

## AFGHANISTAN'S SOCIOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE IN THE KITE RUNNER: A NEW HISTORICIST PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini as an accurate portrayal of Afghanistan during times of war and turmoil. Numerous wars and conflicts were inflicted upon Afghanistan due to the interests of Russia and America. Russia's invasion of Afghanistan resulted in the emergence of the Taliban, leading to war, famine, insecurity, and a refugee crisis in the country. Russian soldiers had ravaged Afghanistan's village, school, and natural resources. Taliban also banned cultural practices such as kite flying. They demolished both the Hazara ethnic group and the Buddha cultural heritage in Bamiyan. During the Cold War, America indirectly supported the Taliban against Russia. The political landscape shifted dramatically after the 9/11 attacks in New York City, leading America to seize control by framing it as a fight against terrorism, thereby exerting dominance over the Afghan people. Hosseini's seminal fiction portrays this cultural crisis and ethnic conflict. This qualitative research utilizes the novel as the primary data source, interpreting it through the theoretical lenses of New Historicism and Foucault's concepts of history, power, and discourse.

**Key words:** History, seminal fiction, culture, Cold war, historicism, power, discourse

### INTRODUCTION

Stephen Greenblatt, a professor at the University of California, first introduced the concept of "new historicism" in the early 1980s, which later evolved into a notable literary criticism school. Key figures in this movement include Greenblatt, Montrose, and Hayden White. New historicism posits that history and literature are intertwined and should not be considered separately. It argues that history is not merely an authoritative record, nor is literature just an aesthetic construct. Instead, both history and texts share an intertextual relationship, influencing and validating each other.

Khaled Hosseini's novel, *The Kite Runner*, which is set against the backdrop of Afghanistan and the United States in the 1970s, explores themes of human nature, race, and war. Using the traditional Afghan custom of "kite chasing" as a narrative device, the novel delves into the redemption of the human soul in extreme circumstances and the complexities of human nature. This paper aims to analyze the novel's deep themes through the lens of new historicism. Furthermore, Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* depicts

modern Afghan history and the crises resulting from wars. It explores the rise of the Taliban and the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, which led to war, famine, a refugee crisis, and the destruction of Afghan culture.

Consequently, Afghanistan gained global attention after the Soviet army defeated Hafizullah Amin (Gibbs, 2006, p. 2). Amin had made himself the leader of the Communist Party and president of Afghanistan after overthrowing Noor Mohammad Taraki. Taraki had come to power during a Soviet-backed coup in 1977. Amin's regime was brutal, and in 1978, after just five months, the Soviets replaced him with the exiled Babrak Karmal, the leader of the Communist Party faction "Parcham" (the flag). Many believe that Karmal's presidential speech was broadcast not from Radio Kabul, the only official station in Afghanistan, but from somewhere in the Soviet Union before he arrived in the city. Since then, Afghanistan has been widely known around the world. It is fair to say that after the Soviet occupation, Afghanistan

became a major battleground during the Cold War (Gibbs, 2006, p. 2).

When people discovered that Al-Qaeda was behind the 9/11 attacks, the reaction resembled what Freud described as "belatedness." The Taliban regime's brutal actions, including public executions, stoning of gays and adulterers, chopping off criminals' hands, amputations of defeated enemies, racial genocide, and destroying nearly two thousand years of history, brought Afghanistan back into the global spotlight (Gibbs, 2006, p. 4). The country, associated with Al-Qaeda, had been freed during a violent civil war after the fall of the Soviet-backed Communist state, with direct help from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and other extremist groups became synonymous terms.

Khaled Hosseini's novel focuses on Afghan history and its people. The novel titled *The Kite Runner*. The novel's timeline begins in the 1960s, when Afghanistan remained a constitutional monarchy. The story is narrated from a particular point of view. An Afghan native, born and raised in Kabul until adulthood, adolescent. The narrator/protagonist has no other choice but to be an Afghan-American. Amir, a native of Afghanistan, left the country after growing up there. A teenager escaped to the United States following the Soviet invasion and was given asylum. States in which he has resided continuously since then. The primary area of history narrative is influenced by prejudice and tensions between different ethnic groups. In essence, Hosseini essentially crafted his narrative to align with the historical backdrop of Afghanistan. Different aspects considered are ethnicity, religion, language, cultural identification, and imperialism in the discussion. early modern context outcomes stem from the dynamic interaction of cultural, religious, and linguistic connections (Joseph, 2004, p. 3).

