

## Translating Trauma in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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### Abstract

Khaled Hosseini's 2003 novel *The Kite Runner*, as the first Afghan novel published in English, garnered attention in a post-9/11 political climate fascinated by the potential for insight offered by its setting and subject matter. The invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 brought unprecedented attention to a region that had been summarily ignored by conceptions of history formulated by the West, despite the impact that Western politics had had on its development. Hosseini's novel advocates for Afghanistan in a Western context whose dominant discourse has effectively reduced it to 'the caves of Tora Bora and poppy fields and Bin Laden', as Hosseini put it in a foreword to the tenth anniversary edition of *The Kite Runner*.<sup>1</sup> Hosseini acknowledges an intended Western audience as he emphasises the fact that *The Kite Runner* has helped to make Afghanistan more than 'just another unhappy, chronically troubled, afflicted land' for his readers (III). Hosseini achieves this in a narrative that traces his protagonist Amir's journey through political and personal turmoil, and, crucially, as a witness to trauma. At twelve years old, Amir is a bystander to the rape of his childhood friend Hassan; the incident traumatises Amir and leads him to a lifetime spent seeking redemption. This essay traces the ways in which Hosseini presents this assault as an allegory for the national rupture that occurs in Afghanistan during the mid-1970s as the country experiences the collapse of the monarchy and the invasion of Soviet forces. Through the use of this allegory, Hosseini translates the trauma of ongoing conflict for a Western audience.

### Khaled Hosseini, World Literature and the Post-9/11 Novel

*The Kite Runner* emerged in the post-9/11 period as an example of world literature that challenged the rhetoric legitimising the invasion of Afghanistan. World literature is defined by the Warwick Research Collective as literature that emerges from the 'dialectics of core and periphery that underpin all cultural production in the modern era'.<sup>2</sup> Hosseini's particular status – as a member of the Afghan diaspora and a full-time citizen of the West – can be seen as bolstering his decision to write fiction that might ease the difficulties of cross-cultural understanding in the post-9/11 era while providing a way for the destabilisation of the notion of the centre-periphery relationship. In her influential work on world literary relationships, Pascale Casanova argues that the periphery is defined by its relationship to the centre, whether it seeks consecration and approval or sets out to chart an antagonistic course.<sup>3</sup> Peripheral writers are

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<sup>1</sup> Khaled Hosseini, Foreword to *The Kite Runner* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003) III. Note: Further references to this text will be included in parentheses in text.

<sup>2</sup> Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Toward a New Theory of World Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2015) 51.

<sup>3</sup> Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (London: Harvard UP, 2004) 23.

ultimately, according to Casanova, defined by their decisions to ‘perpetuate, or alter, or reject, or add to, or deny, or forget, or betray their national literary heritage’.<sup>4</sup> Such decisions can be seen to reveal the ‘very purpose’ of the work done by peripheral writers as they attempt to chart a course for their national literature within the constraints of an inherently unequal world literary system; much can be revealed by the decision of a particular writer to either eschew or adhere to the unforgiving slope of the global literary marketplace as they attempt to create a space for their national perspective.<sup>5</sup>

For an Afghan American writer like Hosseini forced to grapple with complex identities by virtue of his emigration from Afghanistan to the United States, questions of centrality and peripherality are inevitable: how does such an author fit into ‘national’ literary traditions? Considering the relationship between national identity and literature in *Nationalism and Literature*, sociologist Sarah M. Corse notes that ‘national literatures have traditionally been understood as reflections of the unique character and experiences of the nation’.<sup>6</sup> Corse posits that national canons are involved in the formation of collective identities: ultimately, ‘national literatures, like nations, are created by the cultural work of specific people engaged in an identifiable set of activities’.<sup>7</sup> For peripheral writers, participation in such activities involves the navigation of their particular cultural or national setting and the consideration of where this might fit in the larger configuration of world literary systems. As Casanova states, the characterisation of a peripheral writer’s work, and its attendant goals, must ‘situate it with respect to’ both ‘the place occupied by the native literary space within world literature and his own position within this space’.<sup>8</sup> Those practitioners designated to the role of national writer for the peripheral space must be cognisant of the wider settings of world literature as they attempt to set a course for their national literature and the peculiarities of the culture it represents.

