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## Cultural Memory and National Identity in Khaled Hosseini's *the Kite Runner*

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### Abstract

No individual can completely detach from the memory of their cultural past. Even when one attempts to forget, traces of that past inevitably seep into the present. Khaled Hosseini, the Afghan-born American novelist, revisits his memories of pain, guilt, and redemption in *The Kite Runner*, a narrative rooted in his homeland Afghanistan and his migration to America with his father. The unconditional devotion of Hassan to Amir demonstrates how a simple act such as kite flying—though highly symbolic—shapes the entire trajectory of the novel. Hosseini portrays the devastating impact of war on Afghanistan, showing how internal strife dismantled cultural values and stability, and how unbearable this was for its citizens. The Taliban's emergence further extinguished any lingering hope of reviving Afghanistan's former glory. As a writer positioned between cultures, Hosseini emphasizes the yearning to reclaim Afghanistan's lost heritage. His deep sense of absence is reflected in the figure of Hassan, both friend and brother, whose memory becomes central to the story. The novel thus chronicles Amir's journey to America as one marked by the erosion of innocence, identity, and cultural belonging. Despite achieving outward success in American society, Amir remains unsettled, compelled to seek reconciliation with his past.

**Keywords:** nation, narrative, memory, culture, pain

A man can never get away from the memory of his cultural past. He may try to forget it but unconsciously that past flows in his present also. Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan born American writer has dealt with his memory of pain, guilt and salvation in his beloved native land Afghanistan and journey to America with his father in the novel *The Kite Runner*. The story

of selfless love of Hassan for Amir brings out that how a small game like kite flying, though symbolic, creates the whole narrative of the novel. Hosseini writes that how a war stricken country due to its internal issues loses all its cultural values and stability and how painful it was for its inhabitants to bear all this. It shows that how with the arrival of Taliban all the hopes

of going back to glorious past get diminished. As a peripheral writer, Hosseini also highlights the desire to get back the glory of past of Afghanistan. He craves for the presence of his long-lost friend and brother Hassan. This novel is a story that how the journey of Amir to America was a journey of loss of his individuality, innocence and even his culture. He never feels at peace even after becoming a part of American life. His quest of his lost life takes him back to his native land. Amir in the novel is just like a small child running after a kite cut by someone as he gets back to his past to touch and get what was once lost. The present paper aims to bring out the loss of the culture of a nation in light of some internal and international context. It also focuses that how all these misfortunate happenings make the people of a country, once culturally and economically rich, utterly poor.

We see in the novel that how Hazara boy, Hassan gets harassed at the hand of other boys because in Afghanistan, Hazaras—the ethnic minority—have experienced ethnic discrimination by Pashtuns—the ethnic majority—because of a revolt dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Not only this but discrimination in Afghanistan arises from the distinct religious groups—Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims. Shi'ite Muslims link themselves with the Hazara ethnic group, but the Sunni Muslims associate themselves with the Pashtun ethnic group. This discrimination affects every age group in Afghanistan. Hosseini, in his novel *The Kite Runner* reveals that how the ethnic and religious discrimination has become the reality of Afghanistan which somehow destroyed the peaceful life in Afghanistan.

When we go through this novel, we find that for Hosseini, Afghanistan becomes like a lost paradise. He, while living in America, starts remembering his glorious past in Afghanistan. We see in the novel that how cultural influences in Amir's life subconsciously result in the main character's sudden mistreatment towards Hassan. We see in the novel that how people get

affected, unknowingly, by their surroundings, that can affect their friendships, livelihood, and sometimes results in betrayal. We see that the Afghan culture is accurately displayed and challenged through kite running, family affairs and also celebrations. These instances are shown throughout the book in various ways. Many of these cultural expressions are still seen today. Afghan cultures still express their traditional values through their celebrations and family affairs. Through the text, one is able to gather insight on Afghan daily life both before and after the Taliban's control. Kite running is one of the major forms of cultural expressions in *The Kite Runner*, from which this novel gets its name also.

