



## Dynamics of City Life: Elements of Cosmopolitanism in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

Sibu Dhakal

Research Scholar,

Nepal Open University

[sibudhakal@gmail.com](mailto:sibudhakal@gmail.com)

<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-3416-3633>

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### Abstract

**Background:** Khaled Hosseini's debut novel, *The Kite Runner* (2003) reflects the shifting dynamics of city life in Kabul. It presents a narrative of friendship, betrayal, redemption, war, and migration in the backdrop of Kabul. It also explores the complexities of city life and reflects how it is affected by Afghanistan's politics, history, and culture, portraying Kabul before and after the Taliban insurgency.

**Methods:** This study examines the shifting dynamics of city life in Kabul from a cosmopolitan perspective. This research explores the ethnic and sectarian violence in Afghanistan and showcases its impact on the cosmopolitan elements of Kabul city.

**Result:** This research reveals that Kabul had a peaceful life and cosmopolitan character before the outbreak of violence; however, the city gradually lost its cosmopolitanism due to the armed conflict that followed.

**Conclusion:** The multiple dynamics of Kabul City are primarily affected by the war, and the elements of cosmopolitanism reveal a fluctuating nature.

**Novelty:** This research presents a novel perspective on the shifting dynamics of city life in Kabul, providing insight into the cosmopolitan elements and their fluctuating nature.

**Keywords:** conflict, cosmopolitanism, metropolis, urbanism, sectarian violence

### Introduction

This research explores the dynamics of city life in Kabul before and after the Soviet Army's entry and the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan through [Hosseini's \*The Kite Runner\* \(2003\)](#). The novel stands at the political transition in Afghan history. It depicts Kabul city as a peaceful place of solace where the protagonist, Amir, spends his childhood with his friends. The Kabul dwellers have undergone various ups and downs in their life. This study highlights the evolving dynamics of Kabul dwellers, revealing the direct and indirect impacts of war on



their lifestyle, as depicted in the novel. The cosmopolitan character of Kabul is closely observed through textual evidence. Understanding the cosmopolitan character of Kabul City can help researchers develop further ideas and inform policymakers' future strategies.

### **Layers of Reading the Novel**

[\*The Kite Runner\* \(2003\)](#) received critical responses immediately after its publication. It received mass public attention when its picturization was released as a movie in 2007. Scholars and general readers widely acclaimed this novel. The themes explored in the text particularly drew the critical attention of critics and researchers alike. [Matondang \(2020\)](#) has emphasized the thematic aspect of the novel. In her words, "The major themes in *The Kite Runner* novel, by Khaled Hosseini, consist of some themes, namely; friendship (fathers and sons), betrayal and guilt, redemption, friendship" ([Matondang, 2020, p. 13](#)). The complexity of relationships and other themes have been studied thoroughly. Although it is not a thematic exploration per se, the study conducted by [Bammi \(2021\)](#) does provide a significant focus on various aspects.

The study is based on two aspects of the novel: before and after the war. Present Afghanistan is compared with past Afghanistan. Bammi remarks, "Present Afghanistan might not look like anything close to how it used to be before the Taliban and the Russians arrived. We are only left with the stories of the past" ([2021, p. 76](#)). [Anwari and Binam's \(2024\)](#) study investigates the characters' journey in the novel. The central argument is that there is a portrayal of "the main character's journey of redemption within the novel" ([Anwari & Binam, 2024, p. 156](#)). As the novel presents historical and political events in Afghanistan, some researchers have interpreted the text from a historical perspective. The novel unfolds the "recent history of Afghanistan and its people" ([Sapkota, 2021, p. 65](#)). The Taliban war and the entry of the Russian army into Afghanistan hold an important epoch in the history of Afghanistan.

