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Caricatures of Afghani Ethnic Divide and Migrations in Marc Forster's *The Kite Runner*

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Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic country and society. Its ethnic groups have lived together for more than 5000 years in this region and they have gathered together many times against the Great Empires and the Soviet Union and defeated them and have maintained their freedom. Due to Afghanistan's geo-strategic location, the powerful countries have tried to have a direct or an indirect influence in this country's political strategy (military, economy, and social affairs). These foreign powers have always created problems among these ethnic groups for getting through their own interests. In this sense, the country's multi ethnicity has hampered its development as a nation. Today, this discrimination has become like an indirect civil war in this land.

Ethnicity is often a bigger determiner of a people's identity and worldview than race or nationality. In countries like America or Afghanistan there may be many ethnicities that compose a single nationality, each with its own unique point of view. The movie tackles the issue of ethnic discrimination in Afghanistan with an example of the relationship between Pashtuns and Hazaras. Differences in perception among different racial group can affect the country or the place's social cohesion and cause conflict.

Many ethnicities compose a single nationality, each with its own unique point of view. The term "Afghan" refers to the indigenous peoples inhabiting the lands between the Amu Darya and the Indus River, mainly south of the Hindu Kush around the Sulaiman Mountains. Believed to be synonymous with "Afghani speaker" (Pashto speaker), the name eventually became the national identity of Afghanistan in modern times. Yet this is not the real picture. Afghanistan has no ethnic majority, the largest ethnic group being the Pashtuns, accounting for 45% of total population. Despite being a multinational state, irredentist disputes between Pakistan's pashtun lands still continue.

While national culture of Afghanistan is not uniform, at the same time, the various ethnic groups have no clear boundaries between each other and there is much overlap. The population of the country is divided into a wide variety of ethno linguistic groups. Additionally, ethnic groups are not racially homogenous. The ethnic groups of the country are as follow: Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Aimak, Turkmen, Baloch, Pashai, Nuristani, Gujjar, Arab, Brahui, Pamiri and some others. The Hazaras are a Persian-speaking people who reside mainly in the Hazarajat region in central Afghanistan. They seem to have partial Mongolian origins with admixture from surrounding indigenous, Iranian-speaking groups.

War and the trauma of the Taliban have made Afghanistan an unlikely setting for literary fiction, and have given its writers little opportunity to be heard in the west. California-based Khaled Hosseini's first novel is an attempt to correct this, and to remind us of the anonymity it enjoyed before the Soviet invasion in 1979. Accepting John Tomlinson's idea (in Globalization

and Culture) that the “complex connectivities” of globalizing practices and discourses “confound” conventional social science practices, this paper suggests that literary texts that engage these issues may enjoy an advantage in negotiating such complexities. But it also argues that new configurations of diaspora and globalization offer writers and readers the chance to shift. *The Kite Runner* tackles the issue of ethnic discrimination in Afghanistan between Pashtuns and Hazaras.

Baba's father sets an example for him of being kind to Hazara people, even though they are historically demeaned and persecuted. He could have easily sent Ali to an orphanage after his parents' death, but chose to raise him in his household. Baba does the same with Hassan, although this is complicated by the fact that Hassan is actually his son. Baba known locally by the honorific title “Agha Sahib”, a philanthropist and iconoclast, is a Dari-speaking Tajik living in Pashtun-dominated Kabul who hates what the communists are doing. Amir and Hassan are often bullied by an older Pashtun boy, Assef and his two friends, who harbor ethnic hatred against Hazaras. Assef taunts Amir by saying that he has no friends but one and that too Hassan a Hazara who he pays to be his friend. He says, “We are the real Afghan. Not this flat nosed Hazara. His people pollute our homeland. They dirty our blood.”

Even in Baba's house, the house of best intentions, the class barrier between the Pashtuns and Hazaras endures. Ali is as dear to Baba as a brother; he calls him "family." But Ali still lives in a hut and sleeps on a mattress on the floor. He tends the garden, cooks, and cleans up after Baba, and raises Hassan to do the same. So strong is Hassan's identity as a servant that even as an adult, when Baba is gone, he has no sense of entitlement. He insists on staying in the hut and doing housework. When Hassan dies defending Baba's house, he does so not because he feels it belongs to him, but because he is being loyal to Baba and Amir.

In Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, discrimination is everywhere and nowhere at the same time. On the one hand, the Taliban do not seem to care whom they are beating, torturing, or executing. Children like Sohrab are all susceptible to the Taliban's cruelty. In this way, the Talibs discriminate against everyone but themselves. As Amir notices, Assef forces Sohrab to dance to music for his enjoyment dancing and listening to music have long been banned. Music wasn't sinful as long as it played to Taliban ears. On another level, the Taliban discriminate specifically against the Hazara people. Assef and his fellows do not see the Hazaras' lives as worthwhile; they barely see them as human. Assef tells Amir, "Afghanistan is like a beautiful mansion littered with garbage, and someone has to take out the garbage." Like his idol, Hitler, he feels entitled to killing those he deems unworthy of living in his land. He even relishes the term "ethnic cleansing" because it goes so well with his garbage metaphor.

The Taliban emerged in late 1994 and owing to the influence of traditionalist networks of Islamic scholars and village mullahs, the Taliban found supporters mainly in the Pashtun population. At first the organization avoided ethnic rhetoric, but gradually it began using pro-Pashtun as well as anti-Shia arguments. In the aftermath of armed confrontations with other groups, the Taliban often arrested and harassed people only for ethnic reasons. The movie bravely shows the movement's dominantly Pashtun membership and the frequency of ethnic violence have only contributed to further manifest ethnicity as a central component of the conflict in Afghanistan.

Like Baba, many people do not mention the Hazaras' history of persecution. Perhaps these people are so uncomfortable with this topic because by having Assef appear in pre-Taliban times and emerge as a leading Taliban, it shows that the Taliban's persecution of the Hazaras and other Shiites is not new, but a greatly intensified outgrowth of long-held discrimination. Working

from Khaled Hosseini's best seller novel, Marc Forster the director and his screenwriter David Benioff have made a film that sidesteps the emotional disconnects we often feel when a story moves between past and present.

The Kite Runner presents a world informed by a variant of original sin. It calmly describes the relationship between Amir, the son of a powerful Kabul businessman, and Hassan, whose father Ali is a faithful family servant. The nucleus of The Kite Runner is strong. Amir, the motherless only child of the widely loved Baba, has grown up with Hassan, a member of the abused Hazara minority who is both his servant and his best friend. Hassan is forever defending Amir from bullies. Amir is determined to win a kite-flying tournament to secure his father's approval. But on the afternoon of the contest Amir finds Hassan being beaten and raped by a local thug Assef and two boys. Amir, later escapes with his father during the Soviet invasion and settles in America. However, he feels immense guilt over his behaviour toward his Hazara childhood friend Hassan and returns years later to rescue Hassan's son Sohrab who has become enslaved by the Taliban.

Beyond their significance to the script, kites have multiple layers of symbolism in the story. One of these layers involves the class difference between Amir and Hassan, which largely dictates and limits their relationship. In kite fighting, one boy controls the kite while the other assists by feeding the string. Just as Hassan makes Amir's breakfast, folds his clothes, and cleans his room, so does he cater to Amir in kite tournaments.

When the boys fly kites together, they are on the same team. They are more like brothers then, than perhaps any other time, because the activity is somewhat mutual. It allows them to momentarily escape their differences and enjoy a shared sense of exhilaration and freedom. The movie *The Kite Runner* shows a kite flying very high over Kabul. This image represents Amir and Hassan's shared sense of freedom, one that takes them away from life's realities until the kite is grounded again.

Even though Hassan shares in the excitement of kite fighting, he does not actually have control over the kite. Hassan may help the kite "lift-and-dive," but Amir is the one who claims a victory. Hassan may catch a cherished rival kite and hold it in his arms, but always to bring it back to Amir, to whom it then belongs. His joy is vicarious, just like his experience of wealth and privilege while living in Baba's household. In order to free himself of selfishness and cowardice, Amir must go from being merely a kite fighter-someone who seeks glory-to a kite runner, someone who genuinely does things for others.

The movie reveals the suffering the nation has experienced in a quarter century of conflict. Violence pervades the novel, even in the seemingly innocuous activity of kite fighting. Not only is kite fighting violent because it is a kind of battle. This fact suggests that Afghanistan has become a place where joy cannot exist separately from pain; Afghans' memories of their homeland are tainted with suffering. The script centers on a single act of violence, Hassan's rape, and the sin Amir commits by pretending that violence did not occur. Symbolically, Hassan's rape is echoed by Sohrab's rape decades later and by Afghanistan's continual rape by war and terrorism.

