American Culture and Afghan Identity in Khalid Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

Sameena Nauman & James J. Connolly

Abstract

This article contends that the political implications of Khalid Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* are more complex than many critical assessments have recognized. Careful consideration of representations of America and Americans early in the book, as well as its depiction of the struggle of Amir, the novel's protagonist, to define his identity in the United States, suggests a greater degree of ambiguity than the prevailing post-colonial critique allows. This interpretation requires sensitivity to the Afghan dimensions of Amir's life in the United States, which makes it difficult to identify him as simply "westernized" or to define him as the embodiment of American influence. Hosseini's rendering of America, both through the narrative's cultural and material references and through its account of Amir's life as an Afghan immigrant, imbue *The Kite Runner* with an intricacy that undermines simplistic claims that the novel advances a quasi-imperial perspective.

In many respects, Khalid Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* is an American novel. Despite the fact that much of the action takes place in Afghanistan, its narrator and protagonist, Amir, tells the story while living in the United States. More significantly, the narrative is a familiar one to American readers: an

Sameena Nauman is a graduate of Area Study Centre, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, and James J. Connolly is a George & Frances Ball Distinguished Professor of History and Director of the Center for Middletown Studies at Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana, U.S. Requests should be sent to jconnoll@bsu.edu.

immigrant comes to the United States and struggles to define his (or her) identity. Amir's search for personal redemption, if not uniquely American, nonetheless seemed to resonate with American readers, who turned the novel into a bestseller that drew the attention of Hollywood. These themes, along with its timely exploration of Afghan life not long after the September 11th attacks, help explain the level of interest the novel generated in the United States (U.S.). Initial sales were "respectable," but the book eventually became a staple of book clubs around the United States, boosting its popularity. By 2005, the trade paperback edition had sold three million copies and it would remain on the *New York Times* bestseller list for five years. The film that followed brought its story to an even wider audience, both in the U.S. and beyond. Its portrait of Afghanistan had a substantial influence on popular perceptions of that country, likely more than any textbook or scholarly study of the time.[1]

Although *The Kite Runner* was generally well received, some reviewers and scholars have suggested that the novel advanced a neocolonial perspective. These critics argued that its reliance on coincidence, its employment of ethnic stereotypes, its simplistic characterization of its chief villain, and its melodramatic aspects exoticized Afghan life and encouraged Western readers to adopt a naïve, condescending perspective toward Afghanistan. Hosseini's novel, these critics insisted, too readily sorted Muslims into simplistic binaries of good and bad, or modern and anti-modern, and implied that Western (or American) intervention was the means to rescue good, modernized Muslims. The culmination of *The Kite Runner*'s plot, in which the protagonist, Amir, seemingly enlightened by his time in the U.S., returns to Afghanistan to rescue his nephew Sohrab, encourages such an interpretation. For some, the narrative's resolution, in which Amir embraces Sohrab as family in defiance of the prevailing prejudice against Hazaras, naïvely implies that the deep-rooted class, ethnic, and religious

divisions in Afghan life are pre-modern relics that can be overcome through the application of American, or Western, ideals.[2]

This reading hinges in large part on how we view Amir's experience in and of the United States. The argument that *The Kite Runner* offered "a less-than-subtle apologia for the contemporary militarization of Afghanistan," as one scholar has put it, rests on presenting Amir as a stand-in for the United States. He is, in other words, the "westernized protagonist Amir (a.k.a. America)" and his return to Afghanistan and retrieval of Sohrab symbolizes the "moral redemption of the Afghani" through the intervention of the U.S.[3] The logic of this interpretation depends on the extent to which Amir is Americanized during his time in the United States. If we see his character as an archetypal American immigrant, struggling to balance his ethnic and religious heritage against the demands of conforming to a new society before adopting liberal American (and Western) values and attitudes, then it makes sense to imagine him as a conveyor of American ideals.

