

Social class and environment in the moral development of children in *The Kite Runner*

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Abstract:

This article focuses on the issues of social class in relation to the two protagonists' growth into adolescence. Set in Afghanistan, *The Kite Runner* touches on the turmoil the country faces and shows the troubling effect it has on two children, which the essay will mainly focus on. It will specifically determine whether social class and religion have a direct influence on their moral development. With both children from differing religions and social classes, their attitudes to life also differ. Comparisons are to be made over the children's reaction to specific events in the novel to examine whether this has aided or hindered their moral growth. It will directly focus on the children's attitudes and beliefs reflected towards each other to finally determine who has better moral development, the child from the 'superior' religion and affluent background; or the child from the 'inferior' religion with a much more deprived background. This decision will be made through careful analysis of the text and secondary criticisms.

The Kite Runner depicts the story of Amir, the son of a wealthy member of the ruling Pashtuns, and his servant Hassan from the Hazara religion, who are discriminated against by the Pashtuns. With political, ethnic and religious tensions the children's friendship is tested and ultimately destroyed after Amir's betrayal of Hassan. Both characters are forced to flee the turmoil in Afghanistan, yet their story remains intertwined as Amir never truly forgives himself for his actions. With differing approaches to life, the two characters provide insight into whether social class, environment, and religion have an influence on their growth to adolescents. By comparing their development and morality, this essay will determine the effects of these factors on a successful coming of age journey.

To analyse whether the characters' different backgrounds aid or hinder their moral development, I will examine their differing approaches to certain situations and moral dilemmas. Their first difference is their approach to lying. When questioned if he would lie to Amir, Hassan claims he would "sooner eat dirt"¹ then do so. Eating dirt connotes the impression of being lower and creates an image of absurdity which thus reflects how disgusted Hassan is at the prospect of lying to his best friend. In contrast to this Amir finds it easy to lie, when he "told Baba [he] couldn't find the watch anywhere"² and then proceeded to go into Hassan's room and "planted the watch and cash under it"³. In an earlier scene, we learn that in their family "there is only one sin, only one, and that is theft"⁴, so the immoral choice of Amir to lie about the theft of his watch portrays an even bigger betrayal and an act of immaturity. Amir's actions are led by a sense of guilt and to rid this sense of guilt, rather than addressing it, he lies and acts maliciously towards his friend, therefore displaying a lack of maturity. The difference in both the children's attitudes to lies allows the reader an insight into their morality, or in Amir's case lack of. Hassan's complete loyalty to Amir could be viewed as a product of social class, with him being seen as inferior to Amir it is possible he idolised him and wanted to do everything right for him. As he is technically employed by Amir and his father as a servant, this reaction to lying may have been different if his and his father's employability was not at risk. Amir uses lies as a way of benefitting himself which is a product of his social class as he views himself as superior to many so he believes he can hurt others inferior to him.

Their different attitudes towards loyalty to one another is a constant theme throughout their childhood. The most poignant scene in *The Kite Runner* is Hassan's sexual assault, one which represents loyalty in two very different ways. "Hassan mentally transforms into a hero and stands his ground"⁵ when the bullies try to take the kite he has won for Amir. As a result of his loyalty, he endures a brutal act of rape. Hassan's refusal to betray his friend by giving up the kite is heavily contrasted to the lack of action Amir takes whilst watching this attack take place. Amir knew he had "one last chance to decide who [he] was going to be"⁶, but instead is frozen by the fear of the bullies. To only describe Amir's decision as a lack of loyalty does not seem accurate as before in the novel even his father mentions that his son struggles to

¹ Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), p.47

² Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, p.90

³ Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, p.90

⁴ Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, p.16.

⁵ Hesham Khadawardi, "Superego Guilt, Redemption And Atonement In Khaled Hosseini'S The Kite Runner", *International Journal Of Humanities, Social Sciences And Education*, 4.2 (2017) <<https://doi.org/10.20431/2349-0381.0402009>>.

⁶ Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, p.68

stand up for himself or Hassan and that there is "something missing in that boy"⁷. Therefore, Amir's actions almost live up to his father's description as he is missing the quality of bravery that Hassan displays towards the bullies. This could be perhaps linked to his social class, as Amir has had a considerably easier life due to his superior religion and wealth. The need for bravery and standing up for himself was not particularly required. Hassan, on the other hand, is continuously persecuted due to his religion and position in society. "Societies mistreat Hassan and his father by mockery and names calling such as flat-nosed, mice-eating, and donkeys. They live a life of abject poverty and discrimination."⁸, which thus forces the sense of bravery he displays.

It is argued that "Amir's shame at not saving Hassan is felt not simply as a personal failure but as a failure to fulfil his role as a male"⁹. In Afghanistan, there is a clear differentiation between women and men with an adhering to traditional roles and beliefs. This desire to fill his role as a male will have had a significant impact on Amir's moral development, he is taught that women are inferior and men should stick up for them. Therefore, his lack of action would have been a disappointment to society as his role as a male would dictate he needed to intervene. This, therefore, suggests that his environment has shaped his moral development as this need to be masculine is not so prevalent in coming of age novels set in alternative countries.