These are the days that cultural historians will look back on as the golden age of movie adaptations, what is noticeable is that David Benioff's screenplay doesn't broadcast its political naïveté openly, but gestures in the direction of Communists and mullahs, the Soviet invaders and the Taliban insurgents. While unfolding the epic tale of a father and son forced to flee Kabul after the Soviet invasion, Mr. Forster specifically tried to recreate a feeling of Kabul in the

1970s, of streets filled with color and of life in a country whose middle class brimmed with hope, and then revisit the city years later, after the Soviet invasion, to explore the sense of lost identity among exiles and returnees whose country has been raped and destroyed.

It is interesting to study the question of Amir's national identity is especially complex and the most strange question is how he could be enthralled with the idea of America. Amir has an Afghan part of my life, with an Afghan wife and music and food and community, and the so-called American side with his American environment and people. Somehow the two is shown to be intertwined and we don't see that hyphen in the middle. The story is set against a backdrop of tumultuous events, from the fall of the monarchy in Afghanistan through the Soviet military intervention, the mass exodus of Afghan refugees to Pakistan and the United States, and the Taliban regime. The portrayal of Afghanistan is bleak and the images are dry, rocky and barren whilst Fremont, California in America, the land of 'freedom' is all lush and green in every frame.

Baba sees America as a refuge and becomes enthralled, as Amir says, with "the *idea* of America." He identifies with American optimism and freedom of choice, but up until his death, Baba is a guest in America; Afghanistan is undeniably the place where he can be himself. There, he was a successful and influential figure. In America, he must work at the gas station, and operates a stall at a weekly flea market and suffer the humiliation of being a foreigner. The Kite Runner is warm with the sense of old Kabul and the Afghan community in exile. Amir's parents-in-law are telling social stereotypes of those Afghans who are spending their time in US till a time comes when they will return back to their native country. The story roams well beyond Kabul, notably to parts of Pakistan and to San Francisco, where Afghan exiles live bound and haunted by a common sense of loss.

For young Amir, America is not only politically free, but more importantly, free of Hassan and related memories. Amir earns a degree at a local community college and Baba is disappointed that Amir wants to be a writer rather than a physician. Because he comes into adulthood in America, Amir does not suffer along with his fellow Afghans. As he discovers, this makes all the difference in defining his national identity.

Amir's returning to Afghanistan should by all accounts be a homecoming, but he can never truly revisit his homeland; it no longer exists as he knew it. In the interim between Amir's flight from Kabul and his return, the Soviets, warring factions, and the Taliban have turned it from a culturally rich and bustling place into a ghost town of beggars among the rubble and hanging corpses. Amir can no longer be an Afghan because being an Afghan has become synonymous with having survived terror, if not much worse.

According to Farid the driver who smuggles him to and fro to Afghanistan, however, Amir never had an Afghan identity to lose. He tells Amir that his privileged upbringing has made him a "tourist" in Afghanistan all his life. Amir himself tells Rahim Khan that he cannot go to Afghanistan because he has a wife, a home, and a life in America. Through these conversations, we are left asking what constitutes a homeland, a *watan*. If Farid is right, then Amir has no homeland. However, once Farid finds out why Amir has returned to Afghanistan, he changes his opinion of him. He seems to accept him as a friend, if not a countryman.

One's homeland depends not only on one's emotional attachment to a place but one's tangible devotion to it. To make a place one's homeland, one must be willing not merely to dwell on nostalgic feelings but to put them into action- like Amir, by trying to save Sohrab Hassan's son from the homeland itself. Back in San Francisco, Amir introduces Sohrab to Soraya, and gladly welcome him into their home. But Amir's father-in-law, General Taheri, claiming he has to answer to their community, demands to know why they have taken in "that Hazara boy." Amir

reveals that Sohrab is his half-brother Hassan's son. Sternly he says he is no more a Hazara boy. He has a name and it's Sohrab. The film ends with Amir teaching Sohrab how to fly kites and volunteering to act as Sohrab's "runner", and running off to fetch the kite, saying the iconic words "For you, a thousand times over..."

Determined to thoroughly redeem his protagonist, a series of parallels are created that allow Amir to undo some of his former wrongs, and a series of cringe-making coincidences that bring the story full circle. Some of these may be close to poetic justice - as when he receives facial injury in a beating, but most of them are nothing but convincing. The final twist is a tug too many on the viewer's heartstrings and evokes impatience, rather than distress. Despite all this the film has a huge heart, lots of emotion and there's something in this film that transcends cultural barriers. The movie may not paint the story with a broad Middle Eastern brush. The movie starts as a fiercely moral but subtly told story and occasionally it becomes an unconvincing melodrama, more concerned with packing in the action than with convincing integrity.

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