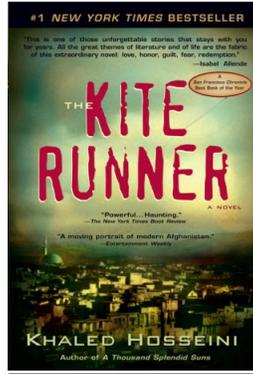


# ***"The Kite Runner"* by Khaled Hosseini : Historical, Political and Cultural Contexts**



*Project*

*Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the completion of*  
**Refresher Course in Comparative Literature**

*By*

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2010

## DECLARATION

I, **N. Shamnad**, do here by declare that this project entitled **“The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini: Historical, Political and Cultural Contexts”** has not been submitted by me for the award of any degree, diploma, title or recognition before.

N. Shamnad

Kariavattom

25 January 2010

## ***"The Kite Runner"* by Khaled Hosseini : Historical, Political and Cultural Contexts**

### CONTENTS

	Title	Page No.
1	<i>The Kite Runner</i>	4
1.1	Objectives of the study	4
1.2	Introduction	4
1.3	Khaled Hosseini – Biography	5
1.4	Plot of the Novel: <i>The Kite Runner</i>	5
1.5	Characters	8
1.6	Reception of the Novel	11
1.7	Controversies	11
1.8	<i>The Kite Runner</i> : Film	12
1.9	Key Literary Elements	12
2	The Contexts of " <i>The Kite Runner</i> "	14
2.1	Historical events of Afghanistan	14
2.2	Ethnic Diversity in Afghanistan	15
2.3	Historical and Political Contexts of " <i>The Kite Runner</i> "	16
2.4	Cultural Contexts of " <i>The Kite Runner</i> "	18
2.5	Conclusion	19
3	Sources	20

# 1 *The Kite Runner*

*The Kite Runner* is an English novel by the San Francisco-based Afghan-American writer Khaled Hosseini. Published in 2003 by Riverhead Books, it is Hosseini's first novel which has sold over 3 million copies worldwide<sup>1</sup>. It was a no.1 New York Times best seller. *The Kite Runner* was adapted into a highly-acclaimed feature film directed by Mark Forster (Monsters Ball, Finding Neverland) with screenplay by David Benioff (Troy) which was released worldwide in December 2007.

## 1.1 Objectives of the Study

- To analyze the plot and theme of the novel: "*The Kite Runner*"
- To explore the key literary elements in the novel
- To examine the characters and their role in the plot development
- To find out the historical, political and cultural contexts of the novel
- To investigate the scope of the novel in the present Afghanistan

## 1.2 Introduction

*The Kite Runner* tells the story of Amir, a young boy from the Wazir Akbar Khan district of Kabul, Afghanistan who betrayed his best friend Hassan (by running away when bullies persecuted Hassan), the son of his father's Hazara<sup>2</sup> servant, and lives in regret. The story is set against a backdrop of tumultuous events, from the fall of the monarchy in Afghanistan through the Soviet invasion in 1979, the mass exodus of refugees to Pakistan and the United States, and the rise of the Taliban<sup>3</sup> regime. There are various interpretations of this book, ranging from the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.sjsu.edu/ugs/reading/>

<sup>2</sup> Hazaras constitute 9% of Afghanistan's population and are considered to be on the lower end of the socio-economic scale.

<sup>3</sup> The Taliban is a political and religious faction and militia that came to power in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s. Following the Soviet Union's 1989 withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban (Persian: "Students") arose as a popular reaction to the chaos that gripped the country. In 1994–95, under the leadership of Mullah Mohammad Omar, the Taliban extended its control in Afghanistan from a single city to more than half the country, and in 1996 it captured Kabul and instituted a strict Islamic regime. By 1999, the Taliban controlled most of Afghanistan but failed to win international recognition of its regime because of its harsh social policies - which included the almost complete removal of women from public life - and its role as a haven for Islamic extremists. The Taliban's refusal to extradite Osama bin Laden to the U.S. following the September 11 attacks in 2001 prompted the U.S. to attack Taliban and Al-Qaeda forces in Afghanistan, driving the former from power and sending the leaders of both groups into hiding.

way in which the Taliban treated its "own" people to the relationship between the two boys being a representation of the microcosms of society.

