Through the Looking Glass—A Peek of Afghanistan through The Kite Runner

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I. Introduction

A. Motivation

*The Kite Runner* is a popular novel well known for its special settings. While most of the mainstream fictions set their story in a Western background, Afghan-American writer Khaled Hosseini, author of the book, tells the story of his home country, Afghanistan. Although we saw plenty of Afghanistan on the news every day, we did not have a real grasp on what its society is actually like until we read the book. We discovered that with the narrative voice of Amir as our “looking glass,” learning about this distant country has become a rather intriguing experience; details of their various customs and traditions and the strained relations between different ethnic groups and religions are all coming alive in Hosseini’s incredible storytelling skills. As the news coverage or the textbooks oftentimes touches only the surface of this fascinating country, we decided to take this opportunity to examine the social and political aspects of Afghanistan in depth.

B. Purpose

With *The Kite Runner* as a springboard, we seek to dive into the depths of Afghanistan culture, its society structure, and the interactions among different ethnic groups. However, since it is difficult to understand a complex culture in such a short period of time, we decided to narrow down to a few topics that are particularly interesting or influential in today’s global community, so that those frequently heard terms on the news will not go to waste. Therefore, research will be conducted in the following manner:

1. **Analyze** the novel, including its plot, main characters, and the author’s background;
2. **Familiarize** with some fundamental facts regarding Afghanistan to have a fuller picture;
3. **Examine** various aspects of Afghanistan mentioned in the novel, including the following:
   a. the Afghan tradition of kite fighting and kite running;
   b. overview of the infamous terrorist group Taliban;
   c. a brief history of Islam and of the Sunni/Shi’a schism;
   d. Hazara persecution, with its connection to religious conflicts and to the novel itself.

C. Scope and Methods
After some initial research, we discover that information on Afghanistan as a whole is more than abundant, making it a little too much to be comprehensive. Therefore, we decided to break down our findings from the following sources into small sections and subsections:

1. Look for reliable websites online that provides details of Afghan history and culture overview;
2. Find essays and previous research papers on the subject;
3. Borrow books (translated works) from our own school library for detailed information.

With the knowledge gathered as support, we will introduce the issue of this matter progressively, first by giving a synopsis of the book, then an overview of Afghanistan as a country. Next we delve into the complexity of Afghan society, going from topic to topic, as categorized in the previous section. The research focuses on events covered by the story, from the 1960s to present. While referring back to the story of *The Kite Runner* from time to time, so the readers can easily see the connection between Hosseini’s story and the information of our research, and our purpose of understanding the Afghan culture through Hosseini’s thrilling tale will be fully realized.

II. Thesis

A. About the Book: A Simple Background

1. The Story

   This is a book about friendship, history and discrimination. Growing up together in Kabul, Amir and Hassan are best friends, despite their different social status in the Afghan society. However, when Amir witnesses the tragedy that has happened to Hassan after their last kite fighting competition, he never finds the courage to speak up. Unable to face his own cowardice, Amir sets up a plot to force Hassan and his father Ali out of their home, but the guilt continues to follow him throughout his adulthood after he immigrates to America. It wasn’t until decades later, when Amir has become a married man and a published writer, that he returns to Afghanistan to rescue late Hassan’s son Sohrab from the war-torn country, as a redemption for the incident on that fateful winter.

2. The Author

   Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, and he was the first child in his family. His father served as a diplomat in the Afghan Foreign Ministry, and his mother was a teacher at a local high school.
At that time, Kabul was a city with Western culture mixed with Afghan traditions. In 1970, Hosseini’s father was sent to Iran, Hosseini taught his family cook, a Hazara, how to read and write. Hosseini was able to read American novels and started to write his own short stories then. Hosseini’s family went back to Kabul in 1973, the year when the Afghan king’s cousin seized the throne, so Hosseini’s family relocated to Paris in 1976. After they were granted political asylum in the United States, they relocated to California. Khaled Hosseini studied in biology, received his medical degree, and became a doctor.

Although he became a successful doctor, he couldn’t stop missing his homeland, which is why he started writing *The Kite Runner* in 2001. Many details in the book was based on his experiences as a boy in Kabul, such as Soraya’s little story of teaching for the first time (P. 163). The book published two years later and got so popular that it soon became an international best-seller.

3. The Main Characters

a. Amir:

   The narrator and the protagonist of the story. He was born in a rich family, and his mother died during his birth. Amir thinks his father, Baba, wishes Amir were more like him, so he tries hard to be outstanding and have a strong desire to win the kite flying games. His best friend is Hassan, a Hazara boy who always does things for Amir. Because of his weakness, Amir doesn’t step forward for Hassan when Hassan needs him the most, which leads to a fault which never ceases to haunt him. However, everything has changed since the king was overthrown. Amir and his father go to the United States and starts a new life, but his guilt makes him return to his homeland to rescue Hassan’s son when Rahim Khan, his father’s old friend tell him to do so.

b. Hassan:

   He was a Hazara and a servant’s son. (But in actuality he was Baba’s son, which means he was Amir’s half-brother.) He is good at predicting where the kite will fall down, so he always runs and gets the kite for Amir. Although Amir doesn’t treat him well, he protects Amir whenever Amir is in trouble. He dies in a Taliban attack, for attempting to protect Amir’s old house.