We contend that Amir occupies a more liminal position, caught between two cultures, a reading that makes the political implications of the novel more complex. Careful consideration of the ways that *The Kite Runner* represents America early in the book, as well as its depiction of Amir's struggle to define his identity in the United States, suggests a greater degree of ambiguity than the prevailing post-colonial critique allows. In particular, a reading that brings a sensitivity to the Afghan dimensions of Amir's life in the United States make it difficult to identify him as "westernized" in any simple, straightforward manner or to define him as the embodiment of American influence.

In an examination of "Islamic diasporic writers," Rachel Blumenthal has also emphasized Amir's indeterminate identity.

Contending that Hosseini has refused to situate him on either side of the Afghan-American divide, she insisted that one

> cannot so easily locate an ideological homeland [for Amir] in either Islamic Afghanistan or secular America. Rather than dub either 'real' or 'symbolic', we must interpret these dual strands of narrative as a mark of Hosseini's hesitancy to privilege one canon over the other, one set of cultural values over another, one ideological homeland over another.

Blumenthal makes this claim in a short discussion of *The Kite Runner* that is a relatively minor point in her broader effort to identify the "homeland," both ideological and geographic, of nonfiction writers Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Azar Afisi, as well as Hosseini. She cited the latter's "deployment of both Eastern and Western literatures," and particularly his use of the story of Rostam and Sohrab, from the Persian epic *Shanameh*, as a framework for his novel's narrative. On this basis, which she asserted more than she documented, Blumenthal argued that Amir cannot be definitively cast as a representative of East or West.[4]

To make a compelling case for the ambiguity of Amir's position requires fuller attention to the question of his identity. This article examines *The Kite Runner*'s treatment of America and of Amir's Americanization to demonstrate the novel's refusal to situate him entirely within one society and to refute claims that it offers little more than Western condescension. Early allusions to American material goods and commodities suggest a complex view of the U.S. influence on Afghan life. Later stages of the narrative make it clear that Amir is neither fully American nor wholly Afghan. These uncertainties trouble the idea that he can be imagined as a purveyor of western values or even that he had been somehow modernized through his time in the United States. Hosseini's rendering of America,

both through the narrative's cultural and material references and through its account of Amir's life as an Afghan expatriate, imbue *The Kite Runner* with a intricacy that undermine simplistic claims that the novel advances a quasi-imperial perspective.

America in Afghanistan

The Kite Runner is a first-person narrative in which Amir, an Afghan native who grew up in Kabul before immigrating with his family to the United States, recalls a traumatic event from his childhood. As a boy in Kabul, he stood by as his friend Hassan (whom, the reader ultimately learns, is also his half-brother) was sexually assaulted. Amir recounted the shame that follows, and his efforts to make amends as an adult. This thread is intertwined with strands focused on Amir's struggle to earn his father's love and his efforts to come to grips with his identity as an Afghan and a Muslim. Filled with melodramatic twists, the story culminates with Amir's return to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan to rescue Sohrab, Hassan's orphaned son, and bring him back to California.

The novel's force derives in large part from its exploration of ethnic, class, and religious distinctions in Afghan society. Status differences between Amir, a member of the Pashtun elite and a Sunni Muslim, and Hassan, a lower-status Hazara and a Shia Muslim whose family worked for Amir's father, aggravated the tensions created by the Amir's failure to help Hassan. The salience of these categories carries over to California, where tribal and religious identities still carry weight within the Afghan-American community. Amir's decision to return to Afghanistan after more than a quarter century to rescue Sohrab, Hassan's orphaned son, raises questions about the significance of these differences.