While Hosseini vividly portrays the suffering under the Taliban's tyranny, which Amir witnesses upon returning home to aid Hassan and his family. The last part of the book is filled with haunting scenes: a man trying to sell his prosthetic leg to feed his children, an adulterous couple stoned to death during a football game's halftime, and a young boy forced into

prostitution, dancing like a trained monkey. When Amir confronts his old enemy, now a powerful Taliban official, the story takes some unexpected turns more typical of a folktale than a modern novel. However, Amir's compassion and his resolve to make up for his past cowardice ultimately win us over.

In *The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini presents a vivid and compelling narrative that highlights the long struggle of his people against the forces of violence, a struggle that persists even today. The novel spans from the 1970s to 2002, focusing on Afghanistan's complex history. The country gained international attention after the 1973 coup. From 1933 to 1973, Afghanistan was a monarchy under King Zahir Shah. On July 17, 1973, while the king was on vacation, his cousin and former prime minister, Mohammad Daoud Khan, seized power in a nearly bloodless military coup. Despite the lack of widespread violence, the coup was a frightening time for Kabul's residents, who heard rioting and gunfire in the streets. Daoud Khan served as president and prime minister for six years until he was violently overthrown by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) on April 27, 1978. Daoud and most of his family were killed in the coup. Despite Afghanistan's long-standing insistence on independence from Russia, the PDPA was a Communist party with close ties to the Soviet Union. Following the events of September 11, 2001, the United States launched an invasion of Afghanistan and ousted the Taliban from power. In conclusion, *The Kite Runner* is a tale that delves into the realms of history and culture. Hence, the subsequent this part of the presentation will mainly concentrate on the portrayal of modern-day Afghan cultural disaster, ethnic and minorities' dominance, and hegemonic rule in history.

#### **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

New historicism, a style of criticism rooted in history, underscores the literary works encompass both the textual and historical dimensions. practitioners of new historicism, view literature as interconnected with the historical context in which it was written. In contrast to formalists and new critics, they focus on historical and cultural aspects. the

circumstances surrounding a text's creation and its later analysis from critics and treating it as something that requires assessments and appraisals instead of viewing it as completely independent. Moreover, new historicism emphasizes the significance of history and culture. The social fabric includes aspects such as society, politics, institutions, class, and gender circumstances. background, et cetera. Transdisciplinary is an objective in relation to this matter. "interdisciplinary" approach that seeks to break down the boundaries among various fields of study, like history and storytelling (Adhikary, 2020, p.3)

New historicists argue that we can never have an objective understanding of history because historical writing is always influenced by various narrative techniques. This idea is largely inspired by the philosopher and historian Michel Foucault. While Foucault shares many views with new historicists, his redefinition of history has significantly influenced concepts like power, discourse, and identity (Harpham, 1990, p. 8). Foucault referred to texts as "discourse" that, although they may appear to reflect external reality, actually consist of representations. The new historicism movement has built on M.H. Abrams' explanation of this idea (p. 183).

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: NEW HISTORICISM**

New Historicism, a literary theory that emerged in the 1980s, challenges traditional views of literature as isolated works of art, instead emphasizing the interplay between literature and the historical contexts in which it is produced and received. This approach owes much to the influence of Michel Foucault and Stephen Greenblatt, both of whom contributed significantly to its theoretical foundations and methodological practices. To fully understand New Historicism, it's essential to delve into the perspectives of both Foucault and Greenblatt, exploring their contributions and the ways in which they intersect and diverge.

### **1. Michel Foucault's Influence on New Historicism**

Michel Foucault, a French philosopher and social theorist, profoundly impacted New Historicism with his ideas on power, discourse, and the relationship between knowledge and authority. Foucault's work emphasized that history is not a linear progression of events but a series of discourses shaped by power dynamics and social structures. His concepts of power and knowledge as interconnected forces are central to New Historicist analysis.

#### **A. Power/Knowledge and Discourse**

Foucault argued that power and knowledge are inseparable; knowledge is always a form of power, and power is always a means of knowledge. This concept is crucial for New Historicism, which examines how literature and historical texts reflect and reinforce power structures. According to Foucault, discourses—ways of speaking and thinking about the world—are not neutral but are constructed through power relations. These discourses shape our understanding of reality and influence what is considered knowledge.

In New Historicist terms, literature is seen as a site where these power/knowledge dynamics are played out. Literary texts are not just reflections of their time but active participants in shaping and being shaped by historical discourses. For example, a New Historicist reading of Shakespeare might explore how his plays reflect and contribute to the power dynamics of Elizabethan England, examining how they engage with issues like monarchy, gender, and colonialism.

