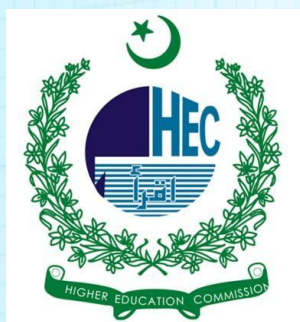


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**Beyond Cultural Essentialism: A Critical Re-evaluation of
Muslim Representation in *The Kite Runner***



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Abstract

This current study examines the representation of Muslims in *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini through a qualitative research approach. Drawing upon Samir Amin's concept of Eurocentrism and Hamid Dabashi's notion of the native informer as its theoretical framework, the research critically investigates how the novel constructs Muslim identities within a Western ideological lens. The analysis explores how certain characters reinforce stereotypes of Muslims as violent, irrational, and culturally backward, while simultaneously privileging Western values as progressive and humane. By applying textual analysis, the study highlights how internalized perspectives within the narrative contribute to the reproduction of dominant Western discourses about Islam and Muslim societies. Furthermore, it evaluates the role of the authorial voice in mediating these representations and questions the broader implications of such portrayals in shaping global perceptions of Muslims, particularly in a post-9/11 context. The findings suggest that the novel, while offering a compelling personal story, also participates in a discourse that aligns with Eurocentric assumptions and the logic of the native informer, thereby reinforcing stereotypes and potentially influencing readers' understanding of Muslim identities in a way that may perpetuate existing biases.

Keywords: Representation, Eurocentrism, native informer

1. Introduction

Globally, Muslims and Islam have often received a narrow and negative portrayal, particularly following the September 11 attacks. The Western media, literature, and political discourse frequently "frame" Muslims as dangerous, irrational, or backward, reducing a highly diverse global community to a single, fearful image. Morey & Yaqin (2011) argue that this framing is not accidental; rather, it is shaped by long-standing Western ideas that view the East as inferior or threatening. As a result, Muslims are often seen not as individuals with different beliefs and cultures but as a collective "other" linked to violence and extremism. Importantly, the authors also highlight that such representations silence positive, ordinary, and complex Muslim experiences, making it harder for balanced voices to emerge.

Abdullah (2015) also critically examines how global politics and media discourse have shaped the image of Muslims before and after 9/11. He argues that even before 9/11, Muslims were often viewed through a narrow lens, as culturally different, conservative, or somewhat backward, but these ideas were not always at the center of global fear. After 9/11, however, this perception intensified sharply, and Muslims began to be widely associated with terrorism, violence, and threat. Abdullah argues that this shift was not natural but constructed through media, political narratives, and selective representation, which repeatedly showed Muslims in negative roles while ignoring their diversity and humanity. Even when Muslims are shown positively in the post-9/11 period, they are often presented as exceptions—"good" Muslims who must prove loyalty or reject their identity to be accepted (Alsultany, 2013).

The negative representations of Muslims and Islam are not only produced by Western media and writers but are also, at times, reinforced by some Muslim writers themselves who act as what Hamid Dabashi calls "native informers." As Western

discourse has long framed Muslims as backward, irrational, and threatening, especially after 9/11, some contemporary Muslim writers, writing for global (often Western) audiences, often reproduce these same stereotypes by portraying their societies as excessively violent, oppressive, or regressive. In doing so, they may unintentionally or strategically validate Western assumptions, gaining acceptance and visibility by aligning with dominant narratives. Such writers appear to offer an “insider truth,” but their representations often simplify complex realities and reinforce existing biases rather than challenging them. Therefore, the problem of Muslim representation is not limited to the West alone; it is also shaped by internal voices that, knowingly or unknowingly, contribute to the continuation of the same narrow and negative images.

In the same vein, the present study aims to analyze how Khalid Hosseini deeply, in his seminal work, *The Kite Runner*, represents Afghan Muslims and Islam negatively, acting as a native informer. The objective of the study is to highlight the traces of Euro- and American centrism in the selected fictional work of South Asian writers and to underscore the misrepresentation of Muslims and Islam.