The United States figures significantly in the Afghan history presented in *The Kite Runner*. American goods and cultural exports are part and parcel of the Kabul landscape of the 1960s and 1970s, a positive presence in what Amir recalls as an open, warm place. Members of the Pashtun elite wore jeans and sneakers, consumed soda, rode Schwinn bicycles, and drove American cars, including Baba's Ford Mustang, "a car that drew envious looks everywhere because it was the same car Steve McQueen had driven in *Bullitt*, a film that played in one theatre for six months."[5] Amir and Hassan saw their first American Western together, *Rio Bravo* with John Wayne, and saw *The Magnificent Seven* thirteen times, crying each time "at the end when the Mexican kids buried Charles Bronson." They were shocked to learn that the film had been dubbed in Farsi and that John Wayne was in fact American, much like the "friendly, long haired men and women we always saw hanging around in Kabul, dressed in their tattered, brightly coloured shirts."[6]

The forces that destroyed the social order of Kabul and Afghanistan as Amir remembered it were explicitly anti-American. The Soviet invasion forced both Americans and Amir's family out of Afghanistan and the installation of an oppressive, anti-American regime. When the Mujahideen finally expelled the Soviets after ten years Afghans initially celebrated the emergence of Taliban as the country's new ruling faction. But they proved worse, imposing a strict form of Islamic sharia that banned cultural activities and amusements such as kite flying and music. The Taliban regime was also resolutely anti-Western, shutting down bookstores that sold foreign books, eliminating schools that espoused Western ideas and educational methods, and restricting women's rights.[7]

Hosseini presented the Taliban regime as the antithesis of the seemingly open, tolerant Afghanistan of Amir's youth. Assef, Hassan's assailant, as well as the paedophile who eventually

abuses Sohrab, is the only significant Taliban character in the novel and he is one-dimensional. His motives appear not to extend beyond a racist malevolence, underscored by his enthusiastic references to Hitler, so there is little exploration of the sources of the Taliban's outlook. Hosseini also emphasized the group's brutality by incorporating actual events, such as the public stoning of accused adulterers, into the narrative. The Taliban exploit and deepen the Pashtun-Hazara and Sunni-Shia divides, a development that Hosseini stressed by making them responsible for the murder of Hassan. Equating the Taliban to "savages," Hassan explained to Amir in a letter, "Alas the Afghanistan of our youth is long dead. Kindness is gone from the land and you cannot escape the killings. Always the killings. In Kabul, fear is everywhere, in the stadium, in the markets."[8]

The Kite Runner's unflinching portrait of Afghanistan under Taliban rule might readily be employed to justify Western intervention. Amir's father, Baba, articulated this perspective most directly. His excitement at spotting Henry Kissinger in a Kabul stadium, his enthusiasm for the staunch anti-communist Ronald Reagan, whom he viewed as a "brash savior," and his contempt for Jimmy Carter (whom he derides as the equivalent of "a boy who can't ride a bike [put] behind the wheel of a brand new Cadillac.") reflect his faith in a forceful, interventionist American foreign policy.[9] For Baba, uprooted by the Afghanistan's political chaos, America represents the best hope for restoring the world where he thrived.

In linking this faith in America as the rescuer of Afghanistan to the character of Baba, Hosseini called it into question. Baba's love for "the idea of America" proves naïve. The experience of living in America humbled him; in Amir's words, it "gave him an ulcer."[10] As his life in the U.S. unfolds, his status declines and his credibility diminishes. Employing Baba as the proponent of this perspective on America as Afghanistan's

deliverer weakens it in another way as well. Baba's dishonesty about his relationship to Hassan undercuts his moral authority. He never accepts Hassan as his son because of his half Hazara origin. His judgment is suspect and assigning to him a positive view of American power and moral force is a way of denying it full legitimacy. In contrast, although Amir is attracted to America, he never presents it as a saviour. For him, its appeal lies in the opportunity to escape his past and to bury his memories. Baba's enthusiasm for the idea of an aggressive and idealized America emerges as remnant of the Cold War espoused by an aging, deeply flawed character.