#### **B. The Archaeology and Genealogy of Knowledge**

Foucault's methodologies of archaeology and genealogy are also influential in New Historicism. Archaeology involves uncovering the underlying rules and structures that govern particular historical periods' discourses. Genealogy, on the other hand, traces the development and transformation of these discourses over time, revealing how they are contingent and constructed rather than natural or inevitable.

New Historicists adopt these methods to investigate how literary texts are part of broader cultural practices and how they participate in the formation and transformation of social and political norms. This approach often involves looking at non-literary texts and artifacts to understand the historical conditions that shape literature. For instance, analyzing legal documents, medical texts, or pamphlets alongside a novel can provide insights into how the novel engages with contemporary issues and discourses.

### **C. Panopticism**

Foucault's concept of panopticism, derived from his analysis of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon prison design, is another crucial element in New Historicism. The Panopticon is a metaphor for the pervasive and invisible surveillance that characterizes modern societies. Foucault argues that power in modern societies operates through surveillance and the internalization of disciplinary norms.

New Historicists apply the concept of panopticism to literary texts by examining how they depict surveillance, control, and discipline. They explore how texts reflect and critique the mechanisms of power and control in society. For example, in dystopian literature, New Historicists might analyze how the portrayal of surveillance and totalitarian control reflects contemporary concerns about government and corporate surveillance.

### **2. Greenblatt's Perspective**

Stephen Greenblatt, an American literary critic, is a leading figure in New Historicism. His work emphasizes the interplay between literature and history, focusing on how literary texts both reflect and shape the cultural and social contexts of their time.

### **A. Self-Fashioning**

Greenblatt's concept of "self-fashioning" is central to his approach. Self-fashioning refers to the ways in which individuals construct their identities through cultural practices, including literature. Greenblatt argues that literary texts are a crucial site for self-fashioning, as they provide models of identity and behavior that individuals can emulate or resist. In New Historicist analysis,

self-fashioning involves examining how characters in literary texts construct their identities in relation to the social and cultural norms of their time. This approach also considers how authors themselves engage in self-fashioning through their works, reflecting and negotiating their own positions within the power structures of their society.

### **B. Circulation of Social Energy**

Greenblatt's notion of the "circulation of social energy" highlights the dynamic exchange of ideas, beliefs, and values between literature and society. He argues that literary texts are not isolated artifacts but are embedded within a network of cultural practices and social interactions. Literature both absorbs and influences the "social energy" of its time, participating in the ongoing negotiation of cultural meanings.

New Historicists examine how literary texts engage with the cultural and social energies of their historical context. They analyze how texts reflect contemporary debates, conflicts, and anxieties, and how they contribute to the construction and contestation of cultural meanings. This approach often involves exploring the intertextuality of literary works, tracing their connections to other texts and cultural artifacts.

### **C. Resonance and Wonder**

Greenblatt also introduces the concepts of "resonance" and "wonder" in literary analysis. Resonance refers to the way a text evokes the broader historical and cultural context, creating a sense of depth and connection. Wonder, on the other hand, refers to the text's ability to evoke a sense of astonishment or fascination, often by disrupting familiar perceptions and expectations. In New Historicist readings, resonance involves exploring how a text engages with and reflects the historical and cultural context of its time. This approach often entails analyzing the text's references to historical events, social practices, and cultural norms. Wonder involves examining how the text challenges and expands the reader's understanding, often by presenting alternative perspectives or questioning dominant ideologies.

### 3. Application of Foucauldian and Greenblattian Perspectives

#### 3.1 Foucauldian Perspective on "The Kite Runner"

##### Power and Discourse

From a Foucauldian perspective, "The Kite Runner" can be analyzed in terms of the power dynamics and discourses prevalent in Afghan society. The novel explores various forms of power, including ethnic, social, and political power. The relationship between Amir and Hassan exemplifies the ethnic power dynamics, as Amir belongs to the dominant Pashtun ethnicity, while Hassan is a Hazara, a marginalized ethnic group. This power imbalance shapes their interactions and the unfolding of the story.

Foucault's concept of discourse can be applied to examine how ethnic identities and social hierarchies are constructed and maintained in the novel. The discriminatory attitudes towards Hazaras, as depicted in the novel, are part of the larger societal discourse that marginalizes and dehumanizes this ethnic group. This discourse is reinforced through language, social practices, and institutional structures.

##### Surveillance and Panopticism

Foucault's idea of panopticism, or the internalization of surveillance, can be seen in the way characters in the novel are constantly aware of societal expectations and norms. Amir's actions are heavily influenced by his desire for his father's approval and the fear of social ostracism. This internalized surveillance affects his behavior, leading to his betrayal of Hassan and subsequent guilt.

