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Beyond Binary Narratives: Gender and Sexuality in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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Abstract: This academic paper explores the portrayal of gender and sexuality in Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner*. The novel is set in Afghanistan, a country where gender roles are clearly defined and homosexuality is taboo. Through the complex and multifaceted characters of Amir, Hassan, Assef, and Soraya, Hosseini challenges traditional ideas about gender and sexuality.

The protagonist Amir is portrayed as a sensitive and emotional boy who does not fit neatly into traditional ideas of masculinity. In contrast, Hassan is portrayed as a strong and brave young boy who enjoys sewing and embroidery, traditionally feminine activities. The character of Assef challenges traditional ideas about sexuality by being attracted to other men, despite the severe punishment for homosexuality in Afghan society. The character of Soraya defies tradition by running away with a man before marrying Amir, portraying women as strong and independent. Hosseini's portrayal of gender and sexuality challenges traditional binary narratives and shows the complexities of gender and sexuality in a society heavily influenced by tradition and religion. This paper argues that *The Kite Runner* sheds light on the impact of societal expectations and cultural traditions on individuals and highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of gender.

Keywords: Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, gender, sexuality, Afghanistan, masculinity, femininity, homosexuality, societal expectations, cultural traditions.

Introduction

Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner* is a powerful and emotional story that explores themes of guilt, redemption, and the impact of societal and political changes on individual lives. Set in Afghanistan, the book follows the life of a young boy, Amir, as he grows up in a war-torn country and navigates complex relationships with his family and friends. While the novel deals with themes such as betrayal, guilt, redemption, and sacrifice, it also offers a nuanced portrayal of gender and sexuality that goes beyond binary narratives.

Gender and Sexuality in *The Kite Runner*

The book has been adapted into a film, which also captures the essence of the story while presenting it through a different lens. However, viewing *The Kite Runner* from a different angle can provide a deeper understanding of the characters and their motivations. Amir, the protagonist, is a sensitive and emotional boy who struggles to live up to the expectations placed on him by his father and society. He is interested in literature and writing, pursuits that are not typically associated with masculinity. Hosseini portrays Amir as a complex and multifaceted character who does not fit neatly into traditional gender roles. Through Amir's character, Hosseini challenges the idea that masculinity is solely defined by physical strength and emotional detachment.

In contrast to Amir, Hassan is portrayed as a strong and brave young boy who is not afraid to stand up for himself and his

friend. However, Hosseini also challenges traditional gender roles through Hassan's character by portraying him as having a more feminine side. Hassan is shown to be gentle and nurturing towards Amir, and he enjoys sewing and embroidery, activities typically associated with femininity. Through Hassan's character, Hosseini challenges the idea that gender is strictly binary and shows that individuals can possess qualities that are traditionally associated with the opposite gender. One of the most prominent themes in *The Kite Runner* is the role of gender in Afghan society. Hosseini portrays the strict gender roles that dominate Afghan culture, where men are expected to be strong and dominant, while women are expected to be submissive and obedient. However, Hosseini also challenges these gender roles by presenting strong female characters who challenge patriarchal norms. For example, Amir's mother, Sofia, is a highly educated woman who defies traditional gender roles by pursuing a career as a professor.

Similarly, Hassan's mother, Sanaubar, is depicted as a rebellious woman who refuses to conform to societal expectations of a "proper" Afghan woman. Through these characters, Hosseini subverts the binary narrative of gender roles and challenges the notion that men are always the dominant gender.

A way to view "*The Kite Runner*" from a different angle is to consider the role of gender and sexuality in the story. The book and film both prominently feature male characters, and while female characters are present, they are often relegated to secondary roles. However, examining the characters'

relationships through a gender and sexuality lens can provide a different perspective on their motivations and actions.