Most important, Hosseini ultimately makes clear that pre-invasion Kabul was not the open and pleasant environment sketched through Amir's childhood memories. The assault on Hassan and the fraught, hierarchical relations between his and Amir's family highlight the prejudice and oppression that prevailed. The political upheaval of the period, including a coup against the Afghan king, is only a background element of Amir's memories. But its presence hints at the larger instabilities of Afghan life in this period. When Amir returns to Afghanistan as an adult, the importance of social class as a source of inequities becomes more evident as well.

Even early in the book, there are plenty of indications that social tensions permeated Afghan society, despite Amir's rosy memories. Although an enthusiasm for American cars and westerns united Amir and Hazara, the "envious looks" drawn by Baba's Mustang hinted at the salience of class differences. The significance of the social distinctions that separated the two boys became evident when Amir searched for Hassan just before the Hazara boy was attacked. When Amir asked a merchant if he had seen his friend, the old man resisted answering and wondered why the member of a Pashtun family would be searching for such a boy. Here, American commodities, which had once united them, now distinguished

one from the other. Amir's leather coat and jeans signalled to the merchant that he was a member of the Kabul elite. "Owning anything American, especially if it wasn't second hand," Amir explained, "was a sign of wealth." Only when it becomes clear that Hassan is a family servant does the merchant grudgingly relent and point in the right direction.[11] The dual character of American products, as both a source of shared experiences for Amir and Hassan and as tools for sharpening group distinctions, provides an initial signal of the novel's subtle treatment of the U.S.

Afghans in America

When *The Kite Runner* turns to Amir's time in the United States, Hosseini again introduces elements of ambiguity that prevent the easy categorization of his identity and values. On the surface, the novel displays many of the trappings of a classic American immigration narrative. There is a generational divide, in which Baba struggles to adapt to a new environment while his son prospers.[12] The younger Amir initially embraces America and seeks to erase his past. But like a good ethnic American in the age of multiculturalism, he ultimately embraces many aspects of old-world culture and faith while jettisoning those that fuel discrimination. In particular, Amir seems to challenge the distinctions between Pashtun and Hazara and, more subtly, the customary gender roles that render women subservient to men. Arguably, these rejections may signal an embrace of American, or Western universalistic, democratic ideals.

Baba's encounter with American life provides a foil that seems to establish Amir as a well-adapted immigrant. An outgoing and popular figure in Kabul, he was in some respects able to establish the same persona in California. "Kabul, Peshawar and Hayward. Same old Baba," Amir noted with affection after he and his father departed a bar following a celebration of his high

school graduation.[13] But despite his jovial demeanour, Baba did not fit in. He was physically uncomfortable because of the pollution, he never learned to speak English clearly, and he was forced to work in a gas station, a position that robbed him of the dignity and prominence he had in Afghanistan. He also missed his homeland. "He was like the widower who remarries but can't let go of his dead wife," Amir reported. "He missed the sugarcane fields of Jalalabad and the gardens of Paghman. He missed people milling in and out of his house, missed walking down the bustling aisles of Shor Bazaar and greeting people who knew him and his father, knew his grandfather, people who shared ancestors with him, whose pasts intertwined with his."[14]

Amir's reflections on his father's mournful outlook came in the wake of an incident that underscored Baba's alienation and loss of status. Father and son stopped in a small grocery they often frequented that was run by an elderly Vietnamese couple. When Baba tried to pay for his purchases with a cheque and the proprietor asked Baba for identification, the older man reacted violently. "Almost two years we've bought his damn fruits and put money in his pocket and the son of a dog wants to see my license!" Baba exclaimed. He felt that the owner was accusing him of being a thief: "What kind of a country is this? No one trusts anybody!"[15] Despite his attraction to the concept of America, for Baba the realities of life in California represented the loss of status and a loss of identity.