1.1. Significance of the Study

There is a strong need to critically examine how South Asian writers represent Muslims, because many of these portrayals are shaped by Euro- and American-centric perspectives that reinforce existing global power structures, including cultural dominance and forms of neo-imperial influence. This study is important at an international level, as Muslims today are often understood and judged through Western frameworks rather than through their own diverse realities. By questioning the selective narrative and possible biases of a South Asian writer, the research encourages readers to engage with such texts more carefully rather than accepting them at face value. In some cases, these writers present images of Muslim societies that align closely with dominant Western expectations, highlighting certain negative aspects while overlooking complexity and diversity. As a result, their work may unintentionally, or at times, strategically echo a Eurocentric, neo-orientalist lens, instead of offering a more balanced and representative account.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

The present study is qualitative in nature as it engages with thematic analysis through deductive reasoning rather than numerical data. This current study adopts Samir Amin’s critique of Eurocentrism alongside Hamid Dabashi’s concept of the “native informer” from *“Brown Skin, White Masks”* as its theoretical framework. Amin (1989) views Eurocentrism not merely as an external system of dominance but as a powerful force that also shapes the internal cultural outlook of non-European societies, thereby sustaining the legacy of imperialism and colonialism. In a related vein, Dabashi (2011) argues that “native informers” often present their own cultures as backward or outdated while elevating Western values, aligning themselves with dominant global narratives. When brought together, these two perspectives provide a strong and relevant framework for this study. Through close textual analysis of the selected novel, the research will examine whether the South Asian writer reproduces Euro- and American-centric viewpoints in his representation of Muslims. At the same time, the study will explore how these writers depict their own religious, cultural, ethical, and social values, questioning whether these representations reflect complexity or reinforce simplified and externalized images.

2. Analysis of *The Kite Runner*

Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan American writer who was born in Afghanistan in 1965 and migrated to the USA in 1980. *The Kite Runner*, the magnum opus of Hosseini, was published in 2003. It was his first and, at the same time, best-selling novel. The work has been translated in more than forty languages, reflecting its worldwide critical acclaim and acceptance.

In *The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini constructs a narrative that has often been read as privileging a stark moral contrast: Afghans are frequently associated with brutality, fanaticism, and intolerance, whereas Americans are framed as humane, progressive, and redemptive figures. This contrast is most vividly embodied in the character of Assef, a Pashtun whose violent hostility toward the Hazara minority exemplifies ethnic chauvinism. “Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns. It always has been, always will be. We are the true Afghans, the pure Afghans, not this flat-nose here. His people pollute our homeland, our watan. They dirty our blood.” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 51). His rhetoric of “purity” and “pollution” reflects a deeply exclusionary mindset, positioning Hazaras as contaminants within the Afghan nation. When examined through Samir Amin’s concept of Eurocentrism, such portrayals can be understood as aligning with broader Western-centric narratives that depict Muslim societies as inherently fractured, regressive, and prone to internal violence. The language of racialized hierarchy and dehumanization not only reduces complex ethnic dynamics to simplistic hostility but also risks reinforcing a monolithic image of Muslims as intolerant and exclusionary, rather than diverse and historically interconnected.

This pattern extends to the novel’s engagement with Afghan history, where references to the Pashtun oppression of Hazaras foreground intra-Muslim violence while largely omitting external political forces, such as colonial or geopolitical interventions. “... my people had killed the Hazaras, driven them from their lands, burned their homes, and sold their women” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 9). By emphasizing Muslims as perpetrators against their communities, the narrative may inadvertently suggest that violence is culturally ingrained rather than historically contingent. Such representation resonates with Amin’s critique that dominant Western discourse often essentializes Muslims as irrational, oppressive, and violent. In this light, Hosseini’s work can be interpreted, through Hamid Dabashi’s notion of the “native informer,” as reproducing rather than challenging these stereotypes for a global readership.

At the same time, the novel’s portrayal of American characters—such as the compassionate Caldwell couple who provide care for Afghan orphans—reinforces a counter-image of the West as benevolent and civilizing. This juxtaposition situates Americans as moral agents of rescue, implicitly legitimizing a narrative in which Western intervention appears necessary for the redemption of a troubled Muslim society. Consequently, the text problematizes Afghan identity and elevates Western humanitarianism, thereby reflecting and sustaining a Eurocentric hierarchy of cultures and values.

Baba, father of the protagonist, moves to America and is suffering from terminal cancer. Amir reflects on Baba’s behavior, wondering, “I didn’t know what or whom he was defying—me, Dr. Amani, or perhaps the God he had never believed in” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 157). Earlier in the novel, Baba is already characterized as someone who openly questions religion, often criticizing mullahs and established religious practices. This moment reinforces a problematic portrayal of a Muslim

character. Baba, despite belonging to a Muslim society, is depicted as a man devoid of faith, whose apparent defiance seems directed even at God. Such framing associates him with arrogance, pride, and a sense of spiritual emptiness. As a result, the image constructed is that of a Muslim figure who is internally conflicted—outwardly part of a religious culture yet inwardly disconnected, frustrated, and rebellious. This characterization risks reinforcing the stereotype of Muslim societies as hypocritical, where public displays of religiosity mask private disbelief.