As a peripheral writer situated at the centre and addressing a central audience, Hosseini occupies a fraught space in the world literary system; he operates within the strange space ostensibly created by globalisation and those migratory patterns engendered by conflict. Casanova describes peripheral writers as being in possession of ‘special lucidity’ when sensing and articulating their disenfranchisement within global literary systems.<sup>9</sup> Central writers, on the other hand, tend to conform to the notion that their experience is universal and to the assumption of equity between literary spheres.<sup>10</sup> Instead of weakening his perception of inequality, Hosseini’s exposure to central power structures allows him to perceive the challenges faced by peripheral voices with an uncommon degree of focus and lucidity. The mammoth task of advocating for Afghanistan from the West in the wake of 9/11 places a premium on this lucidity.

In order to capitalise on his dual perspective and the insights into world literary systems it affords, Hosseini must necessarily be sensitive to his position of relative privilege. His removal

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<sup>4</sup> Casanova 41.

<sup>5</sup> Casanova 41.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah M. Corse, *Nationalism and Literature: The Politics of Culture in Canada and the United States*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 1.

<sup>7</sup> Corse 7.

<sup>8</sup> Casanova 41.

<sup>9</sup> Casanova 44.

<sup>10</sup> Casanova 44.

from the worst of Afghanistan's recent turmoil demands that Hosseini be declarative about his limitations as a national writer; he cannot represent, without the necessary narrative disclaimers, trauma which he did not experience. To attempt a straightforward adoption of the peripheral voice would be to risk the alienation of those perspectives for which he is advocating and render his efforts tantamount to reductive appropriation of the suffering of the Other. Hosseini is able to exercise narrative authority over those instances of national trauma for which he was present as a child, namely the 1979 communist coup and resulting upheaval. Later traumas which occurred following Hosseini's emigration to the West, such as those incurred during the reign of the Taliban or the post-9/11 invasion, require an increased degree of narrative sensitivity.

In deference to these potential difficulties around subjectivity, Hosseini presents *The Kite Runner* to the Western reader in a form which indicates a desire on his part not to claim ownership over that which he did not experience; he harnesses his Afghan American identity to represent the Other as grievable, to apply Judith Butler's concept, building a complex narrative structure in support of this ultimate goal.<sup>11</sup> The novel initially adopts the familiar Western form of the bildungsroman as we witness our protagonist Amir's journey toward the realisation of his ambition, shared with Hosseini, to become a novelist. In this sense, the structure of *The Kite Runner* mimics that of a performative metafiction as we are privy to the events of the novel as they come to us via the narrative voice of a novelist detailing his journey toward being able to tell this very story. On another textual level, however, this metafictional performance of Amir's bildungsroman, once complete, can be read as an allegorical representation of Afghanistan as a peripheral nation, struggling to assert agency and achieve self-advocacy within the international community.

### Translating Trauma

Amir's bildungsroman creates narrative space at the beginning of the novel for the imagination of Afghanistan as a complex nation with a history comprised of more than its tragedies: we are given a glimpse of a 'before'. David Jefferess notes that the novel has been praised for transcending 'the locality of its setting to provide a universal and, ultimately, comfortingly familiar narrative'.<sup>12</sup> Jefferess acknowledges this approach as perhaps humanising Afghanistan for the 'non-Afghan reader' but questions whether the universal approach is problematic in its treatment of cultural difference.<sup>13</sup> However, while Hosseini does appear to defer to the Western perspective in his representation of controversial issues such as religion, gender and alcohol, Hosseini's characterisation of Afghan culture is considerably more nuanced than a straightforward capitulation to Western standards of universality. Hosseini employs a sensitive approach to the rendering of Afghan culture, dealing with its foibles and differences while also acknowledging its similarities to Western cultures. Contrary to Jefferess' reading of the novel as reflecting Western 'expectations' of 'liberalism, democracy and multiculturalism', Hosseini

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<sup>11</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> David Jefferess, 'To be Good (again): The Kite Runner as Allegory of Global Ethics', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 45.4: (2009) 389.