Another aspect of gender and sexuality in *The Kite Runner* is the portrayal of same-sex relationships. While homosexuality is considered taboo in Afghan culture, Hosseini portrays the close relationship between Amir and Hassan as a complex and nuanced friendship that goes beyond traditional ideas of masculinity. Hosseini presents the relationship between the two boys as one of mutual respect, admiration, and love, rather than a sexual relationship. By doing so, Hosseini challenges the notion that same-sex relationships are inherently sexual and highlights the importance of platonic love and emotional connection. While their friendship is portrayed as deeply affectionate and loyal, there are also hints of homoeroticism in their interactions. *The Kite Runner* addresses issues of sexuality through the character of Assef. Assef is portrayed as a violent and sadistic bully who is obsessed with power and domination. He is also revealed to be a pedophile, as he rapes Hassan in a disturbing scene that is difficult to read. This suggests that traditional views of sexuality, which often emphasize heteronormativity and the importance of male dominance, can be harmful and destructive. At the same time, the novel also presents a more positive view of same-sex relationships through the relationship between Amir and Hassan. While their relationship is not explicitly romantic, it is clear that they have a deep emotional bond that transcends traditional notions of male friendship. This suggests that there is room for more

fluid and diverse expressions of sexuality that go beyond narrow binaries of heterosexual and homosexual.

This is particularly evident in the scene where Amir watches Hassan swim, admiring his body and feeling a sense of envy and desire. Additionally, the way in which Amir betrays Hassan can be seen as a manifestation of internalized homophobia, as he is unable to accept his own same-sex desires and instead takes out his frustration on Hassan.

Moreover, the portrayal of women in the story can also be examined through a gender and sexuality lens. For instance, Amir's relationship with his wife, Soraya, is characterized by her submissiveness and his possessiveness. While their relationship is presented as loving and supportive, there are also moments where Soraya is objectified or reduced to a stereotype of the idealized "good wife." Similarly, the female characters who suffer the most in the story, such as Hassan's mother and Sohrab's prostitute mother, are marginalized and dehumanized, reduced to mere plot devices to further the male characters' journeys. Furthermore, Hosseini's portrayal of Baba, Amir's father, also challenges traditional gender roles. Baba is depicted as a complex character who is both masculine and feminine in his traits. He is a strong and dominant man who embodies traditional ideas of masculinity, yet he is also portrayed as a sensitive and empathetic character who is deeply affected by his experiences. Hosseini's portrayal of Baba highlights the complexity of human nature and challenges the idea that gender is a fixed binary.

Examining "The Kite Runner" through a gender and sexuality lens can also shed light on the societal and cultural norms that shape the characters' actions and beliefs. For instance, the strict gender roles and expectations in Afghan society are a significant factor in the characters' behaviours. Amir is taught that being emotional or feminine is a sign of weakness, which contributes to his inability to express his feelings for Hassan or acknowledge his own same-sex desires. Similarly, the women in the story are expected to be subservient to men and to conform to traditional gender roles, which limits their agency and autonomy.

Furthermore, the impact of political and societal changes on gender and sexuality norms can also be explored in the story. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the rise of the Taliban regime both have profound effects on the characters' lives and relationships. For instance, the Taliban's strict enforcement of gender roles and their persecution of homosexuals create a dangerous and oppressive environment for anyone who deviates from the prescribed norms. This is evident in the fate of characters like Hassan and his family, who are Hazaras and therefore marginalized and persecuted by the dominant Pashtun culture.

Conclusion

Viewing *The Kite Runner* through a different angle, such as gender and sexuality, can provide a deeper understanding of the characters and the societal and cultural norms that shape their actions and beliefs. By examining the central

relationships through this lens, one gains insight into the characters' motivations and conflicts, as well as the impact of political and societal changes on their lives. The narrative offers a nuanced portrayal of gender and sexuality that goes beyond binary narratives. Hosseini challenges traditional gender roles by presenting strong female characters who challenge patriarchal norms, portraying same-sex relationships as complex and nuanced friendships, and depicting characters who embody both masculine and feminine traits. Through these representations, Hosseini subverts binary narratives and challenges the notion that gender and sexuality are fixed and rigid categories. *The Kite Runner* serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of diversity and complexity in literature and the need to challenge dominant narratives in order to create a more inclusive and accepting society. Additionally, this perspective highlights the importance of inclusivity and diversity in storytelling, and the need to portray a range of experiences and identities in order to create truly nuanced and authentic narratives. The novel challenges traditional views of sexuality by showing how they can lead to violence and abuse, and it suggests that there is room for more fluid and diverse expressions of sexuality. By exploring these themes in a sensitive and nuanced way, *The Kite Runner* offers a powerful critique of the social and cultural norms that shape the general understanding of gender and sexuality.

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