In this context, Khaled Hosseini can be interpreted as functioning as a “native informer,” foregrounding internal critiques of Muslim society for a predominantly Western readership. By emphasizing Baba’s disbelief and defiance, the narrative appears to expose moral and spiritual shortcomings rather than offering a nuanced or diverse representation of faith. This tendency aligns with Eurocentrism, which often frames Muslim societies as irrational or spiritually inconsistent. Within such a perspective, religion is frequently depicted either as oppressive and extreme or as hollow and insincere. Consequently, Baba’s rejection of God may unintentionally reinforce the Eurocentric notion that religious belief in Muslim cultures lacks depth or authenticity.

The narrative creates a sharp contrast between admiration for the West and its values and the portrayal of Afghanistan as damaged and violent. When Rahim Khan describes the Taliban, he states, “Nay, it’s worse. Much worse... They don’t let you be human” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 198), portraying life under their rule as deeply oppressive and dehumanizing. Much worse... They do not allow individuals to express their humanity (Hosseini, 2003, p. 198), portraying life under their rule as deeply oppressive and dehumanizing. This statement suggests that their rule is not only strict but also harsh and suffocating. However, such wording simplifies a complex reality and reduces an entire Muslim society to an image of cruelty and brutality.

This is where the idea of Eurocentrism becomes relevant. As explained by Samir Amin, Eurocentrism positions the West as the model of civilization, freedom, and true humanity, while non-Western societies—especially Muslim ones—are often depicted as backward or uncivilized. In this light, the phrase “they don’t let you be human” implies that being fully human is tied to Western ideals of freedom and that an Islamic system like the Taliban automatically denies that humanity. This framing risks reinforcing a one-sided view, where we perceive Muslim societies solely through the lens of oppression, neglecting their complexity and diversity.

Similarly, the novel presents the Taliban regime in Afghanistan as intensely violent and especially harsh toward women. In a letter delivered through Rahim Khan, Hassan describes an environment filled with fear, death, and everyday brutality. He recounts an incident where a young Talib beats his wife simply for speaking loudly: “...suddenly a young Talib ran over and hit her on the thighs with his wooden stick... He was screaming at her and cursing and saying the Ministry of Vice and Virtue does not allow women to speak loudly” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 216). This scene constructs a deeply negative image of Muslims, portraying them as cruel, rigid, and particularly oppressive toward women. Religious authority is shown as harsh and irrational, while the Taliban himself appears not as a thoughtful or spiritual figure but as aggressive, abusive, and blindly violent. Such representation contributes to a one-dimensional and troubling depiction of Muslim identity and Islamic governance.

At the same time, this portrayal can be read through the lens of Eurocentrism, which often frames Western societies as progressive and humane while casting non-Western,

especially Muslim, societies as backward and barbaric. The scene reinforces a familiar Western narrative in which Islam, when practiced socially or politically, is associated with violence and the suppression of women. For many readers, the text may confirm pre-existing assumptions rather than challenge them. Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan-born writer addressing a largely Western audience, may unintentionally (or at times deliberately) reinforce these perceptions. Because the critique comes from within the culture itself, it may appear more authentic, thereby strengthening and legitimizing the negative image of Muslim societies, which can lead to further entrenchment of stereotypes and biases among Western readers.

2.1. Afghan Muslims and Violence

In *The Kite Runner*, violence is a central and recurring theme, especially during Amir's return to Afghanistan. The line, "Alas, the Afghanistan of our youth is long dead... you cannot escape the killings. The phrase "Always the killings" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 216) reflects a country that is portrayed as being overwhelmed by constant fear and brutality. Through Amir's perspective, the narrative repeatedly presents scenes of racial, sexual, sectarian, and verbal abuse, often directed at vulnerable and minority groups.

The novel also highlights deep ethnic tensions, particularly between Pashtuns and Hazaras. This division serves as a significant source of conflict and violence. For example, when the Taliban dismiss Hassan by saying, "He was a liar and a thief like all Hazaras" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 218), it reveals how prejudice against Hazaras is normalized and reinforced through power structures. Such moments underscore the involvement of dominant groups, particularly Pashtuns, who possess greater social and political authority, in perpetuating inequality and unrest.

