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Beyond Appearances: The Compassionate Heart of Erkin A'zam's "A Tender-Hearted Dwarf"

Saydalieva Aziza Ergashevna (Author)

12-17

[View Article](#)

Abbreviations as Lexical Economy ("The Martin Chronicles" by Ray Bradbury)

Usmonova Zarina Habibovna, Najmiyev Mirshod Mizrob O'g'li (Author)

18-22

[View Article](#)

Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis of The Functional Forms of Verbs in "The Martian Chronicles" by Ray Bradbury

Usmonova Zarina Habibovna, Sultanmuradova Dursun Sultanmuradovna (Author)

23-27

[View Article](#)

Methods of Teaching Russian Language and Work on The Development of Written Speech

Kabulov S. T (Author)

28-32

[View Article](#)

Internet and Cybersecurity: Threats and Their Prevention

Azizakhon Muydinovna Rasulova, Muslimakhon Ma'sudjon qizi Mo'minova (Author)

33-38

[View Article](#)

Focus and Scope

Section Policies

Publication Frequency

Peer Review Process

Open Access Policy

Publication Ethics

Copyright & License

Plagiarism Policy

Article Retraction & Withdrawal

Articles Processing Charge

Indexing & Abstraction

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The Reflection of Social Status in Khaled Hosseini's the Kite Runner

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Abstract:

Social status is a pivotal element shaping interpersonal dynamics and self-perception within stratified societies. In Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, Afghanistan's deeply embedded ethnic and class divisions are central to understanding the characters' moral conflicts and evolving identities. This paper investigates how Hosseini reflects the intricate web of ethnicity, class, and power in Afghan society and its psychological imprint on individuals. Using a qualitative literary analysis method, this study interprets key episodes, character dialogues, and narrative shifts within the novel to uncover representations of social hierarchy. The analysis is contextualized through secondary historical and sociopolitical literature on Afghan society, as well as postcolonial theory to frame ethnic dynamics. Findings show that Hosseini systematically portrays social hierarchy through housing, education, language, and ethnic affiliations—primarily the tension between Pashtuns and Hazaras. Social status governs not only the characters' social mobility but also their internalized self-worth. The transition of Amir and Baba from Afghanistan to the U.S. highlights how geographic displacement challenges but does not erase class consciousness. Moreover, the Taliban regime's actions reinforce that structural inequality intensifies under authoritarian power. The novel suggests that social inequality is not merely institutional but deeply psychologically internalized, affecting personal guilt, loyalty, and moral choices. Even in exile, characters remain haunted by their social roles. The use of symbols—especially the kite—emphasizes cycles of submission, redemption, and reversal of roles, with the final act of Amir "running the kite" for Sohrab symbolizing an attempt to subvert inherited privilege.

Keywords: The Kite Runner, Social Hierarchy, Afghanistan, Ethnicity, Pashtun, Hazara, Social Injustice, Hosseini

Introduction

Social status refers to the position or rank of a person within the hierarchical structure of society, determined by factors such as wealth, education, ethnicity, occupation, and heritage. It shapes not only how individuals view themselves but also how they are treated by others. Throughout history and across cultures, social status has influenced access to resources, political power, and even personal relationships. In societies with rigid structures, such as pre-war Afghanistan, social status was often inherited and unchangeable, rooted deeply in ethnic and religious divisions.

Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* is a seminal work that intertwines personal narratives with the larger historical and social tapestry of Afghanistan. Set against the backdrop of political upheaval, the novel paints a vivid portrait of a country riven by deep-seated social divisions[1]. In Hosseini's Afghanistan, social status is determined not merely by wealth or occupation, but by ethnicity, lineage, and religion. The Pashtuns, representing the majority Sunni population, dominate the Hazaras, a minority Shi'a group subjected to systemic discrimination. Through the relationships between characters such as Amir, Hassan, and Baba, Hosseini illustrates how social ranking is internalized, perpetuated, and challenged. This article delves into specific episodes from the novel, locating them in their narrative context, to highlight how social hierarchy profoundly shapes the lives of individuals[2].

Methods

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis method, focusing on textual interpretation of Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* to explore how social status is constructed and represented within the narrative. The research relies on close reading of key episodes, character dialogues, and narrative shifts to trace how social hierarchies are embedded in character relationships and plot development.

To ensure theoretical depth, the study draws upon postcolonial theory, especially the works of Homi K. Bhabha and Edward Said, to contextualize ethnic and cultural tensions portrayed in the novel[3]. Additionally, sociological literature on Afghan history and class structure—notably the stratification between Pashtuns and Hazaras—is employed to align fictional events with real-world dynamics.

Data for analysis is derived from:

1. Key passages reflecting class-based discrimination, especially between Amir and Hassan;
2. Thematic elements such as housing, education, and ethnic identity;
3. Symbolic representations (e.g., the kite motif) and their connection to social status.

The triangulation of literary evidence, theoretical perspectives, and sociohistorical context allows for a comprehensive understanding of how Hosseini critiques and reflects entrenched social inequalities through his characters and storyline.

