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The Mothers of the Kite Fliers and Kite Runners: An Against-the-Grain Study of Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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ABSTRACT

The cover page of the novel *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini showcases the brilliant reviews the book received from Daily Telegraph, The Times, Sunday Express and Isabel Allende. Set on the backdrop of a politically troubled Afghanistan, the novel is a tale of friendship, love, loss, betrayal, and hope, coupled with the central Christian theme of guilt and redemption. However a closer reading of *The Kite Runner* reveals a bizarre reality. In this "… devastating, masterful and painfully honest story of a life crippled by an act of childhood and cowardice and cruelty" (Daily Telegraph), all we get to know are the fortunes and the miseries of the Afghan males, but what about the women? The lack of women characters is so stark that to any sentient reader, it almost appears as if the Afghan community is formed solely out of male members. Only when the story shifts out of Afghanistan, the woman becomes somewhat visible in the character of Soraya. Even then, does the woman in the house attain the same subjectivity as that of the man? Does she succeed in being relevant in the society where a child is more its father's than its mother's? Where do the mothers of the kite fliers and kite runners stand in a society whose spirit is best reflected in the kite fighting tournament, a passion passed from fathers to sons? This article is thus an attempt to unearth and explore the unvoiced trivialising of women as the Other in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, Otherisation, patriarchy, phallocentrism, women.*

Where Are the Mothers?

The cover page of the novel *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini showcases the brilliant reviews the book received from *Daily Telegraph*, *The Times, Sunday Express* and *Isabel Allende*. In the words of these critics, the novel is 'Devastating', 'Heartbreaking', 'Unforgettable' and 'Deeply moving', and so is it for most readers. It is indeed an achievement to be the first Afghan voice in English literature to attain such popularity and success.

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Approximately twenty one million copies of the book have been sold worldwide. *The Kite Runner* is a lucid, graphic and touching tale of the struggles of the Afghan community in general and that of an Afghan boy (the narrator Amir) in particular within and outside Afghanistan.

The Kite Runner is the tale of a young Pashtoon boy Amir, a good kite flier, and his loyal Hazara friend Hassan, a brilliant kite runner. Set on the backdrop of a politically troubled Afghanistan, the novel is a tale of friendship, love, loss, betrayal, and hope, coupled with the central Christian theme of guilt and redemption. It is not very surprising that the novel achieved such popularity. It includes every ingredient crucial to be a best seller. Along with the exotic accounts of the Afghan society and its history, and graphic descriptions of the existing culture, cuisine and clothing, a humanistic theme that runs through the novel makes it an all-time favourite. In addition, Hosseini's skilful narration ensures that the reader stays riveted to the novel. No one in his sane mind can question the skill Hosseini possesses, the various accolades he has received. However a closer reading of *The Kite Runner* reveals a bizarre reality. In the first part of the novel which unfurls within the nation of Afghanistan, the narration abounds with the mention of *The Kite Runner* and the kite flier. But what about their mothers?

In this "… devastating, masterful and painfully honest story of a life crippled by an act of childhood and cowardice and cruelty" (Daily Telegraph), all we get to know are the fortunes and the miseries of the Afghan males, but what about the women? In his narration, the narrator Amir provides detailed insight into the lives of Baba, Hassan, Ali, Rahim Khan, Aseef and primarily of himself. However, one thing which massively lacks in the first part of the novel is the feminine presence. The lack of women characters is so stark that to any sentient reader, it almost appears as if the Afghan community is formed solely out of male members. Only when the story shifts out of Afghanistan, the woman becomes somewhat visible in the character of Soraya. Even then, does the woman in the house attain the same subjectivity as that of the man? Does she succeed in being relevant in the society where a child is more its father's than its mother's? Where do the mothers of the kite fliers and kite runners stand in a society whose spirit is best reflected in the kite fighting tournament, a passion passed from fathers to sons? This article is thus an attempt to unearth and explore the unvoiced trivialising of women as the Other in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*.

Amir's Mother: Sofia Akrami

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The first mention of the feminine presence in the Afghanistani context is presented in the form of a picture of a woman, who is long dead. She is Amir's mother Sofia Akrami who had died during child birth. A framed picture of this woman in the decorated living room of Amir's father bears testimony to the fact that she existed.