Overall, Amir's experiences bring attention to the seriousness of ethnic and racial divisions in Afghan society. However, the repeated focus on violence and conflict can also risk presenting Afghanistan in a one-sided way, where instability and brutality seem constant and defining, leaving little room for more complex or balanced representations of its people and culture.

From the perspective of Orientalism and neocolonialism, the portrayal of Afghanistan as violent, primitive, and uncivilized reflects a broader Western way of seeing the "Orient" as inferior and different. This creates the idea of the Afghan "Other"—a society shown as backward and dangerous in contrast to a supposedly civilized West. Keith Stanski (2009) suggests that Anglo-American thinking deeply roots such images, often imagining Afghan society as naturally violent and deceptive.

In this sense, the repeated focus on violence in Afghanistan can be understood as part of an Orientalist pattern that stereotypes Pashtuns, Afghans, and Muslims in general. These portrayals are not neutral; they shape how readers think, often leaving them with a negative and simplified image of the region. The portrayal of the "Orient" as primarily brutal and uncivilized serves another purpose: it justifies Western control and intervention. This idea connects to the old belief of a "civilizing mission," where the West sees itself as responsible for bringing order and progress to supposedly inferior societies.

Because of this, foreign interventions like the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan and the United States' invasion of Afghanistan can be seen as necessary steps to protect Western values and interests. Such narratives make these interventions seem justified, while ignoring the complexity and agency of the local people.

The narrative portrays Afghanistan during Taliban rule as a place where strict laws

and harsh punishments shape everyday life. Fear becomes a part of their routine, subjecting ordinary people to constant pressure. Public spaces such as streets, markets, and even stadiums are no longer safe or normal; instead, they turn into places of control and intimidation, where punishments and executions may occur. The line, “In Kabul, fear is everywhere... it is a part of our lives here” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 216), suggests that violence is not limited to war zones but is present in daily life. It presents Kabul as a city surrounded by danger, where fear exists in the most ordinary settings.

Such repeated descriptions can shape how readers view Afghan society. They may begin to associate Afghan Muslims mainly with violence, oppression, and instability, seeing the society as harsh and controlled by force. While Afghanistan has rich traditions, strong family ties, and a culture of hospitality, these aspects receive less attention, and fear becomes the dominant image.

Eurocentrism often presents Western societies as peaceful and progressive, while depicting Muslim societies as unstable or violent, which helps to shape this portrayal. In this way, Khaled Hosseini may unintentionally reinforce existing Western stereotypes. Because these ideas are expressed by a writer from within the culture, they may appear more authentic, making the negative image of Muslim societies seem more believable and widely accepted.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Kite Runner* presents a powerful but deeply selective image of Afghan and Muslim society, where violence, intolerance, and internal divisions are repeatedly brought to the foreground. Through characters like Assef, the depiction of Taliban rule, and the constant emphasis on ethnic conflict and fear, the narrative tends to construct Muslims as harsh, divided, and at times spiritually conflicted. When read within the frameworks of Eurocentrism and Orientalism, these portrayals appear to align with broader Western discourses that position Muslim societies as backward, unstable, and in need of reform, while simultaneously elevating the West as humane and progressive. In this context, Khaled Hosseini can be seen, at times, as operating in line with Hamid Dabashi’s idea of the “native informer,” where internal critique may unintentionally reinforce dominant global stereotypes. Although the novel does highlight real historical suffering and social tensions, its repeated focus on brutality and fear risks creating a one-dimensional image that overshadows the cultural richness, diversity, and humanity of Afghan society. As a result, the text reflects and strengthens existing perceptions that associate Muslims primarily with violence and oppression, rather than presenting a balanced and nuanced understanding.

4. Limitations of the Study

This study has certain limitations, which must be acknowledged. A key limitation of this study is that it concentrates on the representation of Muslims and Afghanistan; other important aspects of the novel such as its narrative style, themes of friendship, guilt, and redemption, and psychological character development receive less attention. In addition, the study is limited to a single literary work, which restricts the ability to generalize findings to other texts by Khaled Hosseini or to broader South Asian or Muslim literary traditions. Another limitation is that the interpretation is largely based on secondary theoretical frameworks, which may not fully capture authorial intention or reader diversity across different cultural and geographical contexts, particularly in how these frameworks might overlook the unique perspectives of readers from various backgrounds. Finally, as the study relies on textual analysis alone, it does not

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incorporate empirical data such as reader-response studies or reception analysis, which could have provided a more balanced understanding of how different audiences interpret the novel's representation of Muslims.

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