<sup>13</sup> Jefferess 390.

seems committed, in his foregrounding of non-religious protagonists, to the notion that secular liberalism is not the sole remit of the Western state.<sup>14</sup> Though it is important to remain vigilant to the Western influence upon Hosseini's framing of Afghan culture, we can also acknowledge his rendering of a pluralistic pre-war Kabul as a sometimes problematic subversion of post-9/11 New Orientalist stereotypes that determinedly promote one-dimensional depictions of Muslim cultures as subsumed by religious devotion and representations of Islam as a singularly negative cultural influence.

Hosseini's commitment to the careful depiction of Afghan history for a Western audience is never more apparent than in his rendering of Afghanistan's national trauma, which he translates into Hassan's rape – an incident witnessed by Amir. Hosseini frames Hassan's rape and its resultant trauma as an allegory for the turmoil engulfing Afghanistan following a coup in 1973 which toppled the monarchy and precipitated decades of political uncertainty, starting with a communist takeover and the invasion of Russian forces in 1979. These events are only vaguely referenced, unfolding quietly in the background of the novel's primary narrative. In Assef, Hassan's rapist, we find narrative representation of all those factions – European powers, various powerful elites and later Taliban – whose violence has plagued Afghanistan for generations.

Translations such as this are useful because, according to Stef Craps, conceptualisations of trauma in the West are not necessarily suitable for direct transposition onto non-Western contexts.<sup>15</sup> In 'Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma Theory in the Global Age', Craps considers the imperative within trauma theory to diversify and address non-Western contexts; he argues that 'the uncritical cross-cultural application of psychological concepts developed in the West amounts to a form of cultural imperialism'.<sup>16</sup> To simply couch the experience of those living in non-Western spaces in Western terms assumes the universality of the latter perspective and perpetuates the subordination of the Other.

Conversely, differentiating between the types of trauma experienced in culturally dissimilar spaces allows for the recognition of factors which are unique to those spaces. Craps argues that the typically Western formulation of trauma as 'an individual phenomenon' stemming from 'a single catastrophic event' can be 'problematic' because it distracts from those wider social factors that 'enabled the traumatic abuse'.<sup>17</sup> Such factors include 'economic domination, or political oppression' or those issues pertaining to racism and 'other forms of ongoing oppression' which cannot be encapsulated by Western conceptualisations of trauma.<sup>18</sup> More challenging still, and perhaps most relevant to Hosseini's task within *The Kite Runner*, is the communication of that trauma born of ongoing conflict and violence to a Western context largely unfamiliar with relentless upheaval.

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<sup>14</sup> Jefferess 390.

<sup>15</sup> Stef Craps, 'Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma Theory in the Global Age', *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism* edited by Sam Durrant, Gert Beulens and Robert Eaglestone (New York: Routledge, 2014) 48.

<sup>16</sup> Craps 48.

<sup>17</sup> Craps 49-50.

<sup>18</sup> Craps 50.