Baba's alienation helps accentuate Amir's apparent assimilation. Initially for Amir, the opportunity to begin again was an attraction. In America he could escape from the guilt that followed from his betrayal of Hassan and even his struggles to earn his father's love. He marvelled at America's vastness and imagined it as a river, "roaring along, unmindful of the past. I could wade into this river, let my sins drown to the bottom; let the waters carry me someplace far. Someplace

with no ghosts, no memories, no sins." The evocation of baptism in this passage reinforces the idea that Amir can begin anew, taking on a fresh identity. In a turn of phrase designed to raise doubt, he declared "if for nothing else, for that" (the erasure of the past) he "embraced America." The terse wording implies that it was the escape from his Afghan history, rather than an attraction to American life in a positive sense, which drove him to adjust his identification. Success, in the form of finishing school, going to college and eventually becoming a successful writer living in San Francisco, links him to America, but his embrace is not wholehearted.[16]

Amir's success did not entail an abandonment of his Afghan identity. He still maintained his ties to the local expatriate community, particularly through his father. On Saturdays they toured garage sales, purchasing items that they sold on Sunday mornings at the San Jose flea market, where they joined other Afghan families. The flea market soon became a centre of immigrant life in the Bay Area, where Afghan customs persisted, gossip was exchanged, and social hierarchies remained in place. Hosseini sprinkled Afghan terms—*Bolani*, *Qabuli*, *Kolchas*, *Tassali*, *Roussis*, *Parchami*—into Amir's description of the setting to underscore its ethnic character.[17] Unlike weekdays, where Amir thrived as a student while Baba suffered the indignities of lower-class life in America, weekends organized around the flea market represented a continuation of Afghan life, both through Amir's partnership with his father and his immersion into the ethnic community.

It was through the flea market that Amir meets his wife, Soraya, a coupling that further highlights the complexity of his cultural affiliations. Soraya is the daughter of General Taheri, a prominent figure from Kabul, and his relationship with her fit the social expectations of the Afghan community. Both were from (once) well-to-do Pashtun families and their courtship followed old-country customs. But in one respect it represented

a rejection of traditional norms. At 18, Soraya fled her family and had a brief relationship with another man. From a traditional perspective she was damaged goods and Amir's willingness to marry her represented a rejection of the conservative gender and sexual norms that characterized Afghan society.

Amir's most compelling rejection of traditional social values comes near the end of the novel. Having retrieved Sohrab from Kabul, he finds the Bay Area Afghans sceptical of his decision to bring a Hazara boy into his home. None are more hostile than his arrogant father-in-law, General Taheri. Visiting his daughter and son-in-law after Amir has returned from Afghanistan with Sohrab, he expressed worry about "the community's perception of our family" for bringing a Hazara boy into his daughter's household. Soraya begins to answer but Amir interrupts. "You see General Sahib," he responded, "my father slept with his servant's wife. She bore him a son named Hassan. Hassan is dead now. That boy sleeping on the couch is Hassan's son. He's my nephew. That's what you tell people when they ask." He then added, "you will never refer to him as 'Hazara boy' in my presence again. He has a name and it's Sohrab."[18] In an exchange that shows Amir asserting his manhood and independence, he rejects the ethnic divide so central to the Afghan social order.

This culminating scene near the end of the novel tempts the reader to interpret *The Kite Runner* as a rejection of Afghan tribalism and an endorsement of more modern forms of hyphenated identity. Amir retains his Afghan identity but rejects the ethnic and sectarian hierarchies that come with it. In this sense he seems to take on a thoroughly modern identity: ethnic but also cosmopolitan.[19] Amir is part of the Afghan community but does not subscribe to its seemingly premodern social system or its norms regarding women's sexual behaviour. That the expression of this moral autonomy occurs

just as he acknowledges his father's sins and has begun to come to grips with his own past entices the reader to extract a neatly packaged resolution to the problem of identity raised in the novel.

Yet Hosseini also offers the opportunity for a more sophisticated understanding of identity and belonging as well. While Amir may not exhibit the identity crisis and profound doubts about American culture and power that the protagonists in novels such as Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* experience, neither is he readily classified as an assimilated ethnic who embodies Western and American values. There are enough indications that he is not fully Americanized, despite his success, to disrupt a simplistic narrative of assimilation. It is equally clear that he is not fully Afghan, despite his participation in many aspects of life in the Bay Area's expatriate community.

