"Ask him where his shame is": War and Sexual Violence in *The Kite Runner*

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Readings of *The Kite Runner* tend to foreground the personal "past of unatoned sins" (1) that drives the narrator's desire to undo unforgettable wrongs. In this essay, I focus on the precise nature of these sins in the context of sexual violence as a weapon of war. Instances of sexual violence play an important part in *The Kite Runner*'s carefully patterned structure. Paying attention to these decisive moments affords a nuanced perspective on the kind of abuse that forms the lynchpin of the novel. After all, it is the rape of a young Hazara (Hassan) by an aggressive Pashtun (Assef) that largely determines the course of the story, precipitating the return of the protagonist, Amir, to his homeland in a desperate attempt to atone for having witnessed this sexual crime without intervening. This and other similar episodes in the book are best understood against the background of widespread and indiscriminate sexual abuse used as a war tactic during the conflicts sweeping across Afghanistan over the past 40 years. All warring factions (the Soviets, the mujahedeen, the Taliban, the Northern Alliance, and local warlords) were guilty of such violations, though the victims were primarily women and members of the persecuted Hazara community.

Sexual violence during armed conflict serves purposes linked to the conduct of the hostilities themselves, such as torture or the humiliation of the opponent. Many historical conflicts were accompanied by mass rapes and other forms of sexualized violence, including several in the twentieth century: the 1915 Armenian genocide, the Japanese invasion of Nanjing in 1937, World War II (during the Holocaust and in the streets of Berlin after 1945), the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. Despite being committed on a massive scale, sexual violence in these instances was considered an inevitable part of military aggression and even in the cases where war trials were held, it was not prosecuted on its own grounds.

It was the acts of sexual violence committed during the highly mediatized Balkan wars and the genocide in Rwanda in the 1990s that finally drew attention to women's rights during warfare and sparked demands for accountability. The resulting image of sexual violence as a strategy of war enabled an understanding of such violence as a serious security issue, which in turn facilitated its criminal prosecution (Crawford, Hirschauer). It also galvanized the efforts of the international community to condemn the perpetrators, assist the victims, and take preventive measures.

By taking a closer look at *The Kite Runner*'s representation of sexual violence during armed conflict, I hope to show that Hosseini acts from a position of humanitarian sympathy with the victims and faith in the ability of fiction to do its part in investigating the complex causes and victimology of this vile crime. The novel takes a complex view of the issue by attending to its significance within Afghan culture in several interrelated ways. First, Hosseini correlates the violence experienced by Hassan and others with the wars unfolding in the background of the novel's family drama. Second, he scrutinizes the gender dynamics in the families at the core of the book (Amir's and Hassan's) to account for the shame that overwhelms Hassan after his experience of rape. Third, he draws together a series of abuse narratives to show that sexual violence is not an isolated occurrence, but very much a commonplace aspect of armed conflict, irrespective of individual circumstances. And finally, in picturing sexual violence Hosseini also explores the reasons why the brutal violation of the victim's personal identity leaves lasting scars, especially in the context of Afghanistan's patriarchal culture. In a nutshell, I suggest that exposing sexual violence in this way illuminates the role of sexuality and gender in the shaping of modern conflict while also highlighting the ability of literature effectively to expose and denounce human rights atrocities carried out beyond the gaze of international observers.

Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War in Afghanistan

The Kite Runner is in many ways a war novel. Even the kite-fighting tournament, the centerpiece of the narrative's symbolic world, is a

metaphor of armed conflict: "In Kabul, fighting kites *was* a little like going to war" (53), Hosseini writes. Kite runners like Hassan exhibited a level of dedication and submission comparable to the honor and valor codes of the armed forces. The novel spans thirty years of Afghan history, marking the beginning and end of various hostilities from the summer of 1973, when the king's cousin, Daoud Khan, put an end to the constitutional monarchy in a bloodless coup (39), followed by the communist coup of 1978 and the Soviet invasion of 1979. The opening chapters document the moment the rule of law starts to erode, as the sound of rocket and artillery attacks percolates through the pages in a harbinger of worse things to come. When Amir and his father leave Kabul, they do so as a last resort, eager to escape the bombed-out ruins, the curfews, the patrolling Russian troops, and the "tanks rolling up and down the streets . . ., their turrets swiveling like accusing fingers" (119). Throughout the book, whatever conflict may be unfolding, we are presented with the same "gray, barren canvas" (130) that life in Afghanistan has become.