The transposition of Afghanistan's national turmoil into a singular moment of traumatic rupture for Amir is effective in that it allows Hosseini to avoid the task of conveying to a twenty-first-century Western audience the unfamiliar prospect of perpetual conflict. Hosseini is meticulous in his use of that which Craps refers to as 'situatedness' as a means of justifying this approach to the narrative rendering of Afghanistan's trauma.<sup>19</sup> 'Situatedness' refers to a declaration on the part of the author or the protagonist that their perspective is one cultivated at a distance from the traumatic event. Building on Craps' work, declarations of situatedness can be an effective means for authors and characters to deny what he calls 'imperialist pretensions' as they renounce claims to first-hand knowledge or experience of the trauma in question.<sup>20</sup> In doing so, the author is able to prioritise perspectives better acquainted with the particulars of the trauma and avoid accusations of appropriative intentions. Hosseini utilises the established metafictional frame to position the Western reader at a degree of removal from the incident taking place in the alley and the events of national significance it is designated to represent. We are privy to Hassan's assault via Amir's recounting of his childhood memory; the narrative distance enacted here precludes the possibility of over-identification on the part of the Western reader.

As Amir describes his experience as witness to Hassan's assault, the allegorical filter of Western-conceptualised trauma is immediately employed. Amir's description of his response to what is occurring in the alley falls in line with Western conceptualisations of individualised trauma stemming from a singular catastrophic event. Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, defines this Western take on trauma as 'an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events'.<sup>21</sup> According to Caruth, traumatic experiences constitute those which happen 'too soon' or 'too unexpectedly' to be fully known to the individual.<sup>22</sup> Caruth argues that traumatic experiences may only be made 'available to consciousness' as the trauma 'imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor'.<sup>23</sup> The individual can only come to understand and gain 'knowledge' of the traumatic event as it is revisited and its 'belated impact' is felt and worked through.<sup>24</sup> This typically Western characterisation of trauma lends itself well to narrative representation. Caruth suggests that literary fiction can utilise language in ways which mimic the effects of trauma and therefore aid the reading audience in coming to comprehend the severity of what is described.<sup>25</sup> Literature can employ a language that 'defies, even as it claims, our understanding'.<sup>26</sup> In other words, even as the traumatic event is continually encoded by language and we bear witness to its

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<sup>19</sup> Craps 54.

<sup>20</sup> Craps 54.

<sup>21</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) 11.

<sup>22</sup> Caruth 4.

<sup>23</sup> Caruth 4.

<sup>24</sup> Caruth 4.

<sup>25</sup> Caruth 5.

<sup>26</sup> Caruth 7.

passing, literature allows trauma to persist in resisting ‘simple comprehension’ through ‘enigmatic testimony’.<sup>27</sup>

In *Trauma Fiction*, Anne Whitehead summarises Caruth as arguing that the narrative representation of trauma in fiction requires a ‘literary formulation which departs from conventional linear’ structure.<sup>28</sup> The mere recounting of a terrible incident from the perspective of a detached narrator will not capture the complexity of what trauma constitutes and how it behaves. For Craps, the resultant dedication to mimicking trauma’s disruptive capacity encapsulates the approach to writing about traumatic experiences typical among Western novelists.<sup>29</sup> Craps explains the emphasis on ‘experimental, modernist, textual strategies’ in Western trauma fiction in terms of the mimesis it purports to effect for the reading audience.<sup>30</sup> Craps notes that such modernist applications, though perhaps effective in communicating the nature of the trauma experienced in Western contexts, are largely modes of literary expression emerging from a ‘European cultural tradition’ often unavailable to non-Western spaces.<sup>31</sup> As such Craps challenges the usefulness of such modes of expression where trauma is not defined in terms of an individually-focused psychological experience.

The apparent futility of attempting to narrate non-Western trauma via Western modes of literary representation, perhaps explains Hosseini’s mediated approach to narrativising Afghanistan’s national trauma. The frame of Western-conceptualised individual trauma, once employed, necessitates that Amir’s narrative perspective destabilises and shifts intermittently away from what is happening in the alley as Hassan is set upon by his attackers. The narrative is interrupted by memories and remembrances of dreams which spring unprompted into the path of the reader – a rare instance of upset in a novel which otherwise avoids experimentation with form or structure. It is not clear to the reader whether the memory intrudes into the consciousness of our adult, narrating Amir or into that of his younger self. This blurring of the lines seems deliberate given the nature of trauma and the instability of perspective it inspires, representing the moment at which Hosseini’s protagonist is forced to confront a horror so immense that he is unable to effectively process its enormity.