As major themes, "Humans, humanity, and humanization have been explored and uncovered in the novel" ([Rahman et al., 2024, p. 78](#)). Forgiveness, redemption, and other humanistic aspects help build relationships in socially and politically unrest settings. After the occupation of the Russian army over the land of Afghanistan, the women were victimized more than the men. In *The Kite Runner*, "The idea of woman's rights and sexual orientation value has been brought up in abstract compositions alongside the socio-political situation of Afghanistan" ([Sundaresan et al., 2018, p. 494](#)). A Marxist reading of the novel brings the class conflict regarding social and economic inequalities. [Tharu \(2024\)](#) argues, "*The Kite Runner* revolves around the conflict between Amir, the main character, and Hassan, his servant" ([p. 44](#)). He explores the characters' relationships, shaped by their social and economic status. [Nawaz, Ali, and Saba \(2023\)](#) focus on a postmodern reading of the text. They study the novel in terms of "narrative, allegory and subjectivity, nihilism, and desperate hope at times of turmoil" (p. 192). The postmodern reading of the novel is contextual for a postmodern reader. Another postmodern cultural reading of the novel comes when [Adhikari \(2021\)](#) writes, "This novel presents the journey of Muslims to America and the memory of Muslim culture" (p. 179). The migration due to war is the primary cause of cultural loss. The characters suffer from rootlessness. The novel's loss, alienation, migration, and hybrid culture create a diasporic sense.



[Fatma and Manju \(2022\)](#) examined the concept of diasporic sense in the novel. They write, "The diasporic sense in *The Kite Runner* has its roots in the sense of loss and alienation due to war and violence" (p. 339). Hence, the violence in Afghanistan results in diasporic life. [Shahzadi, Anwar, & Zuree \(2024\)](#) view a different aspect of the novel. They focus on "sacrifice and hypocrisy shown in the novel, a story of brotherhood and betrayal" (p. 328). [Ula and Anam's \(2024\)](#) investigation addresses the issue of multiculturalism by applying the Hybridity theory proposed by Homi K. Bhabha. They focus on "understanding of power dynamics within hybrid cultures" (p. 131). The system of Afghan politics is not successful in maintaining cultural multiplicity, which is why the sectarian violence took place, resulting in cultural losses. The city has also raised concerns regarding the quality of life in Kabul. However, the cosmopolitan character of Kabul city and the shifting dynamics of city life have not been examined yet. This paper interprets Kabul City before and after the war, applying cosmopolitanism as a theoretical framework.

### **Cosmopolitanism**

The concept of cosmopolitanism posits that all individuals from diverse ethnicities, cultures, and nations share common moral and human obligations toward one another. Their common concerns are not limited to a single nation or culture. In Ancient Greece, "cosmopolite meant citizen of the world" ([Ribeiro, 2005, p. 19](#)). [Wardle \(2010\)](#) emphasizes a positive attitude towards differences and a broad, peaceful global community. Cosmopolitanism is a Western perspective that seeks to examine issues in a global context.

The citizens accept multiple cultural codes and exhibit the abilities of global citizens. Cosmopolitanism "lays the foundation for a fourth response to globalism" ([Kopf, 2009, p. 173](#)). It is a concept that talks about the global character of a place. It is related to the open space of a city for all. The citizens transcend the narrow concerns of indigenous issues related to ethnicity and culture. There is tolerance and acceptance. The outsiders are heartily welcomed and adopted in a place. The peaceful coexistence of Multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural, and multi-religious nations, cities, or places exists.

### **Depiction of Cosmopolitanism in Hussein's Novel**

[Khalid Hussein's \*The Kite Runner\* \(2003\)](#) drew the attention of global readers through its richness of themes immediately after its publication. Among other major themes, this novel subtly conveys the cosmopolitan character of Kabul, the city that serves as the backdrop for most of the novel's events. Kabul is depicted through the journey of the characters before and after the entry of the Soviet Army and the Insurgence of the Taliban, an Islamic militant group. The Afghan city of Kabul is at the center of the story, although some characters are likely to migrate to Peshawar, Pakistan, and the United States of America. The story begins with a flashback memory of Amir, the protagonist, who lives a well-to-do life with his family in the United States. He remembers his childhood days back in Kabul when she spent her best days in the company of Hassan. He lived there until the winter of 1975. This was the year he was taken to the USA by his father, a wealthy businessman and philanthropist referred to as Baba in the novel. The year 1975 is vital in Amir's life.



It is also a significant event in the history of Afghanistan: the year 1975 marks a pivotal political transition as King Zahir Shah's government was overthrown, followed by the establishment of communist rule. The ruling king, "Zahir Shah, was away in Italy. In his absence, his cousin Daoud Khan had ended his forty-year reign with a bloodless coup" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 30](#)). This event gave rise to political instability and tensions. The Soviet Army entered Afghanistan in 1979 to support the communist government. Due to the worsening situations created by the war, Baba could no longer live in Kabul. The novel's significant details and minor mentions indicate various aspects of Kabul city and its people's shifting dynamics of city life.