The year 1989 brings with it the publication of Amir's first novel and the withdrawal of the Soviets from Afghanistan, yet the war continues, pitting the mujahedeen against the Soviet puppet government. The Northern Alliance transforms Kabul into a warzone between 1992 and 1996, leaving a trail of destruction even greater than the one for which the Soviets were responsible. Just going about your daily life—as Amir's childhood mentor, Rahim Khan, remarks in the book—you risked getting shot by a sniper or getting blown up by a rocket" (209). The Taliban make matters even worse: "They don't let you be human" (209), as Rahim Khan puts it. And Hosseini pulls no punches in describing the aftermath of rocket hits. While "sifting through the rubble" of a bombed-out orphanage, one built by Amir's father (Baba), survivors find "body parts of children" (211). "Is there a more Afghan way of dying" (217) than being blown up, Rahim Khan eventually asks, rhetorically and resignedly, after telling Amir that Hassan's father, Ali, was killed by a land mine. The Taliban also ban kite fighting and carry out massacres of the Hazara community. By the time Amir returns to Kabul to

rescue Hassan's son, the city has been almost completely wiped out, reduced in essence to "the heading of an AP story on page 15 of the *San Francisco Chronicle*" (253) rather than a real, habitable place. Importantly, each of the conflicts and peaceful interregnums have significant ramifications for the safety and welfare of Afghan women.

It comes as no surprise that Afghanistan, a nation subjugated by fundamentalist regimes and often a pawn between global superpowers, poses unique challenges to a gendered human rights discourse. "The experience of war and external occupation," international relations scholar Janie L. Leatherman writes, "has made Afghan women's bodies 'globalized property' over which they have limited control" (2). Due to legal barriers to women seeking justice and the rampant sexism stigmatizing survivors of sexual violence, incidents of rape were underreported in Afghanistan in the timeframe covered by the novel. And because perpetrators could act without fear of punishment, sexual violence reached epidemic proportions. Replacing the monarchy with a republic initially promised substantial positive changes: "People spoke of women's rights and modern technology" (47), but their hope was short-lived. Under the mujahedeen, Afghanistan became a failed state that could no longer protect its citizens, and least of all its women. "Not only had they been unable to bring about peace in their war-ravaged country, but what was worse was that many of them had begun to engage in unsocial activities" (Matinuddin 23), including extortion, looting, drug trafficking, and rape. And yet whatever sexual atrocities one regime was responsible for, the next managed to exceed them. It was after the fall of the Soviet-installed leader Najibullah that "for the first time in the history of Afghanistan . . . rape became a regular feature of war" (Rubin 135). In an attempt to cleanse the nation from the moral sins that had fueled civil war, "the Taliban instituted a regime of draconian purity the likes of which the world had never witnessed" (Gopal 7). The novel accurately captures the wasteland into which the Taliban turned Afghanistan, a lawless place where warlords and various groups aided by foreign powers were preying on women, girls, and boys.

The Kite Runner is a rare example of a novel that depicts sexual violence perpetrated against boys. The bulk of statistical and academic research on sexual violence focuses, of course, on violence against women, because gender has often been conflated with women and girls. Consequently, sexual violence experienced by men and boys has been under analyzed. There are other factors that obfuscate the extent of the problem and contribute to the culture of silence around male victims in Muslim cultures. For one thing, men are more reluctant to acknowledge their experience of abuse, since it is perceived as incompatible with the idea of masculinity; they also fear being seen as homosexuals, which would result in being stigmatized by their communities. And yet in a society like Afghanistan, where gender is used as a means of social stratification, hierarchical distinctions separate not only masculinity from femininity, but also forms of masculinity deemed inferior to dominant masculinities. Even though the sexual violence depicted in the novel affects a boy rather than civilian women, it is important to note that it nonetheless rests on male/female gender hierarchies.

