders. On the other hand, the Hazaras occupy “the lowest socioeconomic bracket in Afghanistan” (Merill, et al), and are generally very poor and practice subsistent farming, herding, or work as domestic help. These factors have resulted in the marginalization and oppression of the Hazaras and render them to the status of the ethnic ‘other’.

In *The Kite Runner*, the main characters, Amir and Hassan, represent the two ethnic groups of Afghanistan: Pashtun and Hazara. An heir of a wealthy and socially respectable Pashtun family, Amir enjoys every privilege that has been denied to his friend and playmate Hassan. While Amir goes to school in his father’s “black Ford mustang” to taste the fruit of education, “Hassan stayed home and helped Ali with the day’s chores: hand-washing dirty clothes and hanging them to dry in the yard, sweeping the floors, buying fresh *naan* from the bazaar, marinating meat for dinner, watering the lawn” (26). Because of this ethnic difference, Hassan becomes a constant victim of physical and verbal assaults by the local mafias; he is raped by the local mafia Assef and later killed by the Taliban because of his Hazara identity.

## VI. CLASS-DIVISIONS

In every social structure, class is an important factor which determines a person’s position in society. Afghanistan is not an exception in this aspect. The characters of the two novels *The Kite Runner* and *When The Moon is Low*, represent the lives of different classes of people and their condition in society. In *The Kite Runner*, Amir’s description of his house in the Wazir Akbar Khan district reflects the lives of the Afghan aristocracy, in all its extravagances, who led a luxurious lifestyle and threw occasional parties to indicate their wealth. The lives of the respectable middle-class people are represented by Hashimi through its protagonist whose premarital life is spent in a well-to-do agricultural family. Her social position gets elevated after marriage to a government official, working in the Ministry of Water and Electricity, and after securing the job of a school teacher. The condition of the people of poor economic background is represented by Hosseini through Ali and his son Hassan who have to work as domestic help in the house of the wealthy people. In her study of “*The Kite Runner From a Marxist Perspective*”, Kristine Putz views the novel as a narrative that revolves around the conflict-ridden relationship between the two classes of people in Afghanistan, the Pashtun and the Hazaras. Amir and Hassan become the ultimate prototype of the two classes, and the relationship they share is defined by their social status. In this respect, Putz observes that Amir “is the Kite flyer, while Hassan is the Kite runner” (1). Thus, the relationship between people of different ethnicity reflects the social and class differences that exist between the two races.

## VII. WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN

In a country like Afghanistan, which is ridden with conflict, is vulnerable and falls an easy prey to foreign invasions, women are subjugated to the status of immense marginality and often, invisibility. In the first part of *The Kite Runner* that is set in Afghanistan, there is hardly any reference to a woman, except an occasional description of Amir’s mother and Hassan’s mother, through the protagonist’s recollection. It is



interesting to note that both of these women are physically absent as characters, since Amir’s mother has died after giving birth to him, and Hassan is left by his mother within a week of his birth. Again, these two invisible women are found to represent the two ethnic classes: while Amir’s mother Sofia Akrami was a Sunni and “a highly educated woman, universally regarded as one of Kabul’s most respected, beautiful, and virtuous ladies”(15), a teacher and a poet, Hassan’s mother was a Hazara, a Shia Muslim with “dishonorable reputation” who eloped with a troop of performers after giving birth to a son. The absence of the real and alive women from the first half of the novel represents the overtly patriarchal nature of Afghan society, where man becomes the ultimate pillar of the family. Hashimi presents a slightly different picture, in terms of the representation of women and their position in society. She has given a comparatively respectable and prominent position to women, through her depiction of women like Fereiba, who has received education, proper training and has earned the job of a teacher. However, her condition as a respectable social being alters significantly as the Taliban came to power when women are deprived of every right and power. As a result, she is forced to leave her job, and later her motherland. These two novels represent the two different facets of the contemporary Afghan society: while Hashimi represents a more liberal social structure before the beginning of the Taliban regime, where women have a position and are empowered to a certain extent, Hosseini represents a more rigid and conservative patriarchal society in the first half of the novel, where women are deprived of presence, voice, and position.

### **VIII. ESCAPE AND MIGRATION**

The turbulent condition of the country and lack of security has prompted many people to escape from their country in search of a better future. In *The Kite Runner*, Amir and his father flee from their home town in the darkness of the night in a truck that smuggles people “out of *Shorawi*-occupied Kabul to the relative safety of Pakistan” (103), ultimately landing up in Peshawar. After a brief stay at Peshawar, Amir and his father lands up in Fremont, California, and are granted asylum in the United States. The route of escape and journey are comparatively easy than that of Fereiba and her children in *When The Moon is Low*. The sudden assassination of her husband and lack of social, moral, and economic support incite Fereiba to escape her motherland, accompanied by her three children, in a night bus that takes them to the extreme west of Afghanistan, Herat, from where they start their journey towards England, passing by and occasionally halting in small towns of Iran, Turkey, and Greece, Italy and France, till they reach London. The passage of their journey is loaded with obstacles and difficulty since the family has no official documents and easy prey to the customs officials.

### **IX. AFGHANS IN FOREIGN COUNTRIES**

Once people step out of their known territory, they have to face and go through a series of complications, crises and adverse situations. Without any valid identity proof or documents, only with a fake passport, Fereiba dares to take the risk of taking her children out of Afghanistan in order to give them a better and promising life. Her journey to England is accompanied by certain lacks- lack of food, money, prop guidance- sometimes she has to spend the nights under the sky with her young children as refugees. On the way, her son Saleem comes across the police officers who arrest him as an illegal trespasser and sends him back to Turkey, resulting in his dispersal from the rest of the family. Saleem has to spend his days as a farmworker and refugee, till he crawls into the trucks that would take him to the port cities of Greece and Italy, from where he has to struggle to find a way out to reach France, the country which would connect him to his family in England. Meanwhile, Fereiba reaches England with the two of her children, and gets reunited with her family, and hopes that her son will be able to reach them one day. In comparison to Fereiba, Amir and his father’s journey to the States are easier because of their stable economic condition and valid official documents. Their real hardship begins in America, where they face the actual poverty and crisis, the things with which they were not familiar in Afghanistan. They have to reside in a gloomy one-room flat, and his father takes up a job in the neighbouring gas station, working for twelve hours a day, While Amir studied in a high school and receive a graduation degree They would visit the weekly Flea market, where they give stall and sell certain things to get some extra money. However, their condition improved once Saleem completes his study, secures a job for himself in the security department of San Jose State, and was later joined by his wife Soraya who would work as a teacher.

### **X. CONCLUSION**

Thus the condition of Afghan people, irrespective of class, residing in and outside Afghanistan is loaded with crisis, disillusionment, poverty, and homelessness. They are devoid of a safe shelter in their home country since their country has been destroyed by numerous transfers of power and at times violent and cruel regimes. Their dream of a better and prosperous life and desire to form a home in foreign lands would remain unfulfilled since the country would consider them as social hazards, the burdens and would never be accepted as a part of the host culture. Their condition, and also the condition of people of every nationality who leave their

home country in search of a new life abroad is almost like that of the mythical figure *Trishanku* (Parameswaran xlv) who was cursed to inhabit a place between heaven and earth and, did never get either of the two.

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