##### Genealogy of Violence

Foucault's genealogical method can be applied to trace the history and evolution of violence in the novel. The violence in "The Kite Runner" is not just physical but also symbolic and structural. The physical violence inflicted on Hassan and later on Sohrab reflects the larger patterns of ethnic and social violence in Afghan society. A genealogical analysis would explore how these forms of violence are rooted in historical and

cultural discourses, including colonialism, tribalism, and political conflict.

#### 3.2 Greenblatt's Perspective on The Kite Runner

##### Self-Fashioning

Greenblatt's concept of self-fashioning is evident in the character of Amir, who constantly shapes and reshapes his identity in response to his circumstances. His journey from a privileged but insecure boy in Kabul to a successful but guilt-ridden man in America reflects his efforts to reconcile his past actions with his present self. Amir's return to Afghanistan to rescue Sohrab is a significant act of self-fashioning, as he attempts to atone for his past and redefine his identity.

##### Circulation of Social Energy

Greenblatt's idea of the circulation of social energy can be used to analyze how "The Kite Runner" engages with and reflects contemporary social and cultural issues. The novel resonates with themes of redemption, guilt, and forgiveness, which are universal and timeless. At the same time, it addresses specific historical and political contexts, such as the Soviet invasion, the rise of the Taliban, and the experience of Afghan immigrants in America.

The novel's depiction of these events and issues contributes to the circulation of social energy, as it engages readers' emotions and prompts them to reflect on similar issues in their own lives and societies. This dynamic exchange between the text and its readers creates a rich tapestry of cultural meanings and interpretations.

##### Resonance and Wonder

Greenblatt's concepts of resonance and wonder can also be applied to The Kite Runner. The novel resonates with historical and cultural references, creating a sense of depth and connection to the broader context of Afghan history and society. For example, the descriptions of Kabul before and after the Soviet invasion evoke a sense of nostalgia and loss, resonating with readers who may have experienced similar upheavals in their own countries.

The novel also evokes wonder through its vivid and evocative storytelling, particularly in its portrayal of the kite running competitions and the stark beauty of the Afghan landscape. This sense

of wonder challenges readers' perceptions and invites them to see the world through the eyes of the characters, fostering empathy and understanding.

Applying Foucauldian and Greenblattian perspectives to *The Kite Runner* enriches our understanding of the novel by highlighting the complex interplay between power, discourse, identity, and cultural context. New Historicism, influenced by the theories of Michel Foucault and Stephen Greenblatt, offers a rich and nuanced approach to literary criticism. By emphasizing the historical and cultural context of literary texts, New Historicism provides a framework for understanding how literature both reflects and shapes the power dynamics and social energies of its time. A Foucauldian analysis reveals how the novel reflects and critiques the power dynamics and discourses of Afghan society, while a Greenblattian approach emphasizes the ways in which the novel engages with and shapes contemporary cultural and social energies. Together, these perspectives offer a comprehensive and nuanced interpretation of *The Kite Runner*, illuminating its themes, characters, and historical context.

### **New Historicist Analysis of Hosseini's *The Kite Runner***

In the novel *The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini presents the contemporary history of Afghanistan. It describes how the combination of war can devastate a country and people. *The Kite Runner* also illuminates the fact that most Afghan refugees are just that peace-loving, law-abiding people who are in America because their beloved homeland has been rendered uninhabitable. Furthermore, the religious and ethnic consciousness shapes the individual mind resulting heart aching domination.

### **The Sociopolitical Aspects in *The Kite Runner***

Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* delves deeply into the sociopolitical landscape of Afghanistan, providing a vivid portrayal of the country's turbulent history from the 1970s through the early 2000s. The novel explores themes of power, ethnic tension, and political instability, weaving them into the personal narratives of its characters.

### **1. Ethnic Tensions**

One of the central sociopolitical themes in *The Kite Runner* is the ethnic divide between the Pashtuns and the Hazaras. The protagonist, Amir, is a Pashtun, while his close friend and half-brother, Hassan, is a Hazara. Historically, the Pashtuns have been the dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan, often marginalizing the Hazaras, who are Shi'a Muslims and have faced significant persecution and discrimination. For instance, the novel highlights this tension through the character of Assef, who embodies the extremist Pashtun views and participates in the oppression of Hazaras. Assef's hatred and violent behavior towards Hassan underscore the deep-seated ethnic prejudices in Afghan society (Hosseini, 2003).