"There was a picture of my parents' wedding night, Baba dashing in his black suit and my mother a smiling young princess in white" (*The Kite Runner,* pp.5)

When the narrator Amir speaks about Hassan's mother, we observe one of the primary ambivalences of the narrator in his feelings and writings. Amir narrates how earnestly he yearns for his mother and speculates whether Hassan is tormented by the same emotions. However quite contrary to his claim, the entire narration of the novel never portrays Amir longing for or remembering his mother. Of the very few references he makes to his mother, one happens to be when Amir blames himself for killing his mother, for it was during his birth that his mother suffered from a haemorrhage and died, thereby making Baba perpetually embittered. In another instance, he mentions his mother when he wonders how she slept beside her loudly-snoring husband. Amir mentions that his father was often scoffed at by people because he was not of loyal blood and possibly would not be able to marry into a royal family. To retort, his father had married Sofia Akrami,

> "… a highly educated woman, universally regarded as one of Kabul's most respected, beautiful and virtuous ladies. And not only did she teach classic Farsi literature at the University, she was a descendent of the royal family, a fact that my father playfully rubbed in the skeptics' faces by referring to her as "my princess"." (*The Kite Runner*, pp.14)

Thus, Amir's mention of his mother happens in as materialistic a way as his father's marriage with her happened. To his father, his mother was a prized possession that boosted his social standing and helped him climb the social ladder: and even his calling her "my princess" was not an act of love but a way to boast of his social standing in front of those who looked down upon him. Amir too recalls her in a similarly distant and detached tone, almost looking at her through his father's eyes.

Despite being unable to garner enough love and care from his ever-expectant, almost godly father, Amir never yearned for the presence of his mother or wondered how different it would be for him to have her around: a presence less demanding, more sensible and more caring. Instead he tried grooming himself into a boy good enough for Baba and failed time and again, being a boy with 'mean streak'. His greatest achievement was to make his father proud of him.

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"And that right there was the single greatest moment of my 12 yrs of life, seeing Baba on that roof, proud of me at last." (*The Kite Runner*, pp.58)

While it is natural for any adolescent of his age to attempt to be worthy of the father's attention, a complete lack of craving for his mother makes Amir's character striking and less natural to an ordinary reader.

The only other mention of Amir's mother occurs after a long time when Amir responds to the conversation of an old beggar on his return to Kabul. He happened to be a professor in the University and an acquaintance of his mother. It is only from him that Amir gets to know the likes and dislikes of Sofia Akrami.

"Now I knew my mother had liked almond cake with honey and hot tea, that she once used the words "profoundly", that she fretted about her happiness. I had just learned more about my mother from this old man on the street than I ever did from Baba." (*The Kite Runner*, pp.219)

The very confession of Amir that he had learnt more about his mother from the old man than his father describes the place of Sofia Akrami in the household in a nutshell. For her husband and, because of his influence, even for her son, she remains a materialistic possession to flaunt, and, after her death, recall only in terms of her stature, her education and the material needs of the family and society she fulfilled. Her character ceases to be that of a mother for the kite flier Amir or a wife to his father and is reduced to an object, an Other in the male-dominated, male-observed and male-cherished society of Afghanistan.

Hasan's Mother Sanaubar

While Amir's mother's presence remains confined to a photograph on the wall, Hasan's mother Sanaubar is a living presence in the novel. Sanaubar is introduced as a woman who "ran off with a clan of travelling singers and dancers." (The Kite Runner, pp.6) The narrator further mentions that "Hassan never talked about his mother, as if she'd never existed." (The Kite Runner, pp.6) In the earlier section, we noted that even for Amir, his mother hardly existed as someone he felt an emotional longing for. This marks a parallel strain in the lives of both the kite flier Amir and *The Kite Runner* Hassan: caught in a pan-masculine world, the kite flier and *The Kite Runner* hardly talk about their mother or feel emotionally attached to them. The mothers remain passive means of connection that had linked the sons to their fathers and failed to exert any emotional influence on the sons. While the woman in the picture Sofia lives on in the novel with an unaffected unchallenged dignity, Sanaubar's chastity is questioned time and again by numerous members of the male-dominated society. She is painted as a promiscuous

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woman who had seduced several men through her bodily gestures and is quite a topic of discussion amongst men. The narrator mentions:

"I have heard that Sanaubar's suggestive strides and oscillating hips sent men to reveries of infidelity." (*The Kite Runner*, pp.7)

Amir had also heard that Sanaubar "made no secret of her disdain" (*The Kite Runner*, pp.9) of her husband Ali's appearance. There were words that "Sanaubar had taken one glance at the baby in Ali's arms, seen the cleft lip and barked a bitter laughter… She had refused to even hold Hassan, and just five days later, she was gone". (*The Kite Runner*, pp.9)

Thus Sanaubar's character is presented to the next generation of kite fliers and kite runners as a woman who took no responsibility of her husband or her child or her family and attached no value to them whatsoever.

