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Global Censorship: Banned Books

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Literacy as an Expression of Connection and Afghan Censorship in *The Kite Runner*

Most discussions of censorship center around books that are controversial to someone's religion, culture, or lifestyle. On a global level, censorship is presented as a means to prevent a national population from ideas that oppose its invading or ruling party. Censorship continues to extend beyond the presentation and withholding of information. By controlling literacy and exposure to external media, a ruling party may control the mindset and opinions of its citizens, especially minorities. The discussion of censorship on this level is not as commonly explored as the topic of challenging or banning books from store shelves; however, censorship through controlling literacy must be discussed. Thankfully, a few forms of literature do discuss this topic in unique ways. Khaled Hosseini, for example, presents these discussions in his novel, *The Kite Runner*. In this essay, I argue literacy is a method of comfort, safety, and ultimately a personal connection between Hassan and Amir—eventually reuniting Amir and Afghanistan—despite being challenged by censorship.

Amir admits early in the novel that Hassan is “the face of Afghanistan” to him, which immediately establishes Hassan as a figure for the Afghan identity (Hosseini 25). If this is true, then it may be no coincidence that Amir's separation from Hassan is a foreshadowing to Amir's departure from Afghanistan. Hassan's connection to the use of the literacy is then applicable to a broad range of Afghan citizens.

By mentioning their challenging relationship due to a national cultural divide so early in the narrative, Amir sets up a sort of contract with readers that tells them complete reconciliation between Hassan and himself is not possible. The two boys grew up together and even nursed

from the same breast; however, even Amir never thought of the two as friends (Hosseini 25).

Amir admits, “History isn’t easy to overcome. Neither is religion. In the end, I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara, I was Sunni and he was Shi’a, and nothing was ever going to change that. Nothing” (Hosseini 25).

This cultural prerequisite carries throughout the rest of the novel as Amir spends his childhood taking advantage of Hassan’s illiteracy and furthering the divide, displaying an early form of censorship that worsens throughout the narrative. As children, the two boys spend a considerable portion of their time bonding over Amir reading stories out loud to Hassan. Even this seemingly harmless aspect of their relationship changes as Amir makes a discovery: “I read him poems and stories, sometimes riddles—though I stopped reading those when I saw he was far better at solving them than I was. So I read him unchallenging things” (Hosseini 25). He even claims, “My favorite part of reading to Hassan was when we came across a big word that he didn’t know. I’d tease him, expose his ignorance” (Hosseini 28). Without officially labeling this behavior, Amir practices a form of censorship towards Hassan that is seemingly harmless. The young Pashtun withholds information from his Hazara friend for his personal amusement, and Hassan is none the wiser. This practice may be a foreshadowing of a darker censorship that Amir introduces later.

Amir was consciously aware of his intentions while driving separation between Hassan and himself; however, he does not address his guilt until adulthood. As a young man, Amir laments his intentional childhood discrimination after his fiancé shares her childhood pride in teaching someone to read; Amir reflects, “I thought of how I had used my literacy to ridicule Hassan. How I had teased him about big words he didn’t know” (Hosseini 151).

Having Amir and Hassan adapt their childhood play to accommodate Hassan's illiteracy is no uncommon feat—this is actually a glimpse into a common setup in Afghan culture. In her article “Transformations in Afghan Media and Culture Through Cycles of Upheaval,” Professor Wazhmah Osman analyzes phases of Afghanistan's media from the 1960s to the post-9/11 media boom. Osman writes of the importance of Afghan media during the post-9/11 media boom, explaining that “television and . . . radio were the media formats at the center of the most publicly visible and politically charged national debates and social movements,” one of the reasons for this being high illiteracy rates (Osman 137). This further confirms Hassan's role as a representative for Afghanistan, as he consumes media by watching television or having Amir read aloud to him.

Furthermore, Hassan and Afghanistan both undergo radically separate changes and relationships with media as the country's ownership shifts throughout history. Hassan is frequently at the mercy of his Pashtun peers and adults due to his Hazara identity. Likewise, Osman writes that Afghanistan's people “have had to endure many abrupt starts and stops in every aspect of their lives, from personal and family aspirations to careers, education, training, and apprenticeships” (Osman 136). Osman acknowledges an overlooked consequence besides this frequent political exchange: “The loss of human talent, including media makers, and especially in cases of forced migration, dispossession, and displacement, brings about a far more profound cultural loss for a nation that cannot be quantified and instrumentalized only in economic terms” (Osman 136). This separation shows as Hassan falls victim to Assef during the rape scene, and as Amir withholds the truth that he witnessed Hassan's trauma without saving him—exhibiting censorship towards Hassan once again.