Neither Afghan nor American

Upon Amir's return to Afghanistan the unmoored quality of his character becomes increasingly clear. Just after crossing the border into an impoverished section of Afghanistan he comments to Farid, his driver and escort that he "feels like a tourist in my own country." Farid's response was a snicker and a challenge: "you still think of this place as your country?" The conversation that followed illustrated Amir's unease and uncertainty:

> "I think a part of me always will," I said, more defensively than I had intended.
>
> "After twenty years of living in America," he said, swerving the truck to avoid a pothole the size of a beach ball.
>
> I nodded. "I grew up in Afghanistan."
>
> Farid snickered again.

> "Why do you do that?"
> "Never mind," he murmured.
> "No, I want to know. Why do you do that?"

In his rear-view mirror, I saw something flash in his eyes. "You want to know," he sneered. "Let me imagine, Agha sahib. You probably lived in a big two- or three-story house with a nice yard that your gardener filled with flowers and fruit trees. Your father drove an American car. You had servants, probably Hazaras."

Farid went on to describe the life of a wealthy Afghan and accuse Amir of returning only to sell off his family property, pocket the proceeds, and return to America. In response, Amir could only ask "Why are you saying these things?" He did not challenge the accuracy of Farid's account nor dispute his concluding charge that "You've always been a tourist here, you just didn't know it."[20]

The exchange, which occurred precisely as Amir entered Afghanistan, underscored the point that he was an outsider, but not in simple, clear-cut terms. In part, his time in America stripped away his Afghan identity. But his sense of difference was also a matter of class, as Farid's derisive comments make clear. That point was hammered home further when the two men spent the night with Wahid, Farid's impoverished brother. Amir realized only belatedly that the children in the household went hungry so that he could eat, a failure that highlighted his status as an outsider. Yet the question of his position within Afghan society quickly becomes more complicated. When asked, Amir explained that the purpose of his trip to Afghanistan was not to cash in the family's estate but to rescue his nephew. This earns the approbation of Wahid, who declared Amir an "honorable man" and "a true Afghan." When Farid apologized, Amir's response reflects an uncertainty that the reader is compelled to share: "Don't worry. You were more

right than you know."[21] Throughout these encounters, the question of Amir's belonging remains unsettled, both in his own mind and from the perspective of Afghans.

In his conversation with Wahib, Amir does not directly challenge the Pashtun-Hazara hierarchy or Sunni-Shia relations, opting instead to assert the family claim. He is hesitant at first to acknowledge that Sohrab, whom Wahib immediately recognizes as a Hazara when presented with a photograph, is his nephew. But he does, and as his search continues, he makes this family claim more openly. Even after his return to the United States with Sohrab, he counters disapproval of a "Hazara boy" not by rejecting the legitimacy of that distinction, but by declaring his blood connection. In the tense exchange with General Taheri about Sohrab late in the novel, Amir does more than simply challenge the Pashtun-Hazara divide. By rejecting the General's label of "Hazara boy" and demanding that his nephew be referred to by name, he confers on him an individual identity.[22]

On the surface, Amir emphasis on his familial connection to a Hazara boy undercuts the tribal and religious distinctions that characterized Afghan society. Early in the novel, he had explained his childhood relationship to Hassan. Despite the fact that they played together constantly, he never thought of Hassan as his friend. Remembering him as "the face of Afghanistan" he explained that, nevertheless, he did not imagine him as a friend or a peer because

> history isn't easy to overcome. Neither is religion. In the end, I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara. I was Sunni and he was Shia, and nothing was ever going to change that. Nothing.[23]

Amir's account of reading a textbook that detailed the history of the Pashtun's brutal mistreatment of the Hazara and its

connections to Sunni-Shia tensions reinforced the idea that the Pashtun-Hazara conflict was both deep-rooted and oppressive.[24] By the novel's end, however, Amir has implicitly rejected these distinctions, creating a narrative arc that clearly contests the validity of a Pashtun-Hazara hierarchy.