### 1.3 Khaled Hosseini – Biography

The Afghan-American writer Khaled Hosseini was born on March 4, 1965. He is the oldest of five children. His father worked for the Afghan Foreign Consul and his mother taught Farsi and history at a girls' high school in Kabul. Kabul, Afghanistan is the boyhood home of Khaled Hosseini, as it is for Amir, his protagonist in "*The Kite Runner*". He also incorporates in his story the same time period in which he, the author, grew up – the 1960s through the present day. In the early 1970s, Khaled's family moved to Tehran, Iran when his father was assigned to a diplomatic post at the Afghan Embassy in Iran. They returned home to Kabul in 1973. In 1976 his family moved to Paris, France, where his father was a diplomat at the Afghan Embassy. They were to return home to Afghanistan in 1980, when the Russians invaded his country. His father was recalled home after the invasion, but decided to, ask for political asylum in the United States and received it. As a result, Hosseini ended up in San Jose, California. They struggled to make ends meet for a while, as they had lost all of their property in Afghanistan and had to start over. He now lives in California, where he works as a doctor. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is the second novel written by Khaled Hosseini<sup>4</sup>. The novel has sold over a million copies in the UK since its hardback publication in May 2007. Khaled Hosseini's novel, *The Kite Runner*, has been voted as the Reading Group Book of the Year in 2008. Hosseini's popularity with reading groups continues as his second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, came in second<sup>5</sup>.

### 1.4 Plot of the Novel : *The Kite Runner*

#### Part I

Amir, a well-to-do Pashtun<sup>6</sup> boy, and Hassan, a Hazara and the son of Amir's father's servant, Ali, spend their days in a peaceful Kabul, kite fighting, roaming through the streets and being boys. Amir's father (who is generally referred to as *Baba*, "*daddy*", throughout the book) loves both the boys, but seems critical of Amir for not being manly enough. Amir secretly fears his

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.khaledhosseini.com>

<sup>5</sup> [www.readersgroupprize.com](http://www.readersgroupprize.com)

<sup>6</sup> Pashtuns are the dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan because they are the presumed majority of the population

father blaming him for his mother's death during childbirth. However, he has a kind father figure in the form of Rahim Khan, Baba's friend, who understands Amir better, and is supportive of his interest in writing stories. Amir tells us that his first word was 'Baba' and Hassan's "Amir," suggesting that Amir looked up most to Baba, while Hassan looked up to Amir.

Assef, a notoriously mean and violent older boy with sadistic tendencies, blames Amir for socializing with a Hazara, which is, according to Assef, an inferior race that should only live in Hazarajat<sup>7</sup>. He prepares to attack Amir with his brass knuckles, but Hassan bravely stands up to him, threatening to shoot out Assef's left eye with his slingshot. Assef and his henchmen back off, but Assef says he will take revenge.

Hassan is a successful "*kite runner*" for Amir, knowing where the kite will land without even watching it. One triumphant day, Amir wins the local tournament, and finally Baba's praise. Hassan goes to run the last cut kite, a great trophy, for Amir saying "For you, a thousand times over." Unfortunately, Hassan runs into Assef and his two friends. Hassan refuses to give up Amir's kite, so Assef exacts his revenge by raping Hassan. Hassan did not give up the kite because he wanted Amir's respect. Wondering why Hassan is taking so long, Amir searches for Hassan and hides when he hears Assef's voice. He witnesses the rape but is too scared to intervene. He feels that his cowardice in Hassan's rape would destroy any hopes for Baba's affections, so he let it be. Afterwards, for some time Hassan and Amir keep a distance from each other. Amir reacts indifferently because he feels ashamed, and is frustrated by Hassan's saint-like behavior. Already jealous of Baba's love for Hassan, he worries if Baba knew how bravely Hassan defended Amir's kite, and how cowardly Amir acted, that Baba's love for Hassan would grow even more.

To force Hassan to leave, Amir frames him by planting a watch and some money under Hassan's mattress; Hassan falsely confesses. Baba forgives him, despite the fact that, as he explained earlier, he believes that "*there is no act more wretched than stealing.*" Hassan and his father Ali, to Baba's extreme sorrow, leave anyway. Hassan's departure frees Amir of the daily reminder of his cowardice and betrayal, but he still lives in their shadow and his guilt.

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<sup>7</sup> A central Afghanistan mountain region

## Part II

Five years later, the Soviets invade Afghanistan. Amir and Baba escape to Peshawar, Pakistan and then to Fremont, California, USA, where Amir and Baba, who lived in luxury in an expensive mansion in Afghanistan, settle in a run-down apartment and Baba begins work at a gas station. Amir eventually takes classes at a local community college to develop his writing skills. Every Sunday, Baba and Amir make extra money selling used goods at a flea market in San Jose. There, Amir meets fellow refugee Soraya Taheri and her family; Soraya's father, General Taheri, who used to be a high-ranking officer in Afghanistan, has contempt of Amir's literary aspiration. Baba is diagnosed with terminal small cell carcinoma but is still capable of granting Amir one last favor: he asks Soraya's father's permission for Amir to marry her. He agrees and the two marry. Shortly thereafter Baba dies. Amir and Soraya settle down in a happy marriage, but to their sorrow learn that they cannot have children.