Hassan continues the cultural Afghan pattern of losing his family, home, and familiar life. After the rape scene, Hassan frequently asks Amir to read to him or to spend time with him somehow, resulting in requests that are frequently refused at this point. When Hassan and his father finally leave after Amir falsely accuses Hassan of stealing, Hassan loses his home, half of his family unit, and his access to media through Amir's use (and abuse) of literacy. This is a significant loss for Hassan to experience after already going through a severely traumatic episode. Readers may infer this as a loss of literature (the frequent practice of Amir reading to him) and of a place of notable history central to his identity (the house he and his father grew up in near Amir).

As a representative for the cultural Afghan identity, Hassan is not the only one who experiences a detrimental loss of literature and a place of notable history central to his identity. Gholamreza Amirkhani, Director General of the National Library of the Islamic Republic of Iran, provides further commentary of more violent censorship towards Herāt literature and culture. Published merely three months after the events of 9/11, Amirkhani writes "Letter from Iran: Afghanistan's Lost Splendor" to educate American readers on the importance of Herāt libraries, as well as the impact of the Taliban's destruction of these libraries. Amirkhani explains that Herāt libraries house the practice of book binding in "the most famous style of Islamic civilization" (Amirkhani 19). According to Amirkhani, the Herāt style is where "calligraphy, painting, binding, casing, illumination, and other book arts reach their peak and libraries become the primary place for artists to exhibit their craft" (Amirkhani 19). Librarians in these institutions are regarded as "artists, men and women of letters, and researchers" (Amirkhani 19). By targeting Herāt libraries, the Taliban not only destroys historical monuments and records of a culture, but they blatantly censor the practices and literature from that culture's perspective. A similar loss of

cultural artefacts is found when Amir and Hassan both leave piles of their belongings behind as they leave Amir and Baba's household, albeit at different times.

Much like the Herāt libraries, Hassan and Amir experience a loss that can never be fully restored. Amir eventually loses his security as a relatively wealthy child, his friend and half-brother, and his childhood home and country. Hassan first loses his innocence during the rape scene, followed by his childhood home and family structure as Amir drives him away. As an adult, Hassan loses more of his blood relatives and his own life as the Taliban publicly executes him.

Stepping beyond Hassan's lifespan, the role of literacy as a connecting feature in the Hosseini's novel shows itself in the reach and effects of Amir and Hassan's writing. As stated earlier, Amir takes his literacy for granted at a young age by ridiculing Hassan's inability to read. Amir also frequently practices writing for his own amusement and as an attempt to connect with his father, a connection that fails in his childhood. However, as an adult, Amir establishes a decent career as a writer and publishes multiple books. He even ironically marries Soraya, a teacher whose passion was sparked from teaching an illiterate girl how to read and write. Through this lens, Amir's writing may be described as successful and uncensored, as it is available to a broad audience and accepted. This is further confirmed through Amir's identity as an author—that is, his personal goal would be that his books be published and purchased to help establish a stable income from his writing.

From an even broader lens, Amir's point of view dominates the entirety of Hosseini's novel in the first person limited perspective. Everything that the readers experience and learn about—even the notes and letters from other characters' perspectives—are from Amir's point of

view. Readers get to read Hassan's perspective for once, but not without Amir's commentary and immediate bias following.

Hassan, on the other hand, is relatively not as successful as Amir in achieving his writing goals. After becoming literate, Hassan writes several letters to Amir as an attempt to reconnect with him. However, the letters do not make it to Amir until after Hassan is killed, completely removing any chance Hassan has of reconnecting with Amir as he had originally hoped. It can only be assumed and expected—seeing as readers do not get a direct look from Hassan's perspective—that Hassan does not expect Amir to meet Sohrab by rescuing the young boy from an orphanage and a sexual assailant. Unfortunately, this is the reality that comes to pass after Hassan is killed.

These circumstances result in the best-case-scenario being Amir taking Sohrab out of his familiar environment and back to America. While this is an overall great solution for beginning to right Amir's childhood wrongs, it may be argued that Hassan did not want to leave Afghanistan to begin with. Seeing as he initially refused to even move from his hut to his old home per Rahim Khan's invitation, Hassan may not have even wanted to leave Afghanistan with his wife and children. Yet again, readers can only assume Hassan's intentions because his letters do not reach Amir until it is too late, offering a limited glimpse into Hassan's thoughts. This blatant lack of information and insight on the minority's perspective shows a strong, yet more effective, demonstration of censorship through withholding Hassan's narrative.