A soldier once tells Hassan, "I knew your mother, did you know that? I knew her real good. I took her from behind by that creek over there." (*The Kite Runner*, pp.6) The narrator Amir further states that he was told "no one was really surprised when Sanaubar eloped. People had raised their eyebrows, when Ali, a man who had memorized the Koran, married Sanaubar, a woman nineteen years younger, a beautiful but notoriously unscrupulous woman who lived up to her dishonourable reputation… Sanaubar's brilliant green eyes and impish face had, rumour has it, tempted countless men into sin…" (*The Kite Runner*, pp.7)

Thus, both Amir and Hassan are surrounded by men who reduce the importance of their mothers in their lives. In Amir's case, his father's lack of emotional attachment to his mother reflects in the way the dead Sofia has been described to her son. Hassan's case is even more traumatic: his mother is time and again demeaned by the entire society as promiscuous, thereby compelling Hassan to almost hate her and feel ashamed of being her son. A lack of Sanaubar's subjectivity, her own voice and her rationality is starkly missing from the narrative. To add, the narrative is inspired by men who have no sympathy or empathy whatsoever for her and reap sadistic pleasure by demeaning her and defaming her as a loose woman. In a recurring contrast, Ali is highlighted as a simple, rather weakly, religious man while Sanaubar is a promiscuous seductress who is 'notoriously unscrupulous'. Thus, the father is always highlighted to the mother; he is the better parent, and rather the only parent who matters in the life of the son. This stands true irrespective of the strength or prowess of the father; Hassan's weakly father is the one dearer to him than his mother Sanaubar and Amir's strong and masculine Baba dominates his life, hardly leaving him space enough to think of his dead mother.

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It is only much later in the novel that the narrator Amir sees Sanaubar in person. Her physical features attract his attention and he notices her grace. This is the first instance when we see Sanaubar directly through the eyes of the narrator rather than through conjectures about her cooked up by other male members of the society.

The only positive portrayal of Sanaubar comes through in the words of Rahim Khan who had seen her return to Hassan's house in her old age. Veiled in a sky blue burqa, she looked like "she had not eaten for days" (*The Kite Runner*, pp.183) and collapsed right at the doorstep. When Hassan forgave her and gave her a place in the family, she took every domestic responsibility with him – "picking tomatoes... trimming a rosebush" (*The Kite Runner*, pp.184), and even delivering his son in the winter of 1990. Starkly in contrast to her earlier act of not holding Hassan after he was born,

> "she stood beaming under a dull gray sky, tears streaming down her cheeks, the needle-cold wind blowing her hair, and clutching that baby in her arms like she never wanted to go. Not this time... That baby... became the center of her existence. She sewed clothes for him, built him toys from scraps of wood, rags and dried grass. When he caught a fever, she stayed up all night, and fasted for three days. She burned isfand for him on a skillet to cast out nazar, the evil eye. By the time Sohrab was two, he was calling her Sasa. The two of them were inseparable." (*The Kite Runner*, pp.185)

Thus, Sanaubar spent her last years as a loving mother, a doting grand-mother and a woman who took every responsibility in the household. Hassan's feeling of loss at her death is reported by Rahim Khan in one sentence:

> "The loss was hard on Hassan – it always hurts more to have and lose than not to have in the first place." (*The Kite Runner*, pp.185)

Thus, the place of a mother was one that could never be realised to its full potential till the over-arching presence of the father existed. However, Sanaubar died leaving none to grieve for her for long: because though her loss was "even harder on little Sohrab" (*The Kite Runner*, pp.185), he finally forgot, because children "forget so easily." (*The Kite Runner*, pp.185) In this tale of kite fliers and kite runners across generations, their mothers are almost muted, unnoticed, unrealised sources of strength who could have stood by and encouraged these men into newer and better lives. While their own potentials to achieve do not receive attention enough for elaborate discussion in the novel, even their influences in the lives of those whom they give birth to remain underexplored, neglected and underestimated.