Amir embarks on a successful career as a novelist. Fifteen years after his wedding, Amir receives a call from Rahim Khan, who is dying from an illness. Rahim Khan asks Amir to come to Pakistan. He enigmatically tells Amir, "*There is a way to be good again.*" Amir goes.

## Part III

Amir went to Pakistan and met Rahim Khan. From Rahim Khan, Amir learns the fates of Ali and Hassan. Ali was killed by a land mine. Hassan had a wife, named Farzana, and a son, named Sohrab, and had returned to Baba's house as a caretaker at Rahim Khan's request. One day, the Taliban ordered him to give up the house and leave, but he refused, and was murdered, along with Farzana. Rahim Khan reveals that Ali was not really Hassan's father. Hassan was actually the son of Baba, and therefore Amir's half-brother. Finally, Rahim Khan tells Amir that the true reason he has called Amir to Pakistan is to go to Kabul to rescue Hassan's son, Sohrab, from an orphanage.

Amir returns to Taliban-controlled Kabul with a guide, Farid, and searches for Sohrab at the orphanage. In order to enter Taliban territory, Amir, who is normally clean shaven, wears a fake beard and moustache, otherwise the Taliban would exact Sharia punishment against him. However, he does not find Sohrab where he was supposed to be. the director of the orphanage tells them that a Taliban official comes often, brings cash, and usually takes a girl back with him. Once in a while however, he takes a boy, recently Sohrab. The director tells Amir to go to a

soccer match, and the man making speeches at half-time is the man who took Sohrab. Farid manages to secure an appointment with the speaker at his home, by saying that he and Amir have "*personal business*" with him.

At the house, Amir has a meeting with the man. The man in sunglasses reveals himself to be Assef, Amir's childhood nemesis. Assef is aware of Amir's identity from the very beginning, but Amir doesn't realize it is Assef sitting across from him until Assef starts asking about Ali, Baba, and Hassan. Sohrab is being kept at the home where he is made to dance dressed in women's clothes, and it seems Assef might have been raping him. (Sohrab later confirms this saying, "I'm so dirty and full of sin. The bad man and the other two did things to me.") Assef agrees to relinquish him, but only for a price - cruelly beating Amir. However, Amir is saved when Sohrab uses his slingshot to shoot out Assef's left eye, fulfilling the threat his father had made many years before.

Amir tells Sohrab of his plans to take him back to America and possibly adopt him, and promises that he will never be sent to an orphanage again. However, US authorities demand, among other things, paperwork as evidence of Sohrab's orphan status. After decades of war, this is all but impossible to get in Afghanistan where, as Amir says, many deceased aren't documented with a death certificate because they never even had a birth certificate. Amir tells Sohrab that he may have to break his promise about sending him to an orphanage, although, he explains, it would be a temporary measure to enable Amir and Soraya to adopt him. Upon hearing this, Sohrab attempts suicide. Amir eventually manages to take him back to the United States without placing him in an orphanage, and introduces him to his wife. However, Sohrab is emotionally damaged and refuses to speak or even glance at Soraya. This continues until his frozen emotions are thawed when Amir reminisces about his father, Hassan, while kite flying. Amir shows off some of Hassan's tricks, and Sohrab begins to interact with Amir again. In the end Sohrab only shows a lopsided smile, but Amir takes to it with all his heart as he runs the kite for Sohrab, saying, "For you, a thousand times over."

## 1.5 Characters

- **Amir** — the main protagonist, narrator of the novel, said to be born in 1963, in Kabul, who begins as a well-to-do Pashtun boy in monarchical Afghanistan and later migrates to America following the Soviet invasion. Amir is Hassan's half-brother; however, Amir

does not learn of their relationship until much later in his life. Hassan never learns of the relationship.