One such interruption occurs as Amir describes seeing Hassan’s face briefly immediately before Assef carries out his sexual assault. According to Amir, the look he witnessed there was one of ‘resignation’ – enough to bring to Amir’s mind a similar look of resignation he witnessed on the face of a sheep one Eid as the mullah cut its throat. The narrative cuts away to a detailed description of this memory, effectively doubling on a structural level Amir’s inability to process the scene as it unfolds. The horror of the recounted memory, with the violence it entails, allows for Hassan’s trauma to be rendered via a conduit experience, thereby communicating devastation without forcing its articulation.

Once returned to the alley, Amir recalls that he ‘stopped watching’ and ‘turned away’, unable to continue in his role as witness (72). Amir considers briefly that he might still step in and save Hassan from Assef. In the end, however, Amir is rendered incapacitated by trauma and runs

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<sup>27</sup> Caruth 7.

<sup>28</sup> Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2004) 6.

<sup>29</sup> Craps 50.

<sup>30</sup> Craps 50.

<sup>31</sup> Craps 50.

from the alley, leaving Hassan to suffer his assault alone. Adult Amir, narrating from the comfort of the present, admits to a number of reasons for turning his back on Hassan. Among these reasons, at least those consciously recognised, were cowardice and fear but also uglier thoughts about Hassan perhaps being the 'price' he had to pay for his father's affection (73). Amir echoes the words of Hassan's attackers as he refers to his friend as 'just a Hazara', making reference to Hassan's status as an ethnic minority – and therefore dispensable as collateral damage (73).

The significance of these uncomfortable admissions becomes clearer when contextualised within the allegorical representation of Afghanistan enacted by Amir's metafictional bildungsroman. Amir views his apparent cowardice in this moment as being complicit in Hassan's rape. However, the reading audience, while disappointed by Amir's inaction, does not experience his childlike response in the same way. From our removed perspective, we are able to recognise Amir's inability to save Hassan as unfortunate, even tragic, but not necessarily as a sign of any inherent failing in his character. Once Amir returns home to seek comfort and longed-for acceptance in the 'warmth' of his father's chest, we recognise the childish desperation underpinning his choice to stay silent and perhaps question whether he had the capacity to effectively intervene (74). Nevertheless Amir becomes determined at this point in the narrative to castigate himself for his inaction and place himself within the same category of guilt as those directly responsible. The implicit unreliability of Amir's traumatised childhood memory serves to undermine the notion that he must atone for any active role in either his own trauma or that of Hassan.

On an allegorical level, this destabilisation of assigned responsibility poses a direct challenge to the notion that Afghanistan must atone before it can be rendered grievable on the world stage. In presenting this allegorical representation of Afghanistan's political upheaval through the perspective of a traumatised child, the Western witness is able to read both situations with compassion. Importantly, Hosseini problematises Amir's fixation on his own guilt and identifies him as an unreliable narrator in this regard, noting later in the narrative that he was 'always too hard on himself' (205). The novel's preoccupation with the theme of redemption is thereby refocused to deal more precisely with the project of working through trauma so that agency and the capacity to speak back can be reclaimed on both narrative levels.

As Hosseini's narrative proceeds in the wake of this trauma we bear witness to the failure of language and the collapse of Amir's relationship with Hassan. Significantly, the narrative at no point turns to Hassan's point of view during the rape, and the reader never receives a sense of his physical or psychological trauma. Amir admits to steadfastly ignoring the tears on his friend's face, the 'crack in his voice' or 'those tiny drops that fell from between his legs and stained the snow black' (74). Hassan, for his part, neither volunteers to recount his assault nor makes any reference to Amir's obvious determination to ignore the fact that something terrible has taken place in his supposed absence. Hassan displays typical signs of trauma as he finds himself momentarily unable to speak or to find language to reorient himself within his surroundings. Amir recalls that 'Hassan began to say something and his voice cracked' (74). Since Hassan was making no progress in his attempts to articulate his traumatic experience, he eventually gave up, 'took a step back' and 'wiped his face' (74). Amir remembers this as the closest he and Hassan 'ever came to discussing what had happened in the alley' (74).

