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Clay Andrew Willis

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At Least They're Reading

By: Clay Andrew Willis

"... literature always should search for something that does not exist in the first place which I would call heroic, but in this paradoxical formation, literature becomes something to be protected, something always under threat from the outside just like a country under the threat of war."

Reiichi Miura

DID YOU LIKE *THE KITE RUNNER*? THE SCENES ARE SO VIVID AND CAPTIVATING, and the cultural exposure, enlightening. Americans fail to understand the scope and grandeur of such a proud people like the Afghans. This book came to us at a pivotal moment in history. And anyways, numbers never lie. Khaled Hosseini has achieved *New York Times* bestseller status, inarguably the most profound indication of literary stature. How could you not love this novel? The imagery and passion simply lift the reader into the pages of a whimsical and mysterious culture utterly foreign to all but the most enterprising citizens. The politics create a long overdue reference point for the historical memories of America's youth. The warm, accessible characters weave through an entrancing drama of struggle and redemption. Oh, the relatable and sympathetic narratives. But then again, how well does Hosseini portray his native homeland? Does he provide the reader a full portrait of the ethnography and politics? In hindsight, the writing seemed a tad extreme, almost sensationalistic, not fitting of the shallow narrative. The novel suffers in a few regards, so the question then becomes: how does such a book succeed both in sales and critical acclaim? Is it truly worthy of the respect given unto it by the literary community?

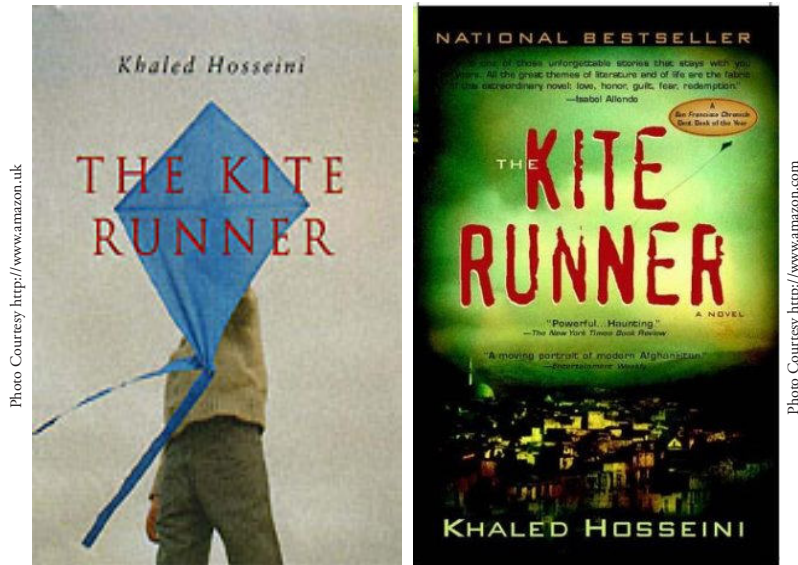
Perhaps *The Kite Runner* does not warrant all the praise showered upon it. The blame lies partly within the publishers. With a rise in literacy in

past centuries the relevance of literature as an exploitable entertainment medium has expanded analogously. With the consolidation of nearly all publishing houses into a group of three or four media conglomerates, the understanding of publishable works has only become more corporate and calculated. As the economic viability of literature as an entertainment commodity increases, the process by which publishers choose literature has evolved rapidly (Campbell 369). Corporations are, of course, intrinsically devoted to maintaining profit margins, especially considering the pressure wielded by stockholders to maintain their stock at an upward drift year after year. "As in the movie business, large publishers are always searching for the blockbuster," so when considering works for publication, professionals must now take consumer tastes into ultimate consideration (Campbell 372). So, what do people like? According to Richard Campbell, one of the foremost experts in media studies, "people are so addicted to mass-produced media menus that they have lost not only the will to challenge social inequities but also their discriminating taste for finer fare" (Campbell 23). In other words, people prefer garbage on the whole. People covet their MTV, *Snakes on a Plane*, *Friends*, and celebrity gossip. Numbers do not lie. As a result, "our society and our literature and our culture are being dumbed down" (Bloom 2). This considerable evolution, spurred by the cyclical relationship of manufacturer and consumer, warrants sincere reflection on the future of literature.