B. Afghanistan In a Glance
Afghanistan is a landlocked nation in South and Central Asia, with the country of Pakistan in the south and east, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan in the north, Iran in the west, and China in the far northeast. The climate is generally arid, the landscape mountainous, with an often harsh and snowy winter. Due to its strategic location along the ancient Silk Road, the region has always been the ground for interactions between various cultural groups of people from the Central Asian, South Asia, as well as the Middle East, among them Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan.

Being the crossroads of civilizations for centuries, Afghanistan nurtures a diverse culture with multiple ethnicities that reside in the region now. Among the most populous are the Pashtuns (42%), followed by Tajik (27%), Uzbek (9%), and the Hazaras (8%).

More recently, the country has served as the middle ground for Western political conflicts, most notably the Soviet Union’s support of the communist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) that led to a civil war, and the reign of Taliban, both included in the story.

C. Major Themes of Afghanistan In the Novel

1. Kite Fighting

   a. Overview

   Kite fighting, or Gudiparan Pazi, has been popular among Afghans for more than 100 years. Flying kite has become much more than just a hobby for many Afghans. As designing a good kite and a strong wire, or par, requires considerable skill and effort, it has long since turned from a simple outdoor sport into a form of art. Once one of the Afghan national games, it was banned after the Taliban made many traditional Afghan customs illegal. Fortunately, after the Taliban reign was over, kite flying is legalized again and is now an important part of Afghan culture. In the story, flying kites is the major entertainment for Amir and Hassan during the three-month winter vacation, and the annual kite flying event is the highlight of Kabul’s winter for everyone.

   b. Nuts And Bolts

   The best season to fly a kite in Afghanistan is autumn because of the local climate, but there are such activities in other seasons as well, depending on the region—for instance, it is noted in the
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book that the best season for kite flying in Kabul would be winter. In addition, the big kite-fighting day is Friday, when lots of boys and men flock to their rooftops, carrying their own designed kites. The activity is usually carried out in a team of two, with one person, called “Charka Gir,” holding the spool or string, and the other, the “Gudiparan Baz,” acting as the kite flyer and controlling the kite’s movement in the air. (*History of Kite Running, by Sophia Rachad*) However, true victory does not come as easily as cutting everyone else’s kite in the competition; “running” the kite is an essential part of winning. Bringing back the fallen kites is considered great honor, especially the last one to be cut at the kite flying competition. Hassan’s specialty in kite running in this novel, appropriately named *The Kite Runner*, has allowed him to bring back the honor from time to time, though it is also because of this that he runs into trouble with the bully Assef on that cold winter day of 1975.

2. Islam

The main religion in Afghanistan is Islam, which has split into many branches, and the division between Sunnis and Shi’a is the largest and oldest in the history of Islam.

![Diagram of Islam branches and schools](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam)


a. The Schism

As commonly known by even the non-Muslims, the religion of Islam originated with their famous Prophet Muhammad. In 632 AD, after Muhammad’s death in the city of Medina, there were arguments amongst the Muslim elders regarding the appointment of their new leader, or *Caliphs*. After a few changes of leadership and a civil war, the majority supported Muawiya to take
power, who later founded the first-ever Islam dynasty Umayyads. While those who believed that the Prophet’s cousin and son in-law, Ali, should take the position, became Shias.

b. Shi’a and Sunni

The Sunnis, descendants of those that have supported Muhammad’s close companions as leaders and denying a hereditary spiritual leader, identify themselves as “people of the tradition,” and take up 75%-90% of the Muslims today. They follow the Hadith, or the recounting of Muhammad’s teachings, as well as the four madh’hab, or schools of thoughts, in dealing with legal matters.

On the other hand, the Shias, people of the Household of the Prophet, only consist 10%-20% of the Muslim community, and insist that the leadership should be passed through hereditary and the leader’s authority is infallible because it was authorized directly from God. There are many branches inside Shia Islam, each accepting different descendants of Ali as their leaders.

Both parties follow the Koran, the Muslim holy book, and generally agree on the essence of the Five Pillars, but that is where their similarities end. As the Muslims continue to expand their territory, the differences between the two main branches also deepen, and their conflicts remain ceaseless even today, as seen in the examples in the next section.