Associate Professor Abdul Wahab Rahimi explores a similar lack of discussion on Afghan media in "War and Peace Journalism: Evaluating the Media Coverage of Afghan Conflicts." Rahimi writes that although there has been much discourse on Afghan *conflict*, "the analysis of *media's role* in the Afghan conflict has not received significant attention" (Rahimi

5434, emphasis mine). Rahimi's paper attempts to fill this gap while promoting peace journalism (Rahimi 5434). Rahimi elaborates that after the Taliban's seizure of Kabul in 2021, the group placed many heavy restrictions and exercised strong control over Afghan radio, television, and literature despite initially promising freedom of speech and media (Rahim 5435-5436).

According to Rahim, "Afghanistan has become one of the most dangerous countries for media in the last two decades . . . journalists treated by officials and conflicting parties have faced a lack of access to information to assure reporting or investigating sensitive issues," with many journalists even facing death (Rahim 5436).

Amir's limited access to Hassan's letters, as well as the consequences of acting on the truth and call for action within its contents, may be representative of this censorship of Afghan media. Much like the journalists in Afghanistan, Amir risks his life by returning to his home country and by acting on Hassan's letters and Rahim Khan's wishes. The overall conflict in Amir's narrative only begins to resolve once he unravels the lifelong censorship of his blood connection to Hassan, his refusal to help Hassan during the rape scene, and the lies he planted to drive Hassan away. This move from guilt to action, however, does not come into play until Amir is moved by hearing Rahim Khan's words and reading Hassan's letters.

Much like the way Amir's exposure of the truth triggers a change in the novel's course, exposure to media in Afghanistan has a strong impact—even in the most unlikely places. Osman references Afghan political talk shows: one wherein Taliban officials cook stew for the rest of the talk show crew, and another where a different Taliban official enters a debate on Western gay marriage (Osman 140). These unexpected actions and discussions take place from a newer generation of the Taliban. Osman writes, "Today's Taliban are not the Taliban of yesteryear, cut off from the world . . . this Taliban generation, like the rest of the Afghan population, also grew

up with mobile phones, hundreds of radio and television stations, and the extensive media bazaars of Pakistani border cities” (Osman 140). Osman’s article thus proves that exposure to more global media promotes a shift in mindset, even within the culture of the censor themselves.

The connection between recent generations of the Afghan population and other cultures through media is relative to the final connection Amir receives from Afghanistan and, ultimately, Hassan. Amir would have never even known about Sohrab’s existence if Rahim Khan had not reached out; additionally, Hassan’s letters may be the final spark of *ethos* and *pathos* needed to push him into action to retrieve the young boy. Even though Amir does not make it in time to reconnect with Hassan himself, thereby failing Hassan’s initial intent in writing the letters, he does meet with a newer generation of Hassan’s bloodline—Sohrab.

The more recent generations of the Afghan population have received new perspectives on their lifestyles through exposure to media; likewise, Amir plays a connecting chain to other perspectives once again as he comforts Sohrab. When Sohrab locks up and mourns the loss of his innocence by asking Amir if he is unclean and a sinner now, Amir reassures Hassan that he is not to blame for Assef’s actions; rather, Amir tells Sohrab that Assef is to blame for the assault. It is likely no coincidence that Sohrab falls victim to the same crime and assailant as his father, Hassan; consequently, Amir offers Sohrab the support and consolation he could not, or would not, directly provide Hassan as a child.

If Hassan is viewed as a representative of Afghanistan’s people and the effects of censorship on them, then Amir may be seen as both the censor and the ultimate exposure to media. Amir shows a bildungsroman-style development here as he grows from being the chief operative of censorship in Hassan’s life to the main connecting piece to other perspectives to Sohrab. Readers watch as Amir goes from withholding information and his own viewpoint from



Hassan to pouring new perspectives and his truth to Sohrab. This has an adverse effect on Hassan's bloodline that does not completely reconcile Amir's past actions, but it does begin to help to correct Amir's debt.

In conclusion, Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* exercises a unique and multidimensional commentary on Afghanistan and its censorship. Hassan is directly presented as a sort of ambassador for Afghan citizens, which is shown directly through Amir's personal opinion and indirectly through Hassan's abuse from his Pashtun peers. Amir, on the other hand, is a more indirect representative whose role is arguably open for interpretation; however, much evidence supports that Amir may be seen as one of the primary censors in Hassan's life. Following this take on the reading, Amir proves himself to ultimately be Sohrab's exposure to external ideas and opinions, eventually acting as a literal and figurative refuge for Sohrab. This fluctuation from censorship to public knowledge, from dishonesty to truth, has notable impacts in both Hassan and Amir's lives. As stand-ins for Afghanistan and its relationship to other countries, Hassan and Amir present an imperfect, but potential, pathway for recovery from Afghanistan's abuse from her invaders. Hosseini's novel may not be the ideal model for a solution, but it serves as a powerful introduction into the conversation.

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