In some respects, the assertion of family ties is an especially powerful way of delegitimizing these supposedly deep and timeless ethnic categories. Pashtun and Hazara are imagined as tribal identities, biological categories extending into the distant past. If, as in the case of the key characters in *The Kite Runner*, blood ties cut across these divisions, it becomes clear that they are in many respects socially constructed and mutable rather than biologically determined and fixed. The revelation that Hassan and Sohrab descend directly from Baba also makes them half Pashtun and half Hazara, further muddying their identities and rendering these divisions meaningless in terms of individual relationships.

Despite the implication of Amir's family claim, the novel falls short of an explicit, full-throated dismissal of the salience of these identities. At no point does Amir directly reject these differences. Such reticence can be understood in the context of the threats he faces while in Afghanistan. Yet even in the U.S. he does not directly challenge them. Only silence, not the resolution of the disagreement, follows his tense exchange with General Taheri about Sohrab. Certainly Hosseini meant to undermine Pahstun-versus-Hazara and Sunni-versus-Shia distinctions, but he chooses to leave a degree of incompleteness about these matters.

Class and gender also operate within the novel in ways that complicate Amir's role as a vessel for rejecting ethnic differences and inherited cultural norms. His position as the scion of a wealthy family permits him to defy communal expectations without facing rejection from fellow Afghans. His

social position, along with his gender, permits him to marry the woman of his choice despite her unfavourable reputation, to pursue a career as a writer, and to return to Afghanistan to rescue Sohrab. Some or all of these choices may not have been available to Afghan men of lesser status and perhaps none of them would be available to Afghan women, even in the United States. Paradoxically, his status as a member of the Pashtun elite (perhaps even more than the freedom of life in the United States) provides him room to ignore Afghan social and cultural prescriptions and to act independently.

The novel's final scene, though optimistic, accentuates the novel's ambiguity. At an Afghan picnic in San Francisco, Amir and Sohrab join a kite-fighting contest. When Amir, with Sohrab's help, uses one of Hassan's favourite tricks to win a battle, the boys smiled, briefly, faintly. It was "hardly there" but it was enough to kindle a sense of hope for Amir. This hint of improvement allows the novel to close on a promising note. But Hosseini was careful not to overplay its significance. "It was only a smile, nothing more," Amir noted. "It didn't make everything all right. It didn't make anything all right." [25] Hosseini leaves Sohrab's future unstated. He had not spoken. His silence, much like the silence that followed Amir's rebuke of the General at the dinner table, remained. The unfinished character of Sohrab's recovery leaves room to imagine many endings, without compelling the reader to conclude that the boy's troubles will disappear or that the prejudice he faces will diminish.

The warmth of *The Kite Runner*'s ending, however muted, helps us understand why some critics charge that Hosseini's novel offers a thinly disguised justification for American intervention in Afghanistan. Published not long after the September 11th attacks and the subsequent U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Hosseini obviously meant to present a commentary on Afghanistan in the light of those developments.

The absence of a clearly articulated scepticism about American intentions and actions, such as those we see in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, is notable, particularly for a generation of critics raised on post-colonial theory and prepared to see evidence of U.S. overreach in every corner of the globe. Certainly the reader is tempted to view Amir's experiences in the United States as an assimilation narrative and to see him as a stand-in for America when he returns to Afghanistan. The novel's reliance on narrative contrivances to facilitate Amir's redemption, particularly the coincidence that Assef is both the grotesque bully who attacks Hassan and the paedophile who abuses his son, also invites legitimate debate about its literary value and political depth.