At the very outset, Amir reminisces about his past and realizes, as an adult, that the place he left behind was deserted; as he says, "I realize I have been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty-six years" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 2](#)). The reference to 'deserted alley' is to the streets of Kabul, those abandoned streets with emptiness, quietness, and loneliness. He says that 1975 changed his life and shaped him into who he is today. In his words, "... the winter of 1975 came and changed everything. And made me what I am today" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 2](#)). This statement is easy to comprehend; as the year changed everything, so did it to him. This was the year when Afghanistan entered into a new political epoch. Had he not been taken to the US by his father, his life would have been quite different, or the Taliban would have snatched his life away.

He was taken away from the conflict-stricken city of Kabul to a place of broader cosmopolitanism in the USA where he could grow and develop his career in peace and security. Amir's childhood memory is vivid, as he would play in the greenery under the clear sky with no smell of gunpowder or sound of bullets. Quite a contrast to when Amir left for the US, Kabul was a city with a blend of nature and modernity, welcoming the dwellers with its green plants and shaft of sunlight. Amir and Hassan "used to climb the poplar trees" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 2](#)) and annoy the people in the neighborhood "by reflecting sunlight into their homes with a shard of the mirror" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 2](#)). Amir would instigate Hassan, a Hazara, and his childhood friend into "firing walnuts with a slingshot at the neighbor's one-eyed German shepherd" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 3](#)). Textual evidence shows that the people in Kabul were permitted to keep a foreign-breed dog. This is the cosmopolitan character of Kabul city. Similarly, Amir discusses "a new and affluent neighborhood in the northern part of Kabul" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 3](#)). Such a new and affluent neighborhood can symbolically be interpreted as a cosmopolitan location. People's concern about politics is related to their freedom of speech. In this connection, Kabul can be understood as a place where people lived then in diversity, enjoying political freedom. They were free to talk about politics. The text provides readers with ample evidence of Kabul preserving its indigenous cultures and the local, traditional lifestyles of its people.

The indigenous street singers play a crucial role in maintaining cultural and social harmony, entertaining the general public through their performances on the streets and in marketplaces. They often sing on historical themes and common folklore. They are not merely street singers but also storytellers and entertainers who address social and political issues. They



have been preserving the typical culture. Amir and Hassan encounter the "Kochi, the nomads who passed through Kabul on their way to the mountains of the north" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 20](#)). The Kochis are a nomadic ethnic group who live a pastoral life in Afghanistan. They keep cattle, camel, goats, and sheep and move with their herds in a caravan. Additionally, Amir and Hassan go to "Cinema Zainab for a new Iranian movie" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 5](#)). Kabul city accommodated the street singers, maintaining a blend of modernity and indigenous folk culture. Amir remembers the kite fighting tournament held in winter. He remembers: "Hassan was by far the greatest kite runner I'd ever seen" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 41](#)). Kite fighting is "an old winter tradition in Afghanistan" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 41](#)). This is how Kabul balances its traditional values with its cosmopolitan character.

The sectarian violence that had long been prevalent in Afghanistan remains a stumbling stone for building cosmopolitan features. The Hazaras are a minority ethnic group, typically Shia Muslims, with their language and culture. They reside in the mountains called Hazarajat. Amir's father, Baba, shelters them in his house and tries to protect them from public oppression. Ali and Hassan live in a mud-built hut on the premises of Baba's mansion. Hassan is Amir's illegitimate brother; Rahim Khan reveals that secret after calling Amir to Pakistan. Hassan is mocked by his friends and even by the country's soldiers. They shout at him, saying, "You! The Hazara!" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 5](#)). He feels humiliated when he hears such words: "Hey, Babalu, who did you eat today?" ... "Who did you eat, you flat-nosed Babalu?" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 6](#)).