3. Hazara Persecution

Although one of the major ethnic groups, the Hazara is historically the most restrained group in Afghanistan, as persecution of the Shi’á Hazaras has subsisted for centuries. The vast majority of this group being Shi’á Muslims, as opposed to the Sunni Muslims that took up the rest of the Afghan population, meaning that they would be subject to long-term oppression from the mainstream society.

a. Historic background

Perhaps the most notorious of these suppressors was the Pashtun ruler Amir Abdul Rahman (1880–1901). When the Hazara tribes rose up to revolt against his reign, Rahman sent troops to crush them by massacring their men, enslaving their women and children, forcibly replacing Hazara’s Shi’á mullahs (religious teachers) with their Sunni counterparts, and looting their homes. By the time
Rahman took control of their city Hazarajat in 1893, it is estimated that 60% of the Hazara population had been wiped out completely, tilting the Afghan scale of population as the Hazaras thus became one of the smaller minority groups. Aside from Pashtuns, Tajiks and Uzbeks are all thought to have taken part in the raids and violence, but there is barely any mention of the injustice committed in the official Afghan history books.

The persecution continued on to the 19th century, as Hazaras kept struggling to make a living at the brink of society. It is suggested that upon 1970s, there were still mullahs, preaching the idea that killing the Hazaras was a key to paradise.

b. Hazara persecution in the kite runner

Such atrocities may sound a bit far-fetched to foreigners, but the extent to which the Pashtuns would go to harm the Hazaras is not as hard to believe with Amir’s description of his own experience at youth. Throughout his childhood years he had seen Hassan and his father Ali having to put up with neighborhood children’s endless taunts, silently. In school the teachers rarely ever taught history from the Hazara’s perspective, aside from the fact that they were descendants of the Moguls. Amir’s entire view on the Hazaras changed, though, when he unearthed one of the rare history books that told of the actual history of the Hazara people:

“I read that my people, the Pashtuns... had ‘quelled them [the Hazaras] with unspeakable violence’... killed the Hazaras, driven them from their lands, burned their homes, and sold their women... The book said a lot of things I didn’t know, things my teachers [and]... Baba hadn’t mentioned either.” (P.10, The Kite Runner)

When Amir decided to show the groundbreaking discovery to his teacher, he got the reaction that could serve as a good explanation as to why Afghanistan continues to have younger Pashtun generations grow up thinking the Hazaras are naturally the more inferior in society, having been taught by the very idea by mullahs, such as the one mentioned below:

“He [the teacher] skimmed through a couple of pages, snickered, handed the bookback. ‘That’s the one thing Shi’a people do well...passing themselves as martyrs.’ He wrinkled his nose when he said the word Shi’a, like it was some kind of disease.” (P.10, The Kite Runner)
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4. Taliban

a. Development

"Taliban" means "student" in Persian, so most of its members are students from Islamic schools in the Afghanistan refugee camps. At first, there were only 800 people in this group. However, the Taliban aimed to eradicate the warlord, rebuild the country’s glory, fought bravely, and made promise to fight corruption and restore business, so it won the support of lots of Afghan civilians. By winning so much support, the Taliban's strength expanded rapidly. It soon developed into a team with about 3 million people, hundreds of tanks and dozens of fighter jets.

In 1995, between May and June, the Taliban launched a war, and soon controlled nearly 40 percent of Afghanistan's regions. Then, they attacked Kabul, where the characters of *The Kite Runner* lived during their childhood. On September 26, 1995, they occupied the radio, television and the presidential palace. The Taliban had full control of the capital, and took control over 90 percent of Afghanistan’s territory. The Taliban claimed to build the world's purest Islamic country, but there was no obvious progress on the achievements of national reconstruction after it took control. Because of the deteriorating of economy and the epidemic, the support from Afghan civilians declined.

From 1996 to 2001, the Taliban established a national regime in Afghanistan. Its official name is the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Due to its authoritarian and theocratic policies, only three countries admitted its legitimacy: Pakistan, United Arab Emirates and Saudi-Arabia.

b. Ideology

The Taliban’s extremely strict and anti-modern ideology has been described as a "innovative forms of combination of Sharia laws Pashtun tribal law."

The Taliban explained Islam in a radical way. It banned many activities that the old regime allowed, such as women's right of employment and education, movies, television, music, dance and other activities. It established religious police who was responsible for enforcing the prohibitions, and the offenders can be whipped. However, most Afghans are not Pashtuns, they pursued more liberal rules of Islam previously. The Taliban also opposed "tribal and feudal structure" and wiped away the leading role of the traditional tribal leaders. On the other hand, since they did not want to share power
with others and most of them were Pashtuns, their ruling means that the multi-ethnic Afghanistan would be ruled by Pashtuns.

The Taliban strongly opposed Shiites, and claimed that Hazaras were not Muslim. The Taliban did not want to debate doctrines with other Muslims, even Muslim reporters were not allowed to question or discuss their interpretation of the Koran decrees.

III. Conclusion

For most Taiwanese students, understanding the world around us and expanding our worldview may sound like a heavy task. However, such a faraway country as Afghanistan comes alive through the well-woven story told by Khaled Hosseini. As we follow Amir’s progress, we are also traveling through the heart of the rich Afghan culture. With the help of some background research and a detailed analysis of the book, we feel more connected to this mysterious land than we ever will with only information on newspapers or textbooks. We hope that in the future, there will be more novels of diverse backgrounds to enrich our learning experiences, as reading well-written fictions, is very much informative as it is entertaining.

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