Yet there is enough ambiguity in the book to justify a different interpretation. Amir's experiences in the United States hardly constitute a clear-cut abandonment of his ethnic and religious identity. In many respects, he associates himself more closely with Afghanistan and his Muslim faith at the end of the narrative than he had when he first arrived in the U.S in search of escape. Most notably, he never offers an explicit rejection of the group distinctions that so powerfully define Afghan life. While his assertion of a family tie weakens those claims, his earlier discussions of their depth and power are never fully countered in the uncertain and tentative resolution of the book. These elements may not make *The Kite Runner* literary fiction of the highest order, but they give it a degree of sophistication that many of its critics have missed. Ultimately, Hosseini's exploration of identity and belonging is complex enough to leave room for doubt, which undermines a reading of his novel as a naïve defence of American imperial ideology.

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Notes

[1]. Jenna Schnuer, "The Kite Runner," *Advertising Age*, 7 November, 2005 (http://adage.com/article/special-report-marketing-50/kite-runner/105191/, accessed 19 April, 2016); Penny Wark, "From Kabul to California: The Incredible Journey of Khaled Hosseini," *The Times* (London), 11 April 2008. (http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/arts/books/article2452372.ece, accessed 19 April, 2016). On the novel's influence, see David Jeferess, "To Be Good (Again): The Kite Runner as Allegory of Global Ethics," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 45:9 (December, 2009), 389 and Megan O'Rourke, "The Kite Runner: Do I Really Have to Read It?" *Slate*, 25 July, 2005 (http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/the_highbrow/2005/07/the_kite_runner.html, accessed 15 January, 2015).

[2]. O'Rourke, "The Kite Runner: Do I Really Have to Read It?"; Graham Huggan, "A Beginning, Two Ends, and a Thickened Middle: Journeys in Afghanistan from Byron to Hosseini," *Journeys* 15:1 (June, 2014): 72-89; (http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/the_highbrow/2005/07/the_kite_runner.html, accessed 15 January, 2015); Jeferess, "To Be Good (Again)." For details on the good-Muslim and bad-Muslim dichotomy, see Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

[3]. Elizabeth S. Anker, "Allegories of Falling and the 9/11 Novel," *American Literary History* 23: (Fall 2011): 56.

[4]. Rachel Blumenthal, "Looking for Home in the Islamic Diaspora of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Azar Nafisi, and Khaled Hosseini," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 34:4 (Fall, 2012), 257-58.

[5]. Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003), 27.

[6]. Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, 26.

[7]. Details of Afghanistan's political and cultural evolution can be found in Ludwig W. Adamec, *Historical Dictionary of Afghanistan* (New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 2012) and Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006). For a longer view see Frank A. Clements, *Conflict in Afghanistan: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 2003).

[8]. Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, 39-40, 216.

[9]. Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, 21, 124, 126.

[10]. Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, 125.

[11]. Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, 69.

[12]. For the emphasis on generations in American immigrant literature, see Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 208-236.

[13]. Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, 132.
[14]. Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, 129.
[15]. Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, 127-8.
[16]. Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, 136.This statement might be read as a depiction of America as a place where one can discard old memories and thus an implicit commentary on America's naïvete on the global stage. This interpretation is all the more convincing when one considers that Amir ultimately rejects the idea that he can ignore his Afghan past.
[17]. Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, 138.
[18]. Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, 360-61.
[19]. By cosmopolitan, we do not mean the traditional idea of a citizen of the world, but instead use it in the sense of the "actually existing cosmopolitanism" that Bruce Robbins and others have identified. In this formulation, identities can be rooted in particular places without precluding a sense of connection to the wider world or to other groups. *The Kite Runner* might fairly be read as adopting this perspective on matters of identity and belonging. See Bruce Robbins, "Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism," in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, ed., Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 1-3. For an opposing view of the *The Kite Runner* as an expression of cosmopolitan thinking, see Jefferess, "To Be Good (Again)," 398-399.
[20]. Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, 231-3.
[21]. Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, 238-9.
[22]. Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, 361.
[23]. Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, 25.
[24]. Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, 9.
[25]. Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, 361.