

Elements of political and social protest writing: Text overview – *The Kite Runner*

Read our overview which shows how teachers can consider *The Kite Runner* in relation to the genre of political and social protest writing. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead, we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan, and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail.

Overview

The political context of Hosseini's story of two brothers is of fundamental importance to the events which unfold and those events which have happened in the backstory. Hosseini incorporates into his narrative the late 20th century and early 21st century politics of both Afghanistan and the western world. The story shows how the lives of ordinary people are affected by domestic and international power politics. In writing *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini had a clear political intent: to humanise a region, for western readers, which is either remote or clouded by negative media coverage. Significantly Hosseini chooses to make his narrator a writer who himself has a political and personal mission – a mission to tell the truth about himself and his country.

Central to Hosseini's post-modern novel is the division between the two factions of Afghan society: the politically and financially superior Sunni Pashtuns and the oppressed Shi'a Hazaras. The two protagonists, Amir and Hassan, represent the two different ethnic groups and the different lives lived by those with and those without political power. This inequality is initially foregrounded through the characters' homes, (Amir's 'mansion' and Hassan's 'mud hut'), but is also present in the representation of everyday life for Afghan people in the early chapters of the novel. The 'school text books' Amir reads barely mention the history of the Hazaras showing how seriously they are marginalised, invisible to an extent. Hazaras are also subjected to terrible insults such as 'mice-eating, flat-nosed, load carrying donkeys' which is aimed at Hassan in the streets of Kabul and reflects the oppressive attitudes of many Afghan Pashtuns. Indeed, the divisions are so deep that even after the Soviet invasion the Hazaras are still scorned by their compatriots, and after the rise of the Taliban the divisions are intensified because the Taliban are largely Pashtuns. Late in the novel when Amir returns to Afghanistan to try to atone for his sins, the otherwise positively characterised Farid asks why Amir 'came all the way from America for...a Shi'a?'

Other power struggles and political tensions are also important in the narrative. The Soviet invasion, the rise of the Taliban, Amir's feelings of inadequacy with

regards to his father, Soraya's rebellion against her parents (because of her having lost 'the genetic lottery') and Amir's physical fight with Assef for Sohrab, are all examples of conflicts between those with power and those without. In this way, Hosseini comments on gender politics, class and ethnicity by his representation of contemporary Afghan society.

Issues of power and ethnicity

The central event of the novel is the rape of Hassan, an atrocity that results from his loyalty to his Pashtun friend Amir (Assef calls Hassan a 'loyal dog'). This event which Amir witnesses and about which he does nothing haunts him for life. Assef's brutal actions on a domestic scale reflect the later, historically grounded, 'massacre of the Hazaras in Mazar-i-Sharif'. As a child, Amir knows he is complicit in the obscene bullying of Hassan, his friend, but at first refuses to acknowledge his guilt, instead compounding Hassan's misery by heaping on him further cruelty. As he moves into adulthood, carrying the burden of his sins, Amir realises he can only gain redemption by recognising his abuse of power, atoning for his wrongdoing and by rescuing and loving Hassan's son Sohrab as a person in his own right, distinct from his ethnicity. Amir's learning – and courage perhaps – is reflected in his angry outburst to General Taheri at the end of the novel: 'you will never again refer to him as Hazara boy in my presence. He has a name and it's Sohrab'.

Settings

The domestic and personal story of *The Kite Runner* is sharpened by the backdrop of political turmoil. The narrative spans a time period of about forty years and is set against the tumultuous recent history of Afghanistan: the 1960s, when the country was at the end of a forty year rule by Zahir Shah, the 1973 'bloodless coup' by his cousin, the Soviet invasion, the guerrilla war fought by the mujahedeen, the Taliban rule and the events following 9/11 in the USA. It is important to note, however, that the history that Hosseini represents is somewhat revisionist (there is little sense given, for example, of the support supplied to the mujahedeen and the Taliban by the USA to oust the Soviets and Hosseini's representation of the peaceful days of the monarchy tends to gloss over the ethnic and religious tensions that divided the country). In the light of the turbulent history and its impact on its people, the historical details incorporated into the novel could be seen to present Afghanistan itself as a victim. As a result of the Soviet invasion Kabul becomes a city of secrets and suspicions and is described as being 'split into two groups: those who eavesdropped and those who didn't' and the very face of the country is physically devastated by war. The once beautiful landscape is strewn with the 'burned carcasses of old Soviet tanks' and Kabul is personified as an old friend who has become 'homeless and destitute' as a direct result of the ongoing political conflict.