The Kite Runner illustrates a much graver condition than simply the decline of literature, the acceptance of something intellectually void that engenders genuine reverence by reviewers and validation by academics, as demonstrated through its widespread acceptance into college reading programs. There is a saying in cooking, "if you wouldn't drink it then don't cook with it." I find it hard to believe that while academics hurl this work at students they themselves gulp it down with the same fervor. Perhaps some logic exists in the enforcing of this remedial manuscript, but remember who to blame when Goethe and Sophocles float beyond cultural memory. Then again, at least they are reading.

The Kite Runner parades a kind of sensationalist plot intrusion to invent, almost exclusively, the levels of interest. Using graphic and largely plot-devoid scenes, Hosseini exploits grave issues as tools to bolster reader conviction and interest. One of the most striking yet irrelevant scenes, "I'm thinking the stoning scene, I'm thinking B-grade movie star villain practically twirling his mustache," is a scene imposed upon the narrative to create brash hype (Flowers). The author fails to achieve a level of complexity in both

story and character that could accommodate such a vivid scene. Hosseini accomplishes nothing relevant with this intensity or this content (Flowers). So why litter the novel with scenes with train-wreck brand imagery? That decision feeds heavily into the economic success of the book, helping to generate the sought after punch of entertainment akin to flashy competitors (Movies, Television). Unfortunately in our post-globalized, consolidated society, economic viability dictates the relevance of a work to producers and distributors, and so the text becomes littered with lines like, “Suddenly I was on my knees screaming. Screaming through my clenched teeth. Screaming until I thought my throat would rip and my chest explode” (Hosseini 343). This is a reaction wholly unsupported by how we have come to understand Amir, who the author establishes as shy and cowardly, further reinforced by Hassan’s rape scene (Hosseini 74-79). Unless a work can give cause for something to exist with “nuanced exploration,” it has no right to impose scenes of this character and misleading relevance. A clear demonstration of how the American market has specifically manipulated the work to appeal to our action-packed culture comes without staid word or phrase.



The American cover flaunts a destroyed Kabul, with ridged crimson letters, and an eerie green tint. This is the cover of a thriller or a horror novel. By contrast, the United Kingdom’s cover suggests a young boy holding an ethereal blue kite that shrouds his head and shoulders. The text is reserved and unimposing in the background in a unified light tone that graciously compliments the visual. Thus demonstrates the market consciousness that the calculating publishers enlist of *The Kite Runner*, explaining part of what

made the manuscript as golden and as tempting as the sun—a political thriller, relevant to our times, with visually exploitable sensationalism.

The most profane demonstration of the book's market viability, consistent with the corporate theme of selectable qualities, arises from a curious comparison with perhaps one of the most marketable and profitable texts written in either the twentieth or twenty-first century: J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*. Aside from the political relevance, *The Kite Runner* and *Harry Potter* share an alarming number of plot and structure similarities, not to mention corresponding characters. Of course *Harry Potter* represents a hyper-extreme example of the practices this paper critiques: the destruction of literary standards for market viability. In pondering characters, the two protagonists, Harry and Amir, both face unnatural extremes of faceless antagonism. Consider Amir's encounters with Assef at the pomegranate tree when Hassan defends the both of them (Hosseini 39-41) and in the Taliban office (289-291). As Amir felt convoluted about rescuing Sohrab (Hosseini 193-194), the ever-reluctant heroes must eventually rise up, surmount their fears and defy evil, of course with the help of their more capable friends. The less significant but far more capable friends Hassan and Sohrab are to Amir as Hermione and Ron are to Harry. These allies perpetually burden themselves with saving, supporting and protecting their protagonists, despite Harry and Amir's failings. Hassan rescues Amir at the pomegranate tree from Assef (Hosseini 39-41), and Sohrab rescues him again from Assef in the Taliban office (Hosseini 289-291). Harry's father was a man well-liked; he was powerful and influential until his tragic death. Amir's father, Baba, equates nicely, except that his death only occurs after he is severed from mother Afghanistan (Hosseini 125). In actuality, neither of these authority figures were able or willing to support their charges due to their weakness and cowardice. The authors present both Assef and Voldemort as figures of un-equateable and incomprehensible evil and villainy as Hosseini demonstrates with the rape of Hassan (Hosseini 75-79). Finally, there is the context itself, the very lifeblood of both stories, where these people call home. The mystery and exoticism capture the reader's imagination in the Orientalist tradition. Hosseini exploits the reader's ignorance to create a fanciful world of wonder, and then dramatically destroys it, as it is threatened respectively by the Death Eaters. Now raise your hand if you consider *Harry Potter* a relevant collegial work of literature. Anybody?