Sohrab's Adopting Mother Soraya

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Amir's wife Soraya is the only woman character sketched rather illustriously in the novel. Her thoughts are conveyed to the readers in first person at times, and her voice attains the subjectivity that none of the other feminine voices enjoy. Out of the rigidly patriarchal society in Afghanistan and the male-dominated male-crafted world where Amir belonged in his childhood, Amir's vision in the US is capable of identifying subjectivity in a woman, and hence Soraya. Soraya is introduced as an educated woman who wants to be a teacher, teaches at a public library and is ESL certified. Right before her marriage to Amir, Soraya speaks for herself. She owns up her secrets breaking the silence that surrounded her and clarifies the rumours by replacing them with facts confessing that she had once been with another man:

> "When we lived in Virginia, I ran away with an Afghan man. I was eighteen at the time… We lived together for almost a month. All the Afghans in Virginia were talking about it." (*The Kite Runner*, pp.143)

Thus, throughout the novel, the narrator has multiple conversations with Soraya and excerpts of her own have been documented. In a certain way, Soraya seems to be the source of inspiration for Amir to shift from a men-cloistered phallocentric viewpoint to a gender-unbiased point of view. By the end of the novel, Soraya still does not have a child of her own. However by virtue of Amir's adopting Sohrab, she, in a sense, becomes his mother. It is worth noticing that the interaction between Soraya and Sohrab is extremely limited in comparison to the repeated attempts at interaction with Sohrab made by Amir. Soraya, the only feminine character with a voice in the novel, somehow assumes a voiceless role in the life of her adopted son. Despite the change in setting from Afghanistan to the US, the Afghan mother still remains distant from the son; however significant in other walks of life, insignificant in the life of her son. The son, as always, remains the father's possession, and is attached to the father way more than the mother whose position in the son's life is side-lined.

Minor Feminine Presences in the Novel

Apart from the three major women characters discussed above, there are minute mentions of some secondary female characters as well. The narrator mentions Sakina, the mid-wife who had fed both Amir and Hassan. While Sakina remains almost completely insignificant in the novel, she is the primary connecting link that Amir and Hassan knew bound them together - as brothers "fed from the same breast". On a visit to Jalalabad for a family gathering, the narrator again mentions the presence of some women: his aunt Shafiqua and his uncle's Humayoun's two daughters- Fazila and Karima- and his two wives. Other characters include Aseef's father's German wife Tanya, Rahim Khan's lover Homaira, Hassan's wife Farzana, the young co-

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passenger on the way to Pakistan and Soraya's mother Khanum Taheri. None of these characters come across through a voice of their own or even through an illustrious description. They remain parts of the silent gaps in the male centred narrative, in the male oriented world of *The Kite Runner*.

Unnoticed Mothers: Women as the Insignificant Other

The Kite Runner is a world of men: love, friendship, guilt and hope find expressions in the novel through male characters that dwell in a masculine world run by phallocentric values and ideas of honour and heroism. It's a land of kite fliers and kite runners, of Afghan men who live life on their own values irrespective of the changing and troubled political scenario. However, in this land of men with masculine values of courage and bravery, women seem to be weirdly silent, to the extent that their absence irks a sensitive reader. The society seems to be running almost without women, who are somewhat confined only to the biological role of propagating the race.

Such insignificance with which the narration addresses women may be understood and analysed in connection to the notion of the Self and the Other propagated by the German philosopher GWF Hegel. The concept of the Self and the Other is closely linked to those of identity and difference. It deals with such binaries of differences which involves a relationship of power, of inclusion and exclusion, in that one member of the pair is empowered with a positive identity, the Self, and the other side of the equation becomes the subordinated Other. In the course of the novel, women emerge as the insignificant Other in an Afghan land run by men caught up in the mesh of a male-centric universe.

The celebrations in the Afghan land are predominantly masculine. The Buzkashi tournament that takes place on New Year's day and is 'Afghanistan's national passion' evades any description of women participation. It is a typically masculine show where

"A chapandaz, a highly skilled horseman... has to snatch a goat or cattle carcass from the midst of a melee, carry that carcass along with him around the stadium at full gallop, and drop it in a scoring circle while a team of other chapandaz chases him and does everything in its power – kick, claw, whip, punch – to snatch the carcass from him." (*The Kite Runner*, pp.18)

The audience is described as "the crowd", but the horsemen or the faces in the crowd are never identified as feminine. In the description of Eid, the narrative once again lacks description of the rituals of women, their celebration or their ways of merry-making. The activities of children are however described in a sentence:

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"Children opened gifts and played with dyed hard-boiled eggs." (*The Kite Runner*, pp.38)

The kite-fighting tournament that takes place in the winter is elaborately described in the novel. It is a tournament Afghan children look forward to, but once again, the tournament turns out to be one meant for the male population. The absolute lack of feminine presence in each of the festivals of the Afghan land shocks a sensitive reader, giving an impression that half the society – women – has been strangely wiped out.