Results and Discussion

From the outset, Hosseini portrays the friendship between Amir and Hassan as fundamentally shaped by inequality[4]. Although they are inseparable companions, the societal gulf between them is ever-present, as evidenced when Amir, under peer pressure, asserts, "But he's not my friend! He's my servant!"[5]. Their living conditions further reinforce this divide, with Amir residing in a lavish mansion adorned with mosaic tiles and chandeliers, while Hassan and his father live in a modest mud hut located "on the south end of the garden, in the shadows of a loquat tree" (p. 8). Education also becomes a marker of inequality; Amir attends school and develops literary talents, whereas Hassan remains illiterate despite being highly intelligent, simply because "he remained uneducated because of his social standing"[6]. These examples illustrate that the hierarchy between Amir and Hassan is not based on personal merit, but on an inherited social structure that governs every aspect of their lives.

Ethnicity emerges as a central factor determining social rank in *The Kite Runner*. Hassan's identity as

a Hazara subjects him to constant humiliation, such as when a soldier demands, "You! The Hazara! Look at me when I'm talking to you!"[7]. Institutionalized discrimination is also evident in the education system, where Hazara history is largely ignored, and teachers express open disdain, claiming, "[Shi'a people] do well... passing themselves as martyrs". The hatred culminates in the character of Assef, who believes, "Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns. It always has been, always will be," and refers to Hazaras as "flat-nosed" and unworthy of Afghan identity"[8]. Through these character interactions and societal norms, Hosseini highlights the entrenched ethnic bigotry that reinforces social hierarchies.

The novel also explores how social hierarchies are perpetuated across generations. Baba, Amir's father, though progressive in some respects, ultimately adheres to societal expectations that maintain ethnic boundaries. His relationship with Hassan is marked by hidden guilt, as he refuses to publicly acknowledge that Hassan is his biological son, a truth revealed later when Rahim Khan tells Amir, "Ali was sterile. No one knew it. It was a shameful secret"[9]. Baba's decision to conceal the paternity reflects his unwillingness to challenge a system where acknowledging a Hazara son would bring disgrace. Thus, even the most powerful characters in the novel are constrained by the invisible chains of social status[10].

The immigration of Baba and Amir to the United States serves as a powerful commentary on the fluidity of social status in different cultural contexts. Once a wealthy and respected businessman in Kabul, Baba is reduced to working at a gas station, his "hands calloused from washing cars"[11-12]. The reversal of fortunes reveals that while social status in Afghanistan was rigidly tied to ethnicity and wealth, American society offers a new, though equally challenging, meritocracy where status must be rebuilt. However, the internalization of Afghan class consciousness remains with Amir, influencing his relationships and his sense of guilt long after leaving his homeland.

The Taliban's rule in Afghanistan brings a new, more brutal expression of ethnic discrimination. Amir learns that the Taliban not only banned cultural practices like kite fighting but also committed atrocities against minority groups, including the massacre of Hazaras in Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998[13]. This state-sanctioned violence is personified by Assef, now a Taliban official, who enslaves and abuses Hassan's son, Sohrab. The systematic oppression under the Taliban regime demonstrates that political change does not necessarily dismantle entrenched social hierarchies; instead, it often intensifies them under the guise of ideological purity[14].

The recurring motif of the kite in the novel encapsulates the theme of social status. Initially, Hassan is the kite runner, a loyal servant chasing after Amir's victories, embodying the submissive role society expects him to play[15]. Later, when Amir runs the kite for Sohrab, it represents his effort to atone for the historical injustices perpetrated by both himself and his society. By flipping the roles, Hosseini symbolically suggests that true redemption and social healing require the privileged to acknowledge and redress the sufferings of the marginalized[16].

Conclusion

Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* is not merely a story of personal betrayal and redemption; it is a profound exploration of how social status, ethnicity, and historical injustice structure human relationships. Throughout the novel, Hosseini demonstrates that social hierarchies are not just external pressures but internalized beliefs that shape personal identity and moral choices. The friendship between Amir and Hassan is both illuminated and ultimately destroyed by these divisions.

By showcasing the endurance of ethnic prejudice through multiple political regimes — monarchy, Soviet occupation, Taliban rule — Hosseini emphasizes the deeply entrenched nature of social stratification. Even when geographical displacement (to America) seems to offer escape, the psychological scars of hierarchy persist. Through Amir's final act of humility — running a kite for Sohrab — Hosseini suggests that healing is possible, but only through the conscious dismantling of social prejudices and the acknowledgment of shared humanity. The novel ultimately serves as a

reminder that true redemption lies not merely in personal atonement but in challenging the societal structures that foster inequality. In *The Kite Runner*, social status is not a static label; it is a dynamic force that shapes destinies, relationships, and the moral fabric of society. Only by recognizing the humanity in those deemed ‘lower’ can true societal healing begin. By weaving personal guilt into collective history, Hosseini invites readers to reflect on their own societies and to challenge the invisible hierarchies that continue to define human lives.

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