Despite the fact that the underlying motivation for the assault is the symbolic destruction of Hassan's ethnic group, the precise nature of this destruction is informed by gendered patterns; specifically, the attacker seeks to emasculate the opponent as a means of deciding the conflict in his favor. At first glance, it might appear that targeting men and boys betrays the intention to suppress another ethnic group more clearly than attacks against women, which could be dismissed as acts of lust. At the same time, by using sexual violence to force men into passivity, the perpetrator ultimately also confirms the negative characteristics associated with the female gender in the respective culture. As a tactic of political violence, rape, therefore, is experienced individually, but has ramifications for the entire community, serving as an instrument to maintain hierarchical relations. In the words of the international security scholar Sara Meger: "When perpetrated against men, then, sexual and other forms of gender-based violence represent a form of 'othering' through which the victimized men are made into gender 'decoys,' enforcing a differentiation between categories of men and a hierarchy of power based on gender" (177).

Hassan's rapist wants to treat him like a woman in order to rob him of his virility and hence of his humanity. In this way, Hosseini shows that the power dynamic of wartime rape in Afghanistan is premised on local gender norms, namely the socialization of men to disrespect women. This disparagement surfaces across multiple sites of female representation in the novel, from sexual activity to birth and motherhood.

Gender and Sexuality: Sex, Birth, Motherhood

Female characters stand out through their prolonged absence from the main narrative strand of the novel. Mothers and wives, for instance, play second fiddle to the male protagonists, though not by any conscious decision of their own; rather, it is Afghan society itself that marginalizes them and impedes their personal development. Amir's mother, Sofia Akrami, "hemorrhaged to death during childbirth" (6). Hassan lost his mother "to a fate most Afghans considered far worse than death: She ran off with a clan of traveling singers and dancers" (6). In the case of Amir's mother, the neglect of women's reproductive health and poor access to life-saving medical care turns pregnancy into a possible death sentence. Far from being rare, this tragedy accurately reflects the fact that maternal mortality remains the leading cause of death among women of childbearing age in Afghanistan. Hassan's mother, Sanaubar, survives the birth of her baby by sheer luck, since she enjoys none of the prenatal medical benefits Western women take for granted: "No obstetricians, no anesthesiologists, no fancy monitoring devices. Just Sanaubar lying on a stained, naked mattress with Ali and a midwife helping her" (11). The suggestion that death would have been a better fate for Sanaubar than running away with a lover signals the restricted sexual freedom of Afghan women in the 1960s, who were unfairly stigmatized as promiscuous at the same time that countless Western women were eloping with counterculture transients in the name of democratic ideals like individual freedom, feminism, and sexual liberation.

The boys are affected differently by the absence of their mothers. Hassan never talks about his, "as if she'd never existed"

(6); Amir, in contrast, longs to have met and known her (7). It is a telling difference because it has to do with the different ways in which the two women—one Pashtun, the other Hazara—were treated by a bitterly divided society. Sofia Akrami, "one of Kabul's most respected, beautiful, and virtuous ladies" (16), was a university instructor in classic Farsi literature and a descendant of the royal family. Amir would often retreat into his mother's books, reading Arabic, European, and American writers (21). Sanaubar was not only forbidden to obtain an education, she was also at the mercy of military personnel patrolling the streets of Kabul. "I knew your mother," a soldier boasts to Hassan; "I knew her real good. I took her from behind by that creek over there" (7). In the eyes of this soldier, Sanaubar (though he never even mentions her name) is only worth remembering for her "tight little sugary cunt" (7). Everything we learn about her in the novel is second-hand information based on rumor and innuendo. She was, allegedly, "a beautiful but notoriously unscrupulous woman who lived up to her dishonorable reputation" (8). Yet this suspicion is grounded solely on her effect on men. Her "brilliant green eyes and impish face had, rumor has it, tempted countless men into sin," while her "suggestive stride and oscillating hips sent men to reveries of infidelity" (8).

Many of the other family stories shared by the novel's central and supporting players suggest that women are treated as second-class citizens. Above all, they are disposable; when they are removed from their roots, as Rahim Khan's Hazara lover Homaira is, at first glance it appears to be for their own good. "She would have suffered," Rahim Khan opines, "You don't order someone to polish your shoes one day and call them 'sister' the next" (105). Yet this kind of mentality shift is exactly what any type of progress toward greater ethnic and gender parity requires. Most of the Pashtun men that feature in the novel, apart from Amir himself, have internalized the double standard that prescribes chastity for unmarried women yet sanctions sexual experience for unmarried men. Even Amir's father expresses reservations about the Afghan woman that Amir sets his sights on in California. When he reveals to Amir that Soraya is no stranger to love, he does so somberly, as if she were suffering

from a grave illness (149). Soraya's mother, too, firmly believes that every woman ought to have a husband and child, even if family life "did silence the song in her" (187).