Hassan's role as a servant means that he has to carry on with his duties despite the immensity of the trauma suffered; as an illiterate member of an ethnic minority, Hassan does not possess a platform from which to enact the witnessing of his trauma or to disrupt the status quo by calling attention to his own needs and experiences. Amir recalls that 'for a week' he 'barely saw Hassan' (76). Hassan eventually re-emerges reluctant to address the impact of the attack; he appears to be aware of his powerlessness and the futility of dwelling on his trauma. In his silence, Hassan represents within the narrative those marginalised groups who remain the voiceless Other. Ultimately, both boys are rendered unable to articulate their experience due to the trauma it engendered. Even adult Amir, narrating from his place in the present, is unable to name Hassan's assault as rape. Instead, he consistently refers to it vaguely as something that 'happened in the alley' (74). Ultimately, this incident is traumatic not simply because of the emotional or physical injury it inflicts, but the shift it represents in their young lives. From this point onward, the trauma exists as something unspeakable between Amir and Hassan, breaking down their previously easy relationship into one made up of fraught, tense interactions until its final collapse.

As Amir's rift with Hassan worsens, unaided by the collapse of Amir's proficiency with language and storytelling in the wake of his trauma, we are presented with the allegorical representation of the ways in which Afghanistan is rendered voiceless and summarily abandoned by the West in the wake of its difficulties. Unable to cope with or work through the trauma, Amir begins to turn his back on Hassan and the progression of his bildungsroman is indefinitely halted. This crisis, both within the metafictional development of Amir's bildungsroman and the allegorical representation of Afghanistan's national turmoil, is embedded in the structure of the novel as narrative attention is pulled away from Afghanistan and Amir leaps forward a number of years to his and Baba's emigration to the West. By turning away from Afghanistan in these intervening years, Hosseini demonstrates for the reader the ways in which a failure to acknowledge or give voice to suffering engendered by violence or political upheaval can have far-reaching consequences.

As a result of the developmental stagnation that is the result of trauma, Amir's emigration to the West does not mark the turning point in his bildungsroman that the reader might expect. Significantly, the impact of trauma on Hassan is not explored any further; his exit from Baba's house marks Hosseini's final engagement with how Hassan is affected by his rape. The narrative leaves Hassan behind as it opts to focus on the wealthy Pashtun boy and trace his ascendancy to the role of national advocate. Though Amir appears to go through the motions of a successful integration into Western society, he remains incapable of leaving his past behind. Hosseini allows Amir's unease in the West to mirror the uncomfortable place Afghanistan occupies in Western discourse. In fleeing Afghanistan, Amir does not manage to cultivate a life removed from the shadow of trauma. Amir eventually finds work as a novelist, marries Soraya and mourns the death of his father; however, a sense of unease haunts this section of the novel as Amir's life in America never quite grants the escape he seeks.

Amir's career as a novelist seems to fall short of providing genuine fulfilment. Once his success in the field has been established, we hear little of his output and few details about the subject matter of his novels. Indeed, while Amir seems to have achieved his boyhood goals, any reader satisfaction at his apparent success is undercut by the sense of hollow achievement and

foreboding that Amir experiences in America. Amir becomes a novelist, and yet he remains unable to utilise language to articulate the trauma haunting his existence. Hassan's rape, and the national upheaval it symbolises, is still unwitnessed at this point in the narrative, as our resident storyteller remains subject to the limiting powers of his own trauma.