Hassan undergoes several episodes of oppression, attacks, and humiliation. The sectarian violence has been a bane to Afghanistan. Kabul city was deeply indulged in discriminatory violence among the dwellers themselves; however, it was tolerant of other religions. Baba hires a blue-eyed Hazara woman to nurse Hassan. She is from "Bamiyan, the city of the giant Buddha statues" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 8](#)). Afghanistan, despite being a Muslim country, has a city where giant Buddha statues are installed. The existence of Buddha statues symbolizes the religious tolerance of the people. Though the Muslims of Afghanistan are divided between Shia and Sunni – with hatred towards each other – they are pretty tolerant of Buddhism. The heterogeneous culture was thus preserved. Amir's father, Baba, exhibits a character of liberalism and philanthropy. He gets an orphanage built for the orphan children. This exemplifies a cosmopolitan act, a sense of social responsibility. Kabul, despite being an Islamic city, permitted its dwellers to drink alcohol in private. As Amir narrates, "In those days, drinking was fairly common in Kabul ... those Afghans who did drink did so in private, out of respect" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 11](#)). According to the Koran, Islam does not permit drinking alcohol. In the novel, Baba "drinks scotch and eats pork" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 11](#)). Eating pork is all the more strictly prohibited in Islam.

For a Muslim, adopting a culture from outside the Koran is a matter of broader thinking, a way of cosmopolitan living. Baba flies to Tehran "to watch World Cup games on television since Afghanistan didn't have TVs yet" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 15](#)). This shows that TV culture has not yet been established. The lack of mass media, especially local media, hindered the process of building the cosmopolitan character of Afghanistan, particularly Kabul. The practice of



sectarian discrimination is so deeply ingrained in the hearts and minds of the people that such discrepancy has been taken as a culture that cannot be changed easily. Amir himself states that history and religion are not easily changed. He says, "History isn't easy to overcome. Neither is religion" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 20](#)). He has accepted his being a Sunni, the oppressor, and Hassan, the oppressed. His understanding of "nothing was ever going to change that" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 20](#)) is an accepted notion that discrimination cannot be solved.

In 1979, Soviet tanks began rolling into the streets of Kabul, where Amir and Hassan once would play, "marking the start of a still ongoing era of bloodletting" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 29](#)). The entry of the Russian Army into Afghanistan added another episode of oppression and violence in the history of the country. They did not bring the local people together to support their goal. Instead, they began torturing the locals, violating human rights on a vast scale. The violence of human rights by the foreign army on the soil of Afghanistan is another setback for promoting cosmopolitanism. Consequently, Afghanistan falls into an era of blood-shedding, resulting in massive death tolls. It can be comprehended through Assef that some of the sectarian extremists expected the President to do away with the Hazaras, which the king could not do. Assef says, "I'll ask the president to do what the king didn't have the quest to do. To rid Afghanistan of all the dirty, Kasseef Hazaras" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 33](#)). After the fall of the monarchy, the system underwent changes, but the core values remained unchanged, and the Hazaras had to face the same fate.

Hassan briefly describes the evidence of atrocities and violence in a letter sent to Amir. Hassan mentioned the present condition of Afghanistan compared to the country he lived in during his childhood. He writes, "The Afghanistan of our youth is long dead. Kindness is gone from the land, and you cannot escape the killings—always the killings" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 184](#)). As mentioned in the letter, the country has fallen into a ditch of violence where one cannot escape the killings. Humanity no longer remains. In the same letter, Hassan further writes, "In Kabul, fear is everywhere: in the streets, in the stadium, in the markets. It is a part of our lives here" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 184](#)). The streets where Amir and Hassan would play in serenity in childhood are now stained with blood. Hassan's wife is beaten for nothing. Later, as narrated by Amir, Hassan and his wife are killed by the Taliban. As they are Hazaras, and people don't want to take risks by supporting them, their "murders were dismissed as a case of self-defense" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 186](#)). The concept of cosmopolitanism is completely shattered in Kabul by such violent activities performed by the Taliban. Kabul is no longer a welcoming city for global citizens. It has become a battlefield where its dwellers are terrified and killed.

The city is gradually being deserted. People have begun migrating to Pakistan and the West. The dwellers are humans without human rights. The women and the children are the most victimized; as Rahim Khan tells Amir, "Kabul is already full of broken children, and I don't want Sohrab to become another" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 187](#)). The streets of Kabul that had billboards at the corners with advertisements of "Coca-Cola ... Hollywood movie posters" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 191](#)) are now a "heap of debris" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 209](#)) with broken billboards of advertisements like that of "DRINK COCA-CO-" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 209](#)) only.



The breaking of the Coca-Cola advertisement can be interpreted as a symbolic denial of cosmopolitanism, as this soft drink is sold in the global market as a globally marketed product.