Amir, however, looks critically on the advantages afforded by his status and on "the sin-with-impunity privileges that came with them" (317). The novel questions Afghan gender norms through Amir's thoughtful, self-reflective observations. "I was fully aware," he remarks, "of the Afghan double standard that favored my gender" (155). He also understands that his special status is nothing but a lucky win "at the genetic lottery that had determined [his] sex" (157). Amir even shares Soraya's frustration that Afghan men are permitted to "go out to nightclubs looking for meat and get their girlfriends pregnant" (188) while she can never live down a single youthful indiscretion. Much like his father, in other words, Amir lives by his own rules, disregarding social custom and embracing liberal views. Yet very much unlike his father, he tries to live by his own principles and refuses to share the illusion that his immunity is natural or incontestable. Throughout the novel, whenever we are confronted with sexual violence, our perspective coincides with Amir's, so we always feel his outrage at the dissolution of state protections for women and children as well as his self-critique. Three instances stand out among the horrors that he witnesses or is aware of: the rape of Hassan by Assef, a Soviet soldier's attempt to rape a female refugee, and Sohrab's sexual captivity.

Three Stories of Sexual Violence

Echoes of the sexual violence we encounter later in the book already resonate in an early passage that details Amir's frustration with his father's decision to have him circumcised at the age of ten; "it felt like someone had pressed a red hot coal to my loins" (50), he recalls. Here and increasingly after Hassan's rape by Assef, Hosseini ascribes to his protagonist a deep suspicion of all things sexual. Whatever aspects of his life it may touch, for him sexuality holds violent, cheerless connotations. In a rare instance in which he briefly refers to the tragedy of his birth, he even expresses a desire to be "pardoned for killing [his] mother" (60). But it is the rape of Hassan

that serves as a pivotal lens through which the reader is asked to understand the gender and ethnic dynamic of Afghan culture and to gauge the impact of the abuse. Assef's attacks conform to the definition of sexual violence as a war tactic to the extent that they are meant to humiliate an opponent in the context of an ethnic conflict. Assef holds his blood to be purer than that of the Hazaras, who in his view "pollute" (43) the country of Afghanistan. To see another Pashtun, like Amir, play with a Hazara boy simply repulses him. As the literary scholar Rebecca Stuhr has argued, prejudices in Afghan society support a power structure that both "makes it possible for Amir to treat Hassan as an inferior" and "allows Assef to rape Hassan without fear of reprisal" (42). The two forms of abuse—ethnic disrespect and sexual humiliation—are entwined and interdependent.

The rape scene is given a brutal, explicit treatment in the book. When Assef and two other boys attack Hassan, they do so with an indifference and brutality that reduce the boy to the status of a "wild animal" or "ugly pet" (76, 77). After the assault, Hassan and his brown corduroy pants are discarded like garbage amid "Worn bicycle tires, bottles with peeled labels, ripped up magazines, yellowed newspapers, all scattered amid a pile of bricks and slabs of cement" (80). Hosseini also makes a point of describing "the dark stain in the seat of his pants" and the "tiny drops that fell from between his legs and stained the snow black" (84), as well as "Assef's buttock muscles clenching and unclenching, his hips thrusting back and forth" (122). It is a shockingly graphic portrayal of rape for a book that has sold millions of copies the world over. It also powerfully illustrates the meanings and effects of a rape committed for the benefit of witnesses, in this case the other boys, who decline to participate in the crime. In visibly flaunting his physical dominance, Assef shows the others that he wants to strip the Hazara boy of his manhood and thereby reduce him to the status of women and homosexuals in the gender hierarchy of Afghan society. In the process, he aims to instill fear among the wider Hazara community and a sense of entitlement in fellow Pashtuns.