Hasan's morality seems to be much more developed than Amir's even when they are just playing. An older Amir tells the reader how "sometimes [he'd] talk Hassan into firing walnuts with his slingshot at the neighbour's one-eyed German Shepard"¹⁰, even though Hassan tells him he doesn't want to. Hassan tries to display a sense of morality at not hurting something inferior to him, but is persuaded by Amir's lack of morality. He forces him to do so by telling Hassan to "remember whose servant you are"¹¹. Amir degrades Hassan into something which he owns and almost orders him to go against his own set of morals. This shows a distinct lack of moral development in Amir as not only is he pressuring Hassan but he is also hurting something inferior to him. Their differing approaches to hurting the dog are a direct result of social class. Hasan, who is used to being taunted by those deemed as superior, displays a disagreement to hurting the dog; whereas Amir finds it entertaining to hurt the inferior perhaps as he finds pleasure in his power in society.

Another example of Amir's lack of moral development is his reaction to guilt. After the attack, the two boys diminish their close friendship by their lack of interaction, when Amir one day decides to speak to Hasan it is clear he feels guilty which in turn shows a lack of moral development because of how he reacts to this guilt Amir uses a pomegranate to throw at Hasan which "struck him in the chest, and exploded in a spray of red pulp". The symbolic red pulp shows the pain that both children feel due to their lack of friendship and the gruesome events that happened. Hassan's cry is described as "pregnant with surprise and

⁷ Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, p.20

⁸ Yohanes Eko Rubiyanto and Restu Arini, "Social Class Conflict Presented In "The Kite Runner" Novel Based On Marxism Theory", *JELE (Journal Of English Language And Education)*, 2.2 (2016), 125 <<https://doi.org/10.26486/jele.v2i2.228>>.

⁹ David Jefferess, "To Be Good (Again): The Kite Runners Allegory Of Global Ethics", *Journal Of Postcolonial Writing*, 45.4 (2009), 389-400 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17449850903273572>>.

¹⁰ Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, p.3.

¹¹ Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, p.3.

pain”, implying a sense of betrayal from his best friend and shock at how he is acting. Amir begins to beg for Hasan to hit him back as he “wished he’d give [him] the punishment [he] craved” thus showing Amir doesn’t recognise the sense of guilt and is confused by how he should act. His craving for Hasan to retaliate implies he is aware of his wrongdoings yet can’t express this so it results in violence. This reaction to an emotion shows a distinct lack of moral development. It also appears that Amir is still trying to control what Hasan does with his imperative commands to “hit me back”, like a master telling a slave what to do. Yet, Hasan does not follow his orders and when Hasan “*did* pick up a pomegranate [...] he opened it and crushed it against his own forehead”. This reaction shows Hasan doesn’t blame Amir for his actions and does not want to hurt his friend, this shows clear growth as he recognises why Amir is throwing the fruit at him but doesn’t retaliate. This action also shows clear restraint from Hasan and although the children are the same age it seems to be showing Amir a lesson, that violence isn’t the answer and that he should accept his guilt.

When examining their environment concerning their growth the situation in Afghanistan needs to be understood. During the time that Hosseini sets the beginning of the novel Afghanistan is a stable but prosperous country, yet this changes shortly after Amir’s betrayal of Hasan resulting in his departure. Hasan’s departure almost seems symbolic as soon after Afghanistan turns to a country full of bloodshed and war. Their friendship breaking coincides with the breaking of the peace, which allows the reader to understand the value of their bond. Later in the novel, we learn “In Kabul, fear is everywhere, in the streets, in the stadium, in the markets, it is a part of our lives here”¹², but during their childhood, this fear is not felt, which suggests that their environment did not necessarily hinder their moral development. However, their environment in the sense that Pashtun’s believe they are superior to Hazarara’s does, as it results in bullying and a sense of superiority. Mir Hekmutallah Sadat argues that “the historical setting for the novel provides not simply the backdrop for the action but also a symbolic history of Afghanistan which illuminates the inequalities and injustices that result from notions of ethnic difference.” He believes that the relationship between the characters of differing religions is “symbolic of Afghanistan’s religious and ethnic tensions”¹³. This, therefore, shows that their characters and moral development are influenced by their environment but perhaps in more a symbolic way than literal sense.

In conclusion, without his father’s wealth and social class, it is questionable whether Amir would act the way he does. For example, he would have been forced to stand up for himself more, meaning he would have reacted differently when witnessing Hasan’s sexual assault. He therefore also wouldn’t look down on Hassan as they would be equal. His moral development would have been different as he would have been forced to be less deceitful and have a stronger moral obligation to survive in the world. In my opinion, social class does have an impact on the moral development of children as Amir negatively uses his social class and to his advantage, he doesn’t truly understand the need for loyalty and morality. In contrast to this Hassan’s lower social class means his sense of loyalty and bravery is affective in his moral development.

¹² Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, p.189

¹³ David Jefferess, “To Be Good (Again): The Kite Runner’s Allegory Of Global Ethics”, *Journal Of Postcolonial Writing*, 45.4 (2009), 389-400 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17449850903273572>>.

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