- **Hassan** — a childhood friend of Amir, although Amir never explicitly admitted to this. He is described as having a China doll face, green eyes, and a cleft lip. Hassan is first thought to be the son of Ali (Baba's Hazara servant and childhood friend) and Sanaubar; later in the story, Hassan is revealed to be the illegitimate son of Baba and Sanaubar. Hassan died without ever knowing about the truth of his paternity. Hassan has always been loyal to Amir.
- **Assef** — a sadistic and sociopathic teenager from Amir's neighborhood in Kabul, the main antagonist. He is the son of an Afghan father and a German mother and ironically, given that he is of mixed origin, an advocate of Pashtun dominance over the Hazara. As a teenager, he rapes Hassan. After the rape, he shows up at Amir's birthday party to give him a book on his great hero, Adolf Hitler. As an adult, he repeatedly rapes Hassan's son, Sohrab, and numerous other young children of both sexes. Neither act, however, seems to be a matter of sexuality as much as of dominance, as there does not seem to be any feelings of lust, at least during Hassan's rape. Many years later, he becomes an executioner and pedophile, when he is a part of the Taliban.
- **Baba** — the father of Amir and Hassan. He is said to be born in the year 1933 (when the Afghan king begins his 40-year reign). He is described as a big, strong, healthy looking man with wild brown hair and beard. Baba is depicted to be of about 1.96 meter (6'5") in height. He loves throwing parties (when he had a large house and many friends in Kabul), and is known for his strength. (He is said to have fought with a black bear and won the fight, in his younger years). Baba is a successful business man and a benevolent force in the community, helping many other people establish businesses for themselves and constructing an orphanage. Holding a moral faith that considered sin only what could be explained as a form of stealing from one's fellow man, he does not endorse the kind of religiosity demanded by the clerics in the religion classed attended by Amir in school. During the book, Baba seems to be a bit disappointed in his son Amir, whom he wishes to be as much of a man as he is. However, his son only reads books and lets others fight off bullies for him. After leaving Afghanistan for America, he ages quickly and dies at

fifty-three, in 1987, of cancer. He lives long enough, though, to see his son Amir marry a young Afghan woman called Soraya. Many people attend his funeral.

- **Ali** — Baba's servant. He had been Baba's friend since he was adopted by Baba's father, a renowned judge, after his parents had been killed by a careless driver. He is initially thought to be the father of Hassan. Before the events of the novel, he had been struck with polio, rendering his right leg useless. Because of this, Ali was constantly tormented by children in the town. He was killed by a land mine after Baba and Amir left Afghanistan.
- **Rahim Khan** — Baba's business partner and best friend in Afghanistan. He later tells Amir about Baba being Hassan's actual father. Amir liked him as a child, also because he was the only adult to encourage him to write, and Rahim Khan is also the one who invited Amir back to Pakistan to pick up Sohrab. Later in the story, Rahim Khan goes off alone leaving a letter to Amir telling him not to find him. He dies peacefully knowing he has successfully made Amir the man Baba wanted him to be.
- **Soraya** — an Afghan woman living in Fremont, California with her parents, Afghan general Taheri and his wife. She marries Amir, having met him at the weekly flea market where Amir and his father as well as the Taheris had been selling items gotten at area yard sales to improve their families' incomes (Gen. Taheri lives mainly off government welfare, considering himself too good for ordinary work and always awaiting a call back to his former position which eventually, after the overthrow of the Taliban, happens). Soraya wants to become a teacher. Before meeting Amir, she ran away with an Afghan boyfriend in Virginia, which, according to Afghan tradition, made her unsuitable for marriage. Because Amir also had his own regrets, he loved and married her anyway. Soraya desperately wants to have children but cannot conceive a child, attributed to "Unexplained Infertility".
- **Sohrab** — son of Hassan, traumatized and repeatedly raped by Assef; Rahim Khan contacts Amir later in life in an attempt to get him to come back to Afghanistan to find Sohrab. In the end, he is adopted by Amir and Soraya and taken to live in the US.

- **Sanaubar** — Ali's wife who gives birth to Hassan as a result of an affair with Baba. She then leaves home to pursue the life of a gypsy. She might have become involved with an Afghan army soldier who nostalgically describes her "sugary little cunt" to Hassan; whether this is true or whether the soldier was just making fun of the Hazara is never established. Having paid a high physical price for her lifestyle, she later returns to Hassan in his adulthood to make up for her neglect of him when he was a child, providing a grandmother figure for Sohrab who nicknames her "Sasa".
- **Farid** — a bitter Tajik driver who is initially abrasive toward Amir, but later befriends him. Two of Farid's seven daughters were killed by a land mine years back, a disaster which left one of his hands mutilated and also took some of his toes. Farid is Amir's means of transport, information, and knowledge of current Afghanistan when he returns. After spending a night with Farid's brother's impoverished family, Amir hides a bundle of money under the mattress to help them: the secretive act once committed to hurt his friend Hassan, he now does to help. He is on the road to recovery.

