

The Kite Runner: the Afghan tragedy goes unexplained

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Directed by Marc Forster, screenplay by David Benioff, based on the novel by Khaled Hosseini

The Kite Runner, directed by Marc Forster (*Monster's Ball*, 2001; *Finding Neverland*, 2004), is based on the book of the same title by Khaled Hosseini. It tells the story of Amir, a boy from a middle class Afghan family, who is haunted by the guilt of having betrayed his childhood friend Hassan, the son of his father's servant.

The story begins in 1975 and is set against the backdrop of the fall of the monarchy in Afghanistan, the Soviet invasion in 1979, the mass migration of Afghan refugees to Pakistan and the United States and the coming to power of the Taliban in 1996.

The first part of the film follows the two boys as they grow up in Kabul, flying kites and going to the cinema. Amir also reads passages from the Persian epics to the illiterate Hassan. Amir's father, Baba, loves both boys, but often favours Hassan. He is critical of his son, and Amir begins to think that his father might blame him for his mother's death (she died in childbirth). Baba's best friend and business partner, Rahim Khan, is a more sympathetic figure in Amir's life, as he seems to better understand him and supports his love of writing stories.

A particularly violent older boy with fascist sympathies, Assef, goads Amir for mixing with Hassan, who is a Hazara, a traditionally persecuted minority (some 10 percent of the Afghan population). According to Assef, the Hazara are an inferior race that should only live in Hazarajat.

Hassan is a 'kite runner' for Amir, so-called because he runs to fetch kites Amir has 'defeated' by cutting their strings. He seems to know instinctively in which of the many streets and alleyways the kite will land as it makes its long descent. One day, Amir wins the local tournament and with it Baba's much sought-for praise. Hassan goes to collect the last cut kite, but runs into Assef and his two henchmen. Hassan refuses to give up Amir's kite, so in order to teach him a lesson and to avenge a past slight, Assef assaults and rapes him.

Crouching behind a wall, Amir witnesses what happens to Hassan, but is too scared to help him. Afterward, Amir feels guilt and repulsion for Hassan's unquestioning loyalty to him. From this point onwards, Amir shuns his former friend.

To force Hassan to leave the family home, Amir frames him as a thief, and Hassan dutifully confesses. Baba forgives him, but Hassan and his father, Ali, leave anyway out of shame.

Because Baba is well-known as an outspoken anticommunist,

when the Soviet Army invades Afghanistan in 1979, Amir and his father flee to Peshawar, Pakistan, and, ultimately, to Fremont in northern California. Amir and Baba, who lived in relative comfort in a mansion in Afghanistan, settle in a small apartment and Baba takes a job at a gas station.

Amir eventually takes classes at a local community college to develop his writing skills. Every Sunday, Baba and Amir make extra money selling used goods at a flea market in San Jose. It is here that Amir meets his future wife—the daughter of an Afghan general.

Amir becomes a successful novelist. Fifteen years later, he receives a call from Rahim Khan, his father's old friend and business partner—who is suffering from a terminal illness—asking him to come to Pakistan. He enigmatically tells Amir "there is a way to be good again."

When he meets Rahim Khan, Amir learns the fates of Ali and Hassan. Ali was killed by a land mine. Hassan had a wife and a son, named Sohrab, and had returned to Baba's house as a caretaker at Rahim Khan's request. One day the Taliban ordered him to abandon the house and leave, but he refused, and was shot, in the street, along with his wife.

Rahim Khan also reveals an important secret about Hassan.

Amir returns to Taliban-controlled Kabul with a guide, to search for Hassan's orphaned son, Sohrab. When he eventually tracks Sohrab down, Amir discovers that the Taliban official who has captured the little boy is none other than his childhood nemesis Assef. In the end, Amir takes Sohrab back to the US, where he and his wife, who cannot have children of their own, adopt him.

The parts of the film depicting Afghanistan were mostly shot in Kashgar, China, due to the dangers of filming in the occupied country. Shooting wrapped up December 2006 and the movie was expected to be released in November 2007. However, after concern for the safety of the young actors in the film, its release date was pushed back six weeks.

The US-installed Hamid Karzai government has banned the film from cinemas and DVD shops, purportedly because of the rape scene and the ethnic tensions that the film highlights.

Although the work inevitably differs from the book on which its based (in the latter, Amir as first-person narrator offers more insight into his feelings and motives than the film provides; Forster's film has one long flashback, the book jumps forward and backward in time more often; the book is more explicit about Hassan's rape), the idea of personal and societal redemption

comes from the novel's author.