### **Return to Afghanistan and Recovery**

In line with Western conceptualisations, working-through and overcoming trauma involves for Amir a return to Afghanistan decades later and a direct confrontation with the source of his torment. Importantly, in returning the narrative to Afghanistan Hosseini must confront the challenges inherent to witnessing trauma that has transpired in Amir's absence and which he did not experience. Amir is forced to perform an identity he can no longer claim as entirely his own; he must literally wear a disguise in the form an 'artificial beard' and 'Shari'a friendly' clothing to gain access to the Kabul of his childhood (213). Amir assumes the role of the familiar outsider, at once invested in Afghanistan's fate through history and heritage but no longer entitled to claim ownership over a region whose misfortunes have no great bearing upon his existence. As such, Amir's identity becomes a focal point of the narrative as his primary sensibility shifts from the 'authentically' Afghan perspective of his childhood to that of an interloper attempting to pass undetected in a country he can no longer un-problematically represent.

Amir is placed as a witness to the periphery whose insights and perspectives are now modelled after, and intended for, the centre. In order to facilitate witnessing for this central audience, Amir defers authority in certain matters to characters whose perspectives have been cultivated by lifelong residence in Afghanistan. By acknowledging Amir's limitations in this regard Hosseini prioritises the peripheral voice and gives narrative space to those perspectives typically silenced at the centre. Hosseini utilises the metafictional structure here to allow Amir to abdicate his role as primary storyteller in this section of the novel – perhaps even momentarily suspending his function as direct allegorical representative – and concede centre stage to those characters situated within the narrative as being of the periphery, like old family friend Rahim Khan.

Through Rahim, we gain insight into the time that has elapsed in Afghanistan since Amir's departure; significantly, Hosseini tasks Rahim with communicating to the Western audience that the arrival of the Taliban was not celebrated for its brutality. Instead, the rise of the Taliban is contextualised within decades of conflict from which they promised deliverance. In a fashion that mimics Western ignorance of this context, the reader is only privy to the turmoil that preceded the Taliban's arrival by way of an explanation as to how Afghanistan fell subject to their rule in the first place. Amir's curiosity, set up to mirror Western interest in Afghanistan, takes as its focus the most extreme, publicised example of brutality and approaches the question of their reign in a manner which implicitly positions Afghans as complicit in their own oppression.

Significantly, Amir's silence on the subject of Afghanistan's troubles is questioned by those he meets during his trip to Kabul. Wahid, a man he encounters during his trip, on hearing that Amir earns his living as writer, enquires as to whether he writes 'about Afghanistan' (217). Wahid, confronting what is ostensibly the metafictional purpose of *The Kite Runner*, suggests that Amir

should use his skill as a writer to ‘tell the rest of the world what the Taliban are doing to our country’ (218). This prompts Amir to declare that he is ‘not quite that kind of writer’, bringing the conversation to an end (218). Amir’s sheepishness on the topic of his writing is conspicuous here when we consider the importance storytelling held for him at the outset of the novel. This is ultimately the closest Amir comes to outwardly articulating the distance that trauma has placed between his innate writerly talent and his ability to facilitate the witnessing of anything significant, whether of personal or national importance.

Amir’s confrontation with Assef, now a Taliban leader and captor of Hassan’s orphaned son, is the narrative culmination of our protagonist’s struggle to deal with the lifelong consequences of childhood trauma. This section of the novel seeks to placate the Western reader who might expect their particular formulation of individual trauma to find resolution in confrontation. Amir submits willingly, even with relief, to Assef’s violence. Though Amir understands this incident as securing his redemption, as noted, Hosseini has problematised the notion of Amir’s liability and, by extension, that of Afghanistan. We are thus able to read this encounter more precisely as an excision of demons, Assef’s defeat representing a rejection of those destructive forces for which he stands.