## 1.6 Reception of the Novel

*The Kite Runner* received the South African Boeke Prize in 2004. It was the first best seller for 2005 in the United States, according to Nielsen BookScan. It was also voted the Reading Group Book of the Year for 2006 and 2007 and headed a list of 60 titles submitted by entrants to the Penguin/Orange Reading Group prize (UK).<sup>8</sup> In addition to the film adaptation, the novel was also adapted to the stage by Bay Area playwright Matthew Spangler. *The Kite Runner* was given its southwest premiere on stage at the Arizona Theatre Company in September-October of 2009.

## 1.7 Controversies

*The Kite Runner* has been accused of hindering Western understanding of the Taliban by portraying Taliban members as representatives of various Western myths of evil. The American Library Association reports that *The Kite Runner* is one of its most-challenged books of 2008,

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/aug/15/news.awardsandprizes>

with multiple attempts to remove it from libraries due to "offensive language, sexually explicit, and unsuited to age group".<sup>9</sup>

## 1.8 *The Kite Runner* (film)

*The Kite Runner* is a 2007 film directed by Marc Forster<sup>10</sup> based on the novel of the same name by Khaled Hosseini. It is a 128 minutes US movie distributed worldwide by the Dream works and Paramount Vantage. David Benioff prepared the screenplay of the film. Though most of the film is set in Afghanistan, these parts were mostly shot in Kashgar, China, due to the dangers of filming in Afghanistan at the time. Much of the film's dialogue is in Dari Persian and English. The child actors are native speakers, but several adult actors had to learn Persian. The film was nominated for the Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2007. The film's score by Alberto Iglesias was nominated for Best Original Score at the Golden Globes and the Academy Awards. The film received generally positive reviews from critics. Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* named it the 5th best film of 2007.<sup>11</sup> The Afghan government has banned the film from movie theaters and DVD stores because of the rape scene and the ethnic tensions and class struggles that the film highlights. Though the child actors enjoyed making the film, they and their families have expressed worries about their situation now that the film is done.

## 1.9 Key Literary Elements

### Setting:

The story takes place in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the United States from 1975 until the present day .

### Conflict:

Protagonist: Amir is the protagonist, because it is his story - a story that details his childhood in Afghanistan and the terrible sin he commits against Hassan, a Hazara boy .

Antagonist: The antagonist is, on the surface, the man named Assef, who is a bigoted childhood acquaintance of Amir and Hassan. He torments them both, but actually attacks them.

Climax : Amir meets Assef, now a Taliban leader, and tries to rescue Sohrab, son of Hassan.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/banned/frequentlychallenged/21stcenturychallenged/2008/index.cfm>

<sup>10</sup> Mark Forster is considered to be one of the most successful Hollywood film directors of famous films like *Monsters Ball* and *Finding Neverland*.

<sup>11</sup> <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20071220/COMMENTARY/176124809>

Outcome: Amir rescued Sohrab and they got out of Afghanistan and fled to Pakistan. There, he tries to find a way to take Sohrab to the United States.

### **Plot Structure :**

The story is a narrative from the viewpoint of Amir, the protagonist, who tells about the sins he committed in his childhood and how he atoned for them as a man.

### **Themes:**

The theme of *strength of character* is the most prevalent theme. Amir commits terrible sins against his friend and half-brother, Hassan. The story of what he does and how he seeks and finds atonement is a lesson for everyone who wants to do find a way to be good again .

The theme of the *resilience of the human spirit* is also an important idea. Even though Amir has committed these sins, the inner strength that he had all along, but thought was somehow missing from his character, breaks through to allow him to find Sohrab and free him from the clutches of Assef. In this same way, when Sohrab falls into a great inner depression and tries to commit suicide, the spirit within him emerges and he finds his way to happiness again<sup>12</sup>. The strong underlying force of this novel is the *relationship between Amir and Hassan*. Early in Amir and Hassan's friendship, they often visit a pomegranate tree where they spend hours reading and playing. "One summer day, I used one of Ali's kitchen knives to carve our names on it: 'Amir and Hassan, the sultans of Kabul.' Those words made it formal: the tree was ours." In a letter to Amir later in the story, Hassan mentions that "the tree hasn't borne fruit in years."<sup>13</sup>

### **Irony:**

Another element that is important is irony – when something happens, or is seen, or is heard that we may know, but the characters do not, or that appears opposite of what is expected. Some examples of irony include: It is ironic when Amir tells us that Baba paid to have plastic surgery done on Hassan's harelip and now he can smile. Yet, something will happen the next winter that makes Hassan stop smiling.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://monkeynote.stores.yahoo.net/>