Amir, who has "a good life in California: a pretty Victorian home with a peaked roof, a good marriage, a promising writing career" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 189](#)), feels "like a tourist" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 196](#)) in Afghanistan when he comes to visit after twenty years. His homeland is like an alien country to him. There are no kite festivals in Kabul. Nor are there any kite shops. Amir narrates, "You won't find kites or kite shops in Jadeh Maywand or anywhere else in Kabul" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 209](#)). The war weakened the cultural ties among the people. It commodified human connections. Human connections have been ruptured, and the sense of belonging has long since disappeared. In the words of Amir, "The wars had made fathers a rare commodity in Afghanistan" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 209](#)). He is carrying an artificial leg in his arms. Upon an inquiry made by Amir, Farid explains that the man intends to sell the artificial leg because such legs are in high demand on the black market. He says to Amir, "You can get good money for it on the black market. Feed your kids for a couple of weeks" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 222](#)). By this point, the readers are aware of the devastation of war and the human cost it demands.

It is generally true that ordinary people become the most victims of war. People in war-stricken zones try various innovative ways to survive. Finding alternative ways of making a living is a characteristic of the cosmopolitan economy. There is various evidence in the text that the foreigners are not doing good for the nation of Afghanistan. They are the masterminds and think tanks behind the plans of the Taliban. It is mentioned in the text that the Arabs, Chechen, and Pakistanis are "the people behind the Taliban" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 223](#)). They live in Afghanistan as guests to accomplish their mission. Farid describes them as the guests who "are going to pee all over the carpet" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 223](#)). In a cosmopolitan city, guests are welcome with open-mindedness. They bring in diverse cultures and ways of life. They are not taken as a threat to the city or the country. However, the case of Kabul city is different. The guests are the masterminds for the devastations and killings. They are responsible for the loss of life and property. Kabul has a shifting dynamic and cosmopolitan character. The cosmopolitanism of Kabul city is unstable. Amir finds his father's house fallen, like many other things in Kabul. Amir discusses the advancements in science and technology that other countries have adopted and compares the conditions of Afghanistan and its people. He says, "Wars were waged, the Internet was invented, and a robot had rolled on the surface of Mars, and in Afghanistan, we were still telling Mullah Nasruddin jokes" ([Hosseini, 2003, p. 228](#)). This statement Amir makes during his visit is evidence of the backwardness of the country even in the dawn of the modern era, owing to the wars as violent activities.

## **Conclusion**

The novel *The Kite Runner* (2003) depicts Kabul as the center of its setting, although Peshawar and California also serve as locations where events occur. Additionally, the story revolves around the depiction of Kabul's city life before and after the wars. This study examined cosmopolitanism demarcating pre-war and post-war Kabul. Before 1975, Amir and Hassan



spent their childhood days in a peaceful environment in Kabul. The city was neat and clean, having serenity and harmony. The childhood moments of the characters are particularly memorable because that was a time when Afghanistan was at peace. There is evidence in the text that those were the days of cosmopolitanism in Kabul. The city maintained a blend of modernity and indigenous culture. The people's fate suddenly changed when the Soviet Army entered Afghanistan in order to support the communist-led government of Afghanistan.

The city of Kabul gradually began to lose its cosmopolitan character, narrowing itself within the boundaries of violence and war. Migration from Kabul to Peshawar in Pakistan and even to the West began. Eventually, the streets of Kabul became deserted and quiet—such massive out-migration kept Kabul from developing cosmopolitan features. Kabul became notorious as a dangerous city for outsiders. One of the factors that stood against the development of cosmopolitanism in Afghanistan had always been the sectarian violence between the Shia and the Sunni Muslims. The discriminatory practice, deeply rooted in the soil of Afghanistan, has been a stumbling stone for the growth and development of the country.

Furthermore, the people are victimized by the Taliban war, which created another episode of established violence. The Taliban war created another episode of bloodshed, violence, and cleansing of the targeted groups. They attacked the Afghan National Army, police, activists, government officials, Hazaras, educators, and the general public. The Taliban war, aimed to remove foreign influence and establish an Islamic emirate, was a significant threat to the cosmopolitanism of Kabul city. To conclude, Kabul city has experienced a shifting dynamic of cosmopolitan character. Some cosmopolitan features are still evident in the city, even during periods of bloodshed and violence. Again, the growing cosmopolitan characteristics are destroyed by the wars. As depicted in the text, Kabul is neither an open space embracing cosmopolitanism nor a completely closed place with boundary walls. It shows a mixed character in terms of cosmopolitanism.

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