Nonetheless, once Amir has worked through his trauma in this way he is able to finally articulate its enormity to Soraya and move forward at last toward genuine realisation of his bildungsroman. Amir describes feeling ‘something lift’ off his chest as he tells his wife ‘everything’ (298). Following this confession it is decided that Amir and Soraya should adopt Sohrab, Hassan’s son, and bring him to the United States to live. The adoption process proves difficult, however, and Sohrab is further traumatised as a result of its frustrations. Unable to cope with prospect of returning even briefly to an orphanage before the adoption can be completed, Sohrab attempts suicide and narrowly escapes death. As a result of this episode, Sohrab is unable to speak for the remainder of the novel and as such represents the lasting impact of trauma upon future generations of peripheral voices.

## Conclusion

Amir informs the reader that ‘while Sohrab was silent, the world was not’ (332). He explains that ‘one Tuesday morning last September, the Twin Towers came crumbling down and, overnight, the world changed’ (332). Amir describes the feeling of disorientation as Afghanistan became a topic of conversation across the country and people would stand ‘in grocery store lines talking about’ cities such as ‘Kandahar, Herat’ and ‘Mazar-i-Sharif’ (332). Importantly, Hosseini does not frame these attacks as something for which Amir, and the Afghan community described in the novel, must answer. Instead, Amir notes that following the attacks and the subsequent bombing of Afghanistan, he becomes an advocate for the Afghan community ‘out of a sense of civic duty’ (333).

Having finally confronted and worked through the trauma of his youth, Amir is able to participate in the project of rebuilding the Afghan community and the creation of an atmosphere in which Afghanistan can exist in Western consciousness as a fully realised nation. At the level of metafiction, Hosseini places Amir, by the novel’s end, as a character who has finally found his voice and recovered his ability to tell the kind of stories required for the purposes of world literature. At this point in the narrative Hosseini has brought us, full circle, back to find the Amir

we first meet at the outset of *The Kite Runner*, finally ready to assume his role as a voice of the periphery.

No longer plagued by the silencing trauma of his youth, Amir is now able to act as proxy – for Hosseini, Hassan and Sohrab – and facilitate our witnessing of Afghanistan’s turbulent history through the allegorical retelling of his coming-of-age story. Analysing the allegory itself, we recognise Afghanistan speaking from the periphery and giving voice to the trauma which has prevented its complex representation on the world stage. As we witness this return to agency, we are cognisant of the myriad obstacles overcome along the way. Hosseini is therefore able to present Afghanistan’s re-emergence as something important and significant in its own right, quite apart from the context of 9/11; Hosseini has effectively undercut any expectation we might have for these characters to answer for the attacks as by the novel’s end their grievability, and by extension that of Afghanistan, has been so thoroughly established as to preclude recourse to any rhetoric suggesting their implicit culpability. Through Amir, and the complex narrative structure offered by his allegorical bildungsroman, Hosseini has provided the Western reader with insight into Afghanistan’s vast cultural landscape and provided us with the capacity to view its struggles and traumas with compassion and genuine cross-cultural understanding.

The final chapters of *The Kite Runner* find Hosseini engaging once again with his role as an Afghan-American novelist and therefore with the fraught space he occupies in world literary systems. The setting for the novel’s closing sections is the Western location of San Francisco, where the narrative’s metafictional frame has been situated all along. The explicit placement of the novel’s resolution in this location is problematic in its dependence on the Western context for realisation. By providing a relatively happy ending and signalling the beginnings of Sohrab’s recovery, particularly in his new Western home, Hosseini risks suggesting that a resolution is only possible in such a context. Additionally, in offering the reading audience a cathartic ending, Hosseini potentially undermines his efforts at destabilising divisionary thinking; he perhaps allows Afghanistan’s national trauma to serve as only a temporary narrative complication resolved within the scope of the story rather than a lasting source of disquiet for readers. These imperfections notwithstanding, Hosseini’s decision to have the narrative remain in the West is arguably an effort to acknowledge as the novel closes the disparity inherent to world literary systems and to demonstrate the ways in which such systems can be, if not changed, manipulated effectively to facilitate the peripheral witnessing and cross-cultural understanding so desperately needed in this post-9/11 era.

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