### **2. Political Instability and War**

The backdrop of the novel is the series of political upheavals that have plagued Afghanistan. The story begins during the relatively stable period of King Zahir Shah's rule, followed by the bloodless coup by Mohammad Daoud Khan, and subsequently the Soviet invasion. There is an evident in the novel which highlights that the Soviet invasion and the subsequent civil war are depicted through the drastic changes in Amir's life and the transformation of Kabul from a peaceful city to a war-torn landscape. This period of chaos is shown to uproot families, including Amir's, who flee to the United States for safety (Hosseini, 2003).

### **3. Rise of the Taliban**

The rise of the Taliban is a significant sociopolitical event depicted in the novel. The Taliban's rule brought about extreme religious and social oppression, particularly affecting women and ethnic minorities like the Hazaras. In the novel, when Amir returns to Afghanistan, he witnesses the brutal rule of the Taliban. Public executions and severe punishments are common, reflecting the oppressive nature of the regime. This is illustrated in a harrowing scene where a couple is stoned to death in a stadium during halftime at a soccer match, showcasing the Taliban's use of fear and violence to maintain control (Hosseini, 2003).

#### **4. Impact of Global Politics**

The novel also touches on the impact of global politics on Afghanistan. The intervention of foreign powers, especially the United States, plays a critical role in shaping the country's modern history. For example, after the events of 9/11, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and the overthrow of the Taliban mark significant changes in the political landscape. This is reflected in the novel's conclusion, set in 2002, during a time of provisional government before Hamid Karzai's election as president (Hosseini, 2003).

The political environment shifted dramatically after the collapse of the Twin Towers in New York City. Following this event, the United States launched a bombing campaign in Afghanistan, overthrowing the Taliban government and establishing control over the country. The Taliban were forced into hiding to avoid American forces, as the U.S. accused them of harboring Osama Bin Laden.

In retaliation for the destruction of the Twin Towers, the United States quickly attacked Afghanistan, which was under Taliban rule at the time. The U.S. alleged that the Taliban were providing sanctuary to Osama Bin Laden. Consequently, the Taliban had to conceal themselves, fearing American retaliation. This scenario illustrates how the U.S. established a hegemonic discourse through its use of power. After invading Afghanistan, the U.S. set up a new government led by Hamid Karzai.

The title of the novel refers to a traditional Afghan children's competition where kite flyers engage in battles, attempting to cut their opponents' strings with their own sharp, glass-coated strings. Achieving victory in this tournament by defeating all other kites, and being the "runner" who retrieves the last fallen kite, is considered a significant honor. Hosseini's novel excels in using the metaphor of the flyer and runner to convey deeper themes.

Every winter, districts in Kabul held a kite-fighting tournament. If you were a boy living in Kabul, the day of the tournament was undeniably the highlight of the cold season. I never slept the night before the tournament. I'd roll from side to side, make shadow animals on the wall, even sit on the balcony in the dark, a blanket wrapped

around me. I felt like a soldier trying to sleep in the trenches the night before a major battle. And that wasn't so far off. In Kabul, fighting kites was little like going to war (43)

Similar to Afghanistan's chaotic history, Afghan kite flying features mid-air battles between competitors. Kite flyers strive to cut down their opponents' kites, mirroring the conflicts between the Afghan government and mujahidin guerrilla factions, whose hands are often injured and bloodied, much like the hands of the kite flyer when the sharp, glass-coated kite string cuts through their skin. Typically, the kite flyer is encouraged to engage in these high-altitude duels by the 'string giver,' who holds the string reel. This role is comparable to that of foreign powers that have instigated conflicts among Afghan factions by supplying weapons, training, and intelligence.

Once an opponent's kite is downed, the competition shifts to a race to retrieve the fallen kite, known as the kite run. This mirrors the events of 1992 in Afghanistan when ethno-religious warlords looted and pillaged Kabul and other cities, competing to gather the most spoils. Notably, in 1994, the emerging Taliban regime banned kite fighting along with many other activities. Thus, the title "The Kite Runner" is symbolically represented by Hosseini in this context.

#### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Khaled Hosseini provides a genuine depiction of Afghan life, both during the turbulent times in Kabul and within the immigrant community in America. "The Kite Runner" offers a vivid portrayal of Afghanistan's contemporary history by incorporating actual events like the Russian invasion, the rise of the Taliban, their rule, cultural suppression, and American influence. This makes the novel a critical reflection of Afghanistan during its war-torn years. Through the lens of New Historicism, Hosseini's work blurs the boundaries between history and fiction, showing how each can inform and reshape the other.

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