The relevance of this comparison comes only in the epiphany that publishers select viable instead of poignant text. The distinct parallel structure

should generate sincere consideration on how publishers are reading for new work, looking exclusively for film adaptation and sales. Beyond the faults of corporations, the children of today seem unwilling to consume literature unless it solicits this film structure. For this reason our school library shelves are flooded with anything that can hold students' attention for more than five minutes, rather than something to pry open their minds and hearts. Then again, at least they are reading. However, in the opinion of Reiichi Miura, associate professor of western culture at Hitotsubashi University's Graduate School of Language and Society in Tokyo, Japan, "The partial knowledge of college kids is owing to the consumerism of the publishing world or cultural industry," once again blaming the corporate drive behind literature (Miura). Does there also exist a failing in the less corporate sides of the literary world?

How could this novel represent a failing in the literary world? Terrible literature has been produced for centuries. It has been argued that even *Beowulf*, the first English epic, could have simply been a mass-produced piece of trash, which would explain how a copy survived (Ogilvy 20-65). Our society has been producing pulp literature for decades, trashy paperbacks about sex, crime and scandal. So why can I ascertain that the conception of *The Kite Runner* indicates a failing in the literary world? The distinction between *The Kite Runner* and so many pieces of trash comes simply with the reverence that surrounds it. The *New York Times* Review of Books, arguably one of the most influential and decisive book reviewers, lauded *The Kite Runner* as "a vivid and engaging story that reminds us how long his people have been struggling to triumph over the forces of violence," without a single line of criticism (Hower). The praise from lesser reviewers spreads an even more sugared and pre-written totem applauding the novel: "[A] beautiful novel... ranks among the best-written and provocative stories of the year" (*The Denver Post*). Yet when the most elite of reviews praises something as transparent and manipulated, one begins to wonder where allegiances lie, and what authoritative parent companies reside over both Riverhead Books and the *New York Times*.

I view the academic success of *The Kite Runner* as the fault of wind-up reviewers, but also largely the fault of the academics themselves. Their inability to take the time to reinforce the genuine history of a contemporarily critical civilization has us vying for any exposure available, and academics respond with this mockery of relevance. Without that all-important context, a student or reader could never understand how limited and shallow a historical context Hosseini offers. Beyond this, the fault of the book's

sincere political lacking falls unto the likely pressure of Hosseini's publishers, editors, possibly the government, and indirectly, the public, to deliver the Afghani experience, relative to the United States, in a positive light, to whitewash the history and truth of the United States' sins in the matter (Mamdani 120-123). Had Hosseini included our involvement with the training and supplying of now terrorist organizations for the purpose of indirectly battling the Soviet Union, a terrifying trend could occur, sales could suffer (Mamdani 120-123). Literary history has degraded from hideous truth to an easy pill to swallow, washed down with "redemptive language immediately legible to Americans" (O'Rourke). Its periphery politics skirt true and relevant issues to pacify American interests while its sensationalistic writing holds the attention of even the markedly remedial readers. While blame for such contorted history is not likely to fall on the shoulders of Hosseini himself, he remains guilty of agreeing to manipulate his heritage for profit.

So, why did this novel succeed when every level suffers from a comprehensive literary and political failure? Is it the influence of the latticed corporate publishing conglomerate responsible for the novel's distribution? Or perhaps it was the overzealous reviewers who must have suffered some variety of contamination, the ignorant consumer, or even the weathered academic? We now see that all have failed the literary world by encouraging this work. It falls unto the great minds of our intellectual stratosphere to help guide the awareness of the manipulated and exploited. The critics and the academics must reign not only guidance upon their charges but more importantly upon themselves. For critics to acclaim such a work with envious prestige makes a mockery of literary history. They must resume the rolls of guardians by casting off their garbled interests.

If *The Kite Runner* persists as the only reference my generation will grasp of Afghani history and social dynamics, then our teachers have served us poorly, and yet many of my peers might easily live a life far more devoid of understanding without this book. While poorly written and versed, at least they are reading. The scholarly community should at the very least make an effort to supplement this tortured work with something truly enlightening. Regardless of the hard time I have given him, I sympathize with Hosseini when pausing to consider the literary world he has emerged in. Now that he resides in a position of power, he has the obligation of responsibly telling the story of Afghanistan. In this day and age, with these wars and conflicts, understanding the author's culture and all Middle Eastern peoples' cultures remains a vital public service, for no peace can come of our ignorance. §

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