The abuse is not complete when the perpetrators have left the scene. Hosseini actually locates the weapon of war not simply in the act itself, but in the feelings of guilt, helplessness, unworthiness, and dishonor that rape brings forth in the victim. Sexual violence is, of course, especially effective due to the stigma that attaches to sexual victimization. It is an unspeakable crime, both in the sense that it places the victim's human dignity in jeopardy and because for those who experience or witness it, it is a painful taboo that they cannot easily divulge or discuss. With their emotions bottled up and their mind poisoned by self-hatred, survivors of sexual abuse will typically keep to themselves and exhibit symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression. Hosseini's predilection for clichés and medical training serve him in good stead here, because it turns out that in the aftermath of the sexual attack Hassan's behavior and state of mind bear all the telltale signs of PTSD. The former California physician registers all the key symptoms: the boy is physically drained ("Lines had etched into his tanned face and creases framed his eyes, his mouth," 97–98). He hardly speaks anymore, shuns company, and generally withdraws into himself as if waiting for a wound to heal. The traumatic incident leaves traces on Amir as well. Memories of the attack follow him everywhere, long after the scene in the alley. When he is given a brand-new Stingray bicycle for his birthday, its red steel-frame body conjures up memories of blood (107). The remainder of his life in Afghanistan will be saturated in the color of this memory.

After he fails to save Hassan, Amir is given a second opportunity to redeem himself during his clandestine journey out of Afghanistan. On their way out of Kabul, the group of refugees that Baba and Amir have joined is stopped at a checkpoint and forbidden from continuing their journey unless a Russian soldier is permitted to spend half an hour with a female refugee handpicked from the desolate group. Amir's father valiantly objects, doing so on the grounds that far from precluding any notion of shame, as the soldier would have it, war in fact "*demands*" (122) decency even more than peacetime does. Apart from Baba, no one dares to express outrage or attempts to hinder the rapist. Even when another, more

senior Russian soldier intervenes, he offers a feeble apology that simply blames the younger, hot-headed comrade's behavior on his inexperience and drug habit. Hosseini dwells on this incident for the same reason that I use Baba's reproach, "Ask him where his shame is" (121), in the title of this essay: Because it demonstrates the use of sexual violence as a strategy of war, one that humiliates, terrifies, and tortures innocent civilians. The arbitrary, seemingly haphazard nature of the soldier's demand suggests that he is merely a sexual opportunist motivated by sheer whim and lust. Yet the self-righteous, calculated manner in which he makes his proposal to trade free passage for sex, alongside his pre-prepared argument about the shamelessness of war, point to a widespread practice of sexual violence committed with total impunity. The female refugee is lucky to escape unscathed; other women in the novel fare much worse, including Sanaubar. On being reunited with her family, she cannot hide the scars of a brutal attack: "One of the cuts went from cheekbone to hairline and it had not spared her left eye on the way. It was grotesque" (221). Hassan's wife, Farzana, is beaten with a wooden stick by a young Talib because she raises her voice when asking a vendor about the price of potatoes, suspecting he might be hard of hearing (228). Though surely reprehensible, none of these attacks or attempted attacks are quite as terrifying as Sohrab's month-long sexual slavery.

The shocking nature of the crime against Sohrab is further compounded by the fact that it is carried out openly—much more so than the assault on Hassan—without any shame or fear of consequences. After his parents are executed in the street by the Taliban, Sohrab finds temporary shelter in an orphanage. Every month or two, a Talib official—later Amir recognizes him as Assef—pays the orphanage director a fee for the permission to abduct a child, mainly girls but boys too, on occasion, including Sohrab. Hosseini is quite charitable with this man, who reluctantly turns a blind eye to the Talib's abuse of power in order to secure an income and keep the orphanage afloat. Though visibly tormented by the nefarious exchange, he appears at peace with the compromise he is forced to reach. "If I deny him one child," he reasons, "he takes

ten. So I let him take one and leave the judging to Allah" (270). The scenes that feature Assef in his den make it clear, however, that any judgment of this particular man must result in a brutal sentence commensurate with his crimes. Assef's abuse of the boy operates in a similar manner to the other forms of sexual domination he engaged in before, namely along gender lines. That sexual violence rests on the feminization of its victims is confirmed by Sohrab's physical transformation while in Assef's captivity: "His head was shaved, his eyes darkened with mascara, and his cheeks glowed with an unnatural red. When he stopped in the middle of the room, the bells strapped around his anklets stopped jingling" (293). The intended degradation requires that the Hazara boy be endowed with both feminine and animal attributes. The shaving of the head conveys his emasculation and the makeup softens his appearance, while the tinkling of the ankle bells accentuates his subordination to his master.