Throughout his school life in Afghanistan and even his junior college days in America, Amir fails to register or acknowledge any prominent feminine presence in his narration. Such an absence of the feminine places women as the insignificant inferior Other in the masculine world that surrounds Amir: a world of Baba, Ali, Hassan, Rahim Khan, a world of men. Insensitive to the presence of women in the world around him, the first woman Amir could register subjectively in his narration is his love and wife, Soraya. While moving out of the rigid Afghan society removes Amir's blindfold to women, the position of a woman as the Other remains intact even in a diasporic Afghan society. Amir's thoughts on his first interaction with Soraya stand testimony to this Otherisation:

> "Upto that point, our encounter could have been interpreted as a respectful inquiry, one man asking for the whereabouts of another man. But I's asked her a question and if she answered, we'd be... well, we'd be chatting. Me a mojarad, a single young man, and she an unwed young woman. One with a history, no less. This was teetering dangerously on the verge of gossip material, and the best kind of it. Poison tongues would flap. And she would bear the brunt of that poison, not me – I was fully aware of the Afghan double standard that favored my gender. Not did you see him chatting with her? But Wooooy! Did you see how she wouldn't let him go? What a lochak!" (*The Kite Runner*, pp.128)

In the Afghan society portrayed, interaction with a woman is almost a sin, and the woman bears the grudge of the society if a man interacts with her publicly. Such a vindication of women is possible only by placing her as the second, the inessential Other in a male-dominated male-favoured masculine world.

After his marriage, Amir realises that till then, all his life, he'd been just around men. Thus, Amir had always closed his own world to the very presence of women characters and perceived the world as just one half – a world of men – making the Otherisation of women in the Afghani context further steep in the novel. Being a biased narrator of a biased society, Amir fails to shed light on the mothers of the kite fliers and kite runners who remain silent in the gaps of the male-centric world of *The Kite Runner*.

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However, post the war, the ironic absence of the adult male in Afghanistan is in direct contrast to the Kabul painted by Amir in his childhood, a Kabul that was sketched by fatherly male presences with nang and namoos. Back to Kabul, Amir notices in shock:

Children sat begging on the streets "in the laps of their burqa-clad mothers... Hardly any of them sat with an adult male – the wars had made fathers a rare commodity in Afghanistan." (*The Kite Runner*, pp.215)

Devastated by political violence, the patriarchal Afghanistan with its superbly masculine essence is reduced to a begging nation of starving women and children. Men being the superior Self and endowed with autonomy were once capable of guarding their children and families. When the responsibility of the family dawned on the mothers in the post war period, women being the inessential Other, in the Afghan society and furthermore in the narration of Amir, are portrayed as helpless, begging on the streets with their children in the absence of the protecting fathers of the families. However, this very noticing of women is almost a phenomenon for Amir, who in all his life had not learnt to notice women in the world around.

As he lay on the hospital bed, half in trance post his surgery, Amir wakes up to notice that "...families – old women in bright shalwar-kameezes, children, men wearing skullcaps – shuffled noisily in and out of the room. They brought with them pakoras, naan, samosas, biryani." (*The Kite Runner*, pp.262)

This indicates that while the Otherisation of women in Afghanistan remains constant all through the novel, Amir's perception of the world that is initially blindfolded to women gets unclogged and broadened as he shifts out of the phallocentric Afghan land and interacts with and loves a woman. So, women in Afghanistan are seen begging on the streets, the diasporic Afghan society still pits at women rather than men tagging them loose 'lochak', Soraya, the adopting mother, is still more distant from the child than Amir, the adopting father, but at least, Amir's narration captures these women in its course, as opposed to his narration in the first half of the novel when the narrator fails to register or acknowledge the presence of women characters in the first place. The Otherisation of women that was thus occurring at two levels in the first half of the novel – at the level of the society and at the level of Amir's narration – is narrowed down in the second half to just the Otherisation from the society, unclouding the vision of the narrator Amir.

This, however, does not change the fate of the mothers in *The Kite Runner*; they remain as inessential in the lives of their children as always. In a society where the father's love is the only object of jealousy that forces competition among siblings, the mothers are just mere

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weavers in the process of furthering the generation. Sons belong to their fathers, and when the fathers cease to exist (as in the post-war situation), the sons are left unprotected to face their own destiny. *The Kite Runner* has often been said to give a humane face to the voiceless land of Afghanistan, but the article attempts to assert that this face is essentially a gender-biased one: a male face torn by love, guilt, longing, hope and redemption, and attempting to live by masculine vows of honour, nang and namoos. *The Kite Runner* is no wonder a touching tale of love and friendship, but it is confined to a world of sons, fathers, uncles and brothers. The mothers of the kite fliers and kite runners are clouded in oblivion; they exist just because they have to, to propagate life and give male fathers their male sons to teach male norms to in a rigidly male-dominated society.

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