Khaled Hosseini, who wrote *The Kite Runner*, was born in Kabul, where his father worked for the Afghan foreign ministry. In 1970, Hosseini and his family moved to Tehran, Iran, where his father worked for the Afghan embassy. A Hazara man, named Hossein Khan, worked for the Hosseinis while they were living in Iran. Hosseini taught Khan to read and write. Although this relationship was brief and rather formal, it apparently served as an inspiration for the relationship between Hassan and Amir in *The Kite Runner*.

In 1973, Hosseini's family returned to the Afghan capital, a short time before the former King of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah, was ousted from power in a bloodless coup orchestrated by the king's cousin, Daoud Khan.

In 1976, Hosseini's father obtained a job in Paris and moved the family there. They chose not to return to Afghanistan because of the Soviet occupation. Instead, in 1980 they sought political asylum in the US and eventually settled in San Jose, California.

Hosseini practiced medicine until a year and half after the release of *The Kite Runner*. The book was a best seller in the US in 2005. It was also voted 2006's reading group book of the year and headed a list of 60 titles submitted by entrants to the Penguin/Orange Reading Group prize in the UK.

Hosseini is currently a 'Goodwill Envoy' for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The film is spectacularly shot and is at times engaging, especially when exploring the lopsided friendship between the two small boys. It also offers a glimpse into disparate lives shaped by some of the most significant political events of the latter part of the 20th century, in a region that has historically been, and is once again, the scene of inter-imperialist rivalry and conquest. This is a rare thing, and will account for a significant amount of its general appeal. But the limited character of the story, its failure to go terribly deep in any direction, is ultimately bound up with its retrograde themes.

Both the book and film attempt to generate uncritical sympathy for the plight of the principal character and to a lesser extent, his father. The reader or spectator will share this sentiment only to the extent that he or she remains largely ignorant or indifferent to the many complex social and historical questions touched on by the work.

Even if one accepts the premise that a childhood transgression (Amir's mistreatment of Hassan) could ultimately produce such a dramatic denouement, there is too much here that strains credibility. It is difficult to believe that Amir, who enjoyed a relatively comfortable childhood and has now started a new life in the US, would risk everything to save the child of his former friend. He has not shown signs of possessing that sort of a social or moral conscience.

The whole thing doesn't add up.

One of the few discordant notes allowed by the filmmaker, in this increasingly contrived story, is struck by Amir's driver and guide to Kabul, Farid, who is initially hostile towards the wealthy Afghan expatriate. Farid berates Amir, for running away when other Afghans were suffering—until he too is caught up in the Amir's 'sense of purpose' and becomes his accomplice in

rescuing Sohrab.

Amir, who, when compared with his peers, is a morally spineless child, has grown up to be a rather pathetic writer, hanging on to the coattails of right-wing Afghan exiles. Even though the film exaggerates the book's account of Sohrab's rescue, the single handed Rambo-esque 'liberation' organized by Amir is not just highly improbable, in the context of a story that asks the reader to assume that the US is not only a place of refuge but also a force for good, the implications are downright sinister.

Even though the narrative doesn't extend to the present day, the story's central idea of atoning for past sins, dovetails quite neatly with the justifications for the present US-led invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. Apologists for the invasion choose to interpret the ongoing imperialist occupation of Afghanistan as a noble correction to the 'non-interventionist' years of the 1990s.

A correct reading of recent Afghan history, however, would actually trace the source of the current miseries in that country to two decades of US provocation, covert operations and naked aggression. Washington stoked up and financed the jihadist movements in the late 1970s and 1980s. When the brutal civil war raged in Afghanistan in the 1990s, the US and other major powers merely saw this as the inevitable working out of their main objective in the region, that of countering Soviet influence.

The vast majority of flattering reviews of the book and film have concentrated on the 'common denominator' theme of 'redemption.' Generally speaking, such an abstract consideration says next to nothing. When applied to history and international conflict, it is worse than that, because it leaves entirely out of account the actual motives of the various social participants. Did the US invade Afghanistan, for example, because of its need to 'redeem' itself for its past failures in the region or for definable reasons of geopolitical strategy?

The implication of Amir's rescuing Sohrab is clearly that Afghanistan still needs rescuing by some external force, presumably the US. The depiction of Hassan is part and parcel of the general approach. In this vision of things, the mass of the Afghan population will always be helpless unless aided by a stratum of Afghan society that is allied with the foreign occupation.

The inadequacies of the book and film leave them open to being used for quite rotten purposes. At the end of the day, and perhaps even before that, movies like *The Kite Runner* and *Charlie Wilson's War* are acceptable to those wishing to justify the present occupation of Afghanistan. So much so that the wife of the present president of the United States could declare at an official function in March 2006: "I am especially thrilled to finally meet the author of *The Kite Runner*, Mr. Khaled Hosseini. President Bush and I both really, really enjoyed your book. And we recommend it. I recommended it today at a tea at the White House to some women who asked me what I was reading."



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