Under Taliban rule (1996 -2001), the country becomes a terrifying and 'hopeless place'. Scenes such as the execution in the Ghazi stadium and the 'young man'

who 'dangled from the end of a rope' after his public hanging explicitly highlight the political crisis Afghanistan undergoes at the end of the 20th century. Assef's readiness to become an active member of the Taliban is significant, showing how Afghanistan is partly responsible for its own terror and hopelessness.

Assef, as a representation of a Sunni Pashtun, in a sense is a product of the ethnic divisions that are historical. Hosseini's setting the early story in a peaceful Afghanistan carries with it some ambiguity. He said he wanted to 'remind people that ...the history of the Afghans in the twentieth century has been largely peaceful and harmonious' and to a great extent Amir's childhood memories are pastorally blissful. Amir remembers an Afghanistan with its ancient charms free from external conflict, with long summers, storytelling under the pomegranate trees and kite flying in winter. Even the servants seem to enjoy serving and the rich employers largely keep them safe. However, this vision is from Amir's perspective. Hassan and Ali do not have personal voices in the early part of the text and readers are left to imagine life from their point of view. It is also relevant to think about how uncomfortable many readers feel thinking of the servitude of Hassan and Ali and of the treatment of Sanaubar. The story suggests perhaps that the attitudes of the ruling Pashtun elite towards the Hazaras in part make Afghanistan the author of its own misery. Baba's status as a 'towering Pashtun specimen' for example means he is able to abuse his position, fathering Hassan despite his mother's marriage to Baba's Hazara servant, Ali. After the Taliban takes control, Assef easily gains a ruling position within the regime and this gives him the ability to abuse and murder with impunity, almost as if his early upbringing prepares him for his later violent behaviour.

Gender politics

Soraya's discussion of double standards highlights the gender inequalities within Afghan society. While men who father children out of wedlock are 'just having fun', after her affair Soraya is viewed as damaged goods. This negative reaction to female sexuality is seen more overtly in the depiction of Hassan's mother Sanaubar who had tempted 'countless men into sin' and is seemingly punished for her beauty when 'someone had taken a knife to her face' leaving her looking 'grotesque'. Similarly, Soraya's mother is silenced by her marriage to General Taheri. Khala Jamila, Amir reports, had been famous in Kabul for her singing voice but 'that she never sing again in public had been one of the General's conditions when they married'.

Power of nations

Afghanistan is seen to be at the mercy of both the Soviets and the Americans at key points in Amir's story. Its people are abused and dispossessed. The Soviet invasion is represented on a domestic level through the attempted rape of a young Afghan woman by a Russian soldier, as a 'price' for letting the lorry Amir is travelling in pass. Amir's and Baba's hurried leaving of Afghanistan for America, to secure their safety and ideals, shows how the larger political world

impacts on the personal and domestic.

Towards the novel's close, when the time frame moves to post 9/11, Hosseini shows how Afghanistan's misery increases with the American bombing. Cities that the narrative had previously heralded as holiday destinations for a young Amir, are now described as the battle ground 'for the Taliban's last stronghold in the North' as America attacks. America is presented somewhat ambiguously, both as a saviour in destroying the Taliban but also a destroyer. Hosseini includes the initial presentation of these cities, as 'the cities of (Amir's) childhood', to encourage readers to consider these destinations as real and human, not merely as an unrecognisable feature of a news report and therefore to see their destruction in human terms too.

Power of organised religion

At the opening of the novel, Baba derides religious power stating 'God help us all if Afghanistan ever falls into' the hands of the mullahs. This is foreboding. Later there is evidence that religious power is corrupt when the cleric present at the Ghazi stadium execution, who justifies the woman's death, claims 'God says that every sinner must be punished'. Furthermore Assef's claim that God wants him to 'live for a reason' can be seen as signifying the arrogance of those with power who think that their actions are sanctioned by a God who is on their side.

The novel shows the horrors of religious extremism through the attitudes and behaviour of the Taliban. Although Hosseini acknowledges that the Taliban brought an end to the fighting of the tribes (who had made Kabul a 'proverbial hell on earth' after the Soviet withdrawal), he also shows that they were responsible for massacring Shiites and enacting fundamentalist supremacist laws – banning dance, music and kite flying and restricting women's rights. They replaced the secular laws of Afghanistan with Islamic Shari'ah law (illustrated in the novel by the punishment of two adulterers) with the intention of keeping the people as far away as possible from the enlightened lifestyle that the west claims to hold.

Perhaps, in the light of this, it is clear why Hosseini chooses for his narrator to be an emergent writer. In the story, Amir is encouraged to write a book about the miserable fate of his people: 'May be you should write about Afghanistan. Tell the rest of the world what the Taliban are doing to our country'. In this respect Amir's (and Hosseini's) novel is a political and social protest text, demonstrating perhaps the strength of the pen as a tool of protest.

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