When novel starts we see that the king Mohammad Daoud Khan does military coup which becomes first major event that occurs. In July 1973, this major political event took place in Afghanistan which Hosseini mentions in book during chapter majorly. The character, Amir, states how his way of life was about to change drastically and "if not yet, then at least it was the beginning of the end." The use of this type of language truly signifies that the life of the characters in the novel was about to change for the worse, hence the word "end" was used. Hosseini's use of abrupt language truly emphasizes the significance of the event the word 'end' itself holds so much tension that it puts the reader on edge. The use of the phrase "if not yet" is a way of Hosseini preparing the reader for even more brutal events. It makes readers argue that the coup of the king was not completely the reason behind the "bleak changing world". When Hosseini makes us question this, Amir goes on to state that how the "official end" was on April 1978 which was the communist coup, which then led onto to, December 1979. Russian military tanks "roll into the very same streets where Hassan" and Amir played "bringing the death of Afghanistan." The author's use of deadly imagery emphasizes the morbid mood that the characters were facing at the time. During all these events, one thing

which was going to get vanished was the peaceful life and culture of Afghanistan.

Amir went from living in luxury to traveling to Pakistan in a crowded truck escaping from the new Taliban regime and finally settling down in a small apartment. Due to the Soviet war, Amir and his father were forced to leave their lives behind before them too were killed. Unlike his father, Amir starts looking forward to the resettlement in America. When finally free in America, Amir embraces the culture and tries to leave his ugly past and events from Kabul. However, Hassan always remains in the back of Amir's mind and his memory haunts him throughout his stay in America. Amir starts college classes to work on his English and to get his degree. He does this primarily to get the approval of his father, an approval that he always longed for. After his marriage to Soraya and his father's death, Amir receives a call from an old friend telling him to return to Pakistan. His past had come to disturb him from his new life in America and he decides to return to Pakistan. There Rahim Khan revealed the whole truth of Hassan to Amir. Once again Amir was forced to return to his hometown Kabul where he feels like a stranger when he reaches there. He did not recognize the city, all of the trees were cut down and even his old home did not seem as luxurious as it once was. His trip back made him realize how different Afghanistan was to Amir. Since he was from a privileged class, he never got to face the problems of poverty, which seemed to have been experienced by most other people in Afghanistan. This overwhelming trip, full of shocking blows and pain finally gave him peace after so many years. His journey to retrieve Hassan's son from Assef becomes his way of asking for forgiveness and to become good again. Finally, Amir adopts Sohrab, Hassan's son, and takes him as his own son. In the end he runs a kite for Sohrab the way Hassan used to do for him. Throughout the novel, Amir encounters tribulations which he runs away from cowardly not expecting the repercussions

from his actions and in the end found a way to face it straight on.

America was a place to bury my memories of their cultural past. Unlike Amir, his father did not embrace American culture. He had a hard time adjusting to life in a small apartment working at a gas station where no one knew of him. Baba used to take pride in knowing all the changes he made with his contributions in Kabul. In Afghanistan, Baba remembers that he used to help everyone in town and now in US, he feels like nobody. Amir recalls the parties he used to have back home and how the day of his graduation, Baba kept buying everyone drinks at the bar as his way of being the life of the party again. The change to a Taliban regime in Kabul really hit him hard; it made him want to return to the good old days of smoking cigars in his study with his good friend Rahim Khan. Baba not only missed the luxurious life he lived in Kabul but he also mentioned to have missed Hassan and Ali. He also stated that he wished Hassan would have gone to America with them. Assimilating to American culture was definitely not easy for Baba who just wished to go back to Kabul. In the end, it seems that he gave up hope in ever returning to his country and died of lung cancer in America.

Feeling of loss and collision of cultures can clearly be seen through the eyes of the characters, Amir and Baba from *The Kite Runner*. Used to luxury and mansions, the boy and his father are forced out of Afghanistan because of the Soviet-Afghan War into Peshawar, Pakistan and then to California where they must start all over. The way of dealing with the dilemma they had in US was different for both father and Amir and overcome them in their own way. Amir finally finds peace when he returns with Hassan's son, after years of mental unrest while Baba at last gives in as if defeated. Both caught between colliding cultures, in the end Amir and Baba find peace after a long journey of their struggle with the loss of their culture.

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