The abuse affects Sohrab much like it did his father before him. He feels uncomfortable with Amir's attention and flinches when touched, going for a whole year without speaking to either of his adoptive parents. "I'm so dirty and full of sin" (335), he insists between bouts of crying and torpor. When Amir finds him with his eyes "still half open but lightless" (366) in a bath of bloodied water, it is clear that despite having survived this suicide attempt, something inside him is irreparably damaged. The final chapters of the book painstakingly chronicle the stages of Sohrab's trauma. A blend of fear and shame makes it impossible for him to live a normal life or simply accept himself as a member of society and of a new family in the United States: "He walked like he was afraid to leave behind footprints. He moved as if not to stir the air around him" (381). In short, he displays the caution and paranoia of a prey species that expects to be attacked again, viciously and without warning, by its natural predator. All the abusive situations Amir personally witnesses or hears about are filtered through his disapproving point of view, so the novel's overall depiction of sexual violence takes on a similarly accusatory tone. Hosseini's attention to the power politics of sexual violence in war, the gender inequality that it feeds

on and perpetuates, and the enduring trauma of physical abuse cast a much-needed light on a tactic of war that is too often and too easily elided from literary representations of warfare.

Sexual Violence as Metaphor and Allegory

However specific Hosseini's accounts of sexual violence in this novel may be, the central rape scene can also be understood at a more abstract level as a symbol for acts of violence that play themselves out on a larger scale. Hosseini himself has suggested a reading of this kind against the backdrop of international indifference to Afghanistan's problems: "For me, the scene in the alley has always had a metaphoric quality to it. . . . A lot of fellow Afghans feel like that's what happened to their country, if you substitute Afghanistan for Hassan" (Hosseini). But the scene invites a plurality of interpretations, depending on the context to which it is transposed. On one hand, as I have argued elsewhere, the novel was successful partly because it uncovered "parallels between Afghanistan's struggles for political and cultural autonomy and a shaken US national consciousness after 9/11" (Banita 336). On the other hand, the sexual violence described in *The Kite Runner*, which was published just as the 9/11 wars were expanding across the Middle East and Central Asia, can also be seen as emblematic of the physical and psychological toll of the war on terror. The release of the Abu Ghraib images only one year later confirmed that sexual violence was being used by all warring factions, including the US military. Sex, the torture images suggest, is inseparable from the power dynamics of the war on terror much the same way that the conflicts in Afghanistan derived their viciousness from the transgression and taboo of forcible intercourse.

Hosseini's unabashed dramatization of sexual violence is not without its hazards, however. At an early stage of cultural awareness regarding US military entanglements in the country, *The Kite Runner*'s approach through the prism of intimate violence arguably helped position Afghanistan "as a generalized zone of suffering in need of Western protection and rescue" (Ivanchikova 3). When he doubles down on the subject by portraying Sohrab's similar experience with

the same sexual predator, Hosseini opens himself to the accusation that he might be catering to an Anglophone reading public's prurient "appetites for cultural otherness and curiosity about a distant war" (Ivanchikova 5). What is more, in the aftermath of 9/11, public figures who voiced concerns about human rights—especially the rights of women—in Muslim-majority countries were suspected of trying to "manufacture consent for international engagements across the Muslim world" (Abu-Lughod 81). Certainly, writing about the suffering of the Hazaras in Afghanistan in a way that resembles the narratives of class or racial injustice in Western fictions by Mark Twain or Victor Hugo encourages American readers to assume the moral high ground and endorse the rationale of the war on terror. After all, how could anyone sympathize with the barbarian norms of this medieval society?

While this criticism has at least some partial validity, Hosseini's frank and courageous depiction of rape is important in light of the strong barriers to reporting sexual violence in Muslim-majority states. At the same time that it seems degrading to members of the Hazara community to dwell on this episode, portraying sexual attacks against Hazara children in a book aimed at a mass audience is a fundamental step in recognizing the illegitimacy of wartime rape. By naming and shaming a rapist, Hosseini makes clear that sexual violence is an affront to social order and human rights that deserves global scrutiny as an issue of principle. Moreover, as the political ethnographer Torunn Wimpelmann points out, "naming an act as a violation against someone other than the family sovereign signifies a challenge to absolute sovereignty, as it names other people as holders, or partial holders, of rights" (5). Seen in this light, the novel's condemnation of the Pashtun rapist underscores Hassan's rights and entitlements as a legal person, while challenging the ethnic divide that elevates the Pashtuns above the