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides3/kite\\_runner1.asp](http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides3/kite_runner1.asp)

**Quotes :**

The following quotations are important at various points in the story :

1. " I have been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty-six years." Amir tells us this as he opens his story and prepares us for the time he betrayed his best friend Hassan in an alley in Kabul .
2. " There is a way to be good again" Rahim Khan said this to Amir to encourage him to help Hassan's son escape Afghanistan.
3. "For you, a thousand times over", at the end of the novel Sohrab only shows a lopsided smile, but Amir takes to it with all his heart as he runs the kite for Sohrab, saying the sentence.

**Imagery:**

Other elements that are present in this novel are symbols and metaphors. There are many symbols and metaphors used by the author such as : The fact that two boys feed at the same breast is symbolic for brotherhood, The stories about Rostan and Sohrab in the Shahnamah symbolize the goodness and heroic qualities of Hassan .

**Other Elements :**

There are several other literary devices that pop up at various times in the story. One of the most prevalent ones is foreshadowing which frequently presents clues of something that will happen later in the novel .

**2 The Contexts of "*The Kite Runner*"**

Much of the story described in *The Kite Runner* takes place in Afghanistan during two time periods, the 1970's and 2001. The political climate of the country changed dramatically between those two times. Moreover, the novel describes ethnic and religious groups that are unfamiliar to many westerners.

**2.1 Historical events of Afghanistan**

In 1919, Afghanistan regains independence after the third war against British forces trying to bring the country under their sphere of influence. General Mohammed Daud becomes prime minister in 1953. He turns to the Soviet Union for economic and military assistance. In 1978, General Daud is overthrown and killed in a coup by leftist People's Democratic Party. It leads to

the power struggle between leftist leaders Hafizullah Amin and Nur Mohammed Taraki won by Amin. In 1979, Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to help remove Amin, who is executed. Babrak Karmal, leader of the People's Democratic Party Parcham faction is installed as ruler backed by Soviet troops. Various mujahideen troops fight Soviet forces. US, Pakistan, China, Iran and Saudi Arabia supply money and arms. US begins supplying mujahideen with Stinger missiles, enabling them to shoot down Soviet helicopter gunships. Babrak Karmal was replaced by Najibullah. Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan completely in 1989, but civil war continued as mujahideen push to overthrow Najibullah. In 1993, Mujahedeen factions agreed on the formation of government with ethnic Tajik, and proclaimed Burhanuddin Rabbani as the president. Factional contests were continued. Pashtun-dominated Taliban emerged as a major challenge to the Rabbani government. In 1996, Taliban seized control of Kabul and introduced hardline version of Islam. Rabbani flees to join anti-Taliban northern alliance. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia recognized the Taliban as the legitimate rulers of Afghanistan. Most other countries continue to regard Rabbani as head of state. In 1999, United Nations imposed an air embargo and financial sanctions to force Afghanistan to hand over Osama bin Laden for trial. The World Trade Centre in the US attacked on September 11, 2001. Within one month the US and Britain launched air strikes against Afghanistan after Taliban refused to hand over Osama bin Laden. Taliban rule ended in November, 2001. Hamid Karzai became the president of Afghanistan in 2004<sup>14</sup>.

## 2.2 The Ethnic Diversity in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is an ethnically diverse country. As of 2009, there are approximately 28 million people estimated to live in Afghanistan<sup>15</sup>. Pashtu and Dari are considered the official languages of Afghanistan and are spoken by 85% of the people. 30 other minor languages are also spoken in Afghanistan. About 99% of the population is Muslim, and of these Muslims, 84% belong to the Sunni sect. There has been a long history of an ethnic hierarchy within Afghanistan. It has created imbalances in wealth, influence and education within its society. Traditionally Pashtuns have dominated the country because they are the presumed majority of the population. As a result, many of the other ethnic groups have not had a strong voice within the society<sup>16</sup>. Tajiks

<sup>14</sup> San Jose State University—<http://www.sjsu.edu/reading/KR2006.htm>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.en.wikipedia.org>

<sup>16</sup> Amnesty International USA *The Kite Runner Companion Curriculum*, <http://www.amnestyusa.org/education/pdf/kiterunnerhigh.pdf>

form 27% of the population and the second largest ethnic group. They are identified with agriculture and town life. Tajiks are considered to have low income and like many Hazaras, they are not the highest on the social ladder. However there are Tajiks that are successful and important members of the government. Hazaras constitute 9% of Afghanistan's population and are considered to be on the lower end of the socio-economic scale. They reside mainly in the central Afghanistan mountain region called 'Hazarajat'. Historically, the Hazara seem to have Mongolian origins. Most Hazara are Shi'ite Muslims. The 1% which are not Muslim are either Hindu, Sikh or Jewish. 12% of the population is comprised of the Turkmen (3%) and Uzbeks (9%). The remaining 10% of the population is comprised of the Nuristans, an ancient people of Mediterranean descent, the Fariswan, the ethnic Shi'a Persians, the relatively few in number Baluchis of the south and the scattered members of the Kuchi and Aimaq nomads.

### **2.3 Historical and Political Contexts of " *The Kite Runner* "**

*The Kite Runner* is set in Afghanistan and America. The novel is directly links with the Afghan history, geography, ethnic groups, the Soviet invasion, the rise of the Taliban, 9/11 and the US invasion. After September 11th, as it became apparent that the United States would bomb Afghanistan, an open letter written by an Afghan appeared on the Internet. It pleaded with Americans to realize that Afghanistan was already a devastated country. It needed food, not vengeance; sympathy, not hate<sup>17</sup>.

*The Kite Runner* spans the period from before the 1979 Soviet invasion until the reconstruction following the fall of the Taliban. The novel portrays the Afghans as an independent and proud people who for decades have defended their country against one invader after another. But the narrator wonders if his people will ever transcend the tribalism that continues to threaten Afghanistan's integrity. "Maybe," he thinks, "it was a hopeless place."

The novel's canvas turns dark when Hosseini describes the suffering of his country under the tyranny of the Taliban, whom Amir encounters when he finally returns home, hoping to help Hassan and his family. The final third of the book is full of haunting images: a man, desperate to feed his children, trying to sell his artificial leg in the market; an adulterous couple stoned to death in a stadium during the halftime of a football match; a rouged young boy forced into prostitution, dancing the sort of steps once performed by an organ grinder's monkey. But

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.bookpage.com/0306bp/fiction/kite\\_runner.html](http://www.bookpage.com/0306bp/fiction/kite_runner.html)

political events, even as dramatic as the ones that are presented in "The Kite Runner," are only a part of this story. A more personal plot, arising from Amir's close friendship with Hassan, the son of his father's servant, turns out to be the thread that ties the book together. The fragility of this relationship, symbolized by the kites the boys fly together, is tested as they watch their old way of life disappear.

*The Kite Runner* is also a story about the collapse of civil society and the violation of fundamental human rights that commonly takes place in such settings - ethnic and racial discrimination, religious intolerance, the oppression of women and children, war crimes, the plight of refugees. Afghan refugees escaping war and Taliban rule are victims of human rights violation in this novel also, among them Baba and Amir living in exile in Hayward, California—for Amir, "a place to bury [his] memories"; for Baba, "a place to mourn his"; (p. 112). In Hayward, however, there are "homes that made Baba's house in Wazir Akbar Khan look like a servant's hut" (p. 118).

In 1981, at a checkpoint on their way out of Afghanistan after two years of Soviet occupation, Baba and Amir encountered a Russian soldier who, though already paid bribe money, demanded a further condition of their escape: "a half hour with the lady in the back of the truck" (p. 100). Baba said to the truck driver: "Ask him where his shame is." To which the Russian soldier responded: "There is no shame in war." Angrily, Baba countered: "Tell him he's wrong. War doesn't negate decency. It demands it, even more than in times of peace" (ibid.). As it happens, Baba speaks consistently with international law which, in both treaty and custom, insists upon humane rules of armed conflict in international and civil wars. A disdain for the Russians resulting from their invasion and occupation of Afghanistan beginning in 1979 is palpable throughout this book. United States helped to arm and train the *mujahideen* who later made Taliban governance possible.

Khalid Hosseini 'wanted to write about Afghanistan before the Soviet war because that is largely a forgotten period in modern Afghan history. For many people in the west, Afghanistan is synonymous with the Soviet war and the Taliban.' He explains: 'I wanted to remind people that Afghans had managed to live in peaceful anonymity for decades, that the history of the Afghans in the twentieth century has been largely peaceful and harmonious'<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Sherman, Sue 2006. *Cambridge Wizard Student Guide: The Kite Runner*, Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, P 5

As a result of Afghanistan's many years of civil strife and inhumane governance, children were prominently victimized. As Zaman, director of the orphanage visited by Amir in search of Sohrab, puts it (p. 222): "Many of [the children] have lost their fathers in the war, and their mothers can't feed them because the Taliban don't allow them to work . . . There is very little shelter here, almost no food, no clothes, no clean water. What I have in ample supply here is children who've lost their childhood." A similar sentiment is later expressed by Sohrab when he says (p. 277): "There are a lot of children in Afghanistan, but little childhood."

Afghanistan continues to this day to be a land of conflict, divided by religion, caste, class, political ambition, global power politics, and other factors in such a way as to make the realization of human rights for the Afghan people as a whole still a distant dream. It is not alone in this regard. Major and widespread human rights abuse has been all too familiar in Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti, Kosovo, Rwanda, Congo, East Timor, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, among others, in recent years.

## **2.4 Cultural Contexts of " *The Kite Runner* "**

The novel portrays the Afghans as an independent and proud people who for decades have defended their country against one invader after another. But the narrator wonders if his people will ever transcend the tribalism that continues to threaten Afghanistan's integrity. "Maybe," he thinks, "it was a hopeless place." As a boy, Amir, the protagonist, cravenly betrays his servant and best friend, the Hazara boy Hassan. When the Russians come, Amir and his father move to California, where Amir becomes a successful writer. He embraces America because it "had no ghosts, no memories, and no sins." But when Amir learns that a childhood mentor is ailing back home, he returns to discover that his relationship to Hassan had been deeper than he realized. This leads him on a hazardous journey to rescue and adopt Hassan's son, whose father the Taliban had executed.

The novel derives its name from the Afghan custom of doing battle with kites. Although the book can sometimes be melodramatic and garrulous, it provides an extraordinary perspective on the struggles of a country that, until that doleful September day in 2001, had been for too long ignored or misunderstood. And despite its grimmer episodes, the novel ends with a note of optimism about Afghanistan's future, an optimism that the whole world would prefer to see

unspoiled. *Inshallah*, as Afghans say: God willing. In "The Kite Runner," Khaled Hosseini gives a vivid and engaging story that reminds us how long his people have been struggling to triumph over the forces of violence - forces that continue to threaten them even today<sup>19</sup>.

Hosseini's depiction of pre-revolutionary Afghanistan is rich in warmth and humor but also tense with the friction between the nation's different ethnic groups. Amir is from among Afghanistan's privileged - the Pashtuns, who are Sunni Muslims. Hassan is of a shunned ethnic minority - the Mongoloid Hazaras, who are Shi'ite Muslims. It could be said that what makes Hassan so endearing to Amir is that Hassan never complains about his "station in life" and that he cheerfully and unconditionally accepts his second-class status. By the end of the story, when his true relation to Amir is revealed, Hassan is rewarded by being posthumously elevated to a status of near-parity with Amir and his family; and in the U.S. Amir finally stands up for Sohrab, Hassan's son, as an individual and not merely an ethnic face. But there is no instance of anyone of the "lower" cast ever rebelling against this taken-for-granted domination. If they did, it is likely that they would not be as friendly and pleasant as Hassan and his father, Ali.

Religion seems to be many things to many people in this novel. Baba is celebrated in part for his exceptionally secular ways in a traditional society; it is nearly the civic framework for his California exile community in Hayward. Amir exercises it in an entirely private way, as if his faith were more repentance than conversion. And in Assef's Talibanic rendition, Islam is essentially just a pretext for his pathological cruelty. Honor in this novel is anchored fundamentally in a patrilineal social system; it is a value passed on from father to son, and to join in it one must become, apparently, a father or father figure to other young men<sup>20</sup>.

## 2.5 Conclusion

*The Kite Runner* maps the journey of the Amir, the narrator. The story takes place in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the United States from 1975 to 2003. *The Kite Runner* leaves one feeling, a terrible Sadness for the Afghan people. Afghans have suffered at the hands of foreign invaders and their own people throughout the history of Afghanistan and particularly in the past

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<sup>19</sup> The New York Times review of *The Kite Runner* at : <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/03/books/the-servant.html>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.bookbrowse.com/index.cfm?page=title&titleID=1232&view=guide>

30 years. In *The Kite Runner*, Khalid Hosseini brilliantly tells their story within a story. The Cold War between the U.S.A. and the former Soviet Union, and the rule of Taliban brought death and utter destruction to the country. Over 5 million Afghans abandoned their homes and went into exile in other countries. Close to 1.5 million lost their lives. *The Kite Runner* explores the impacts of the Cold War, the Soviet invasion, the Taliban rule, refugee issue, heterogeneity of Afghan Society, tribal tradition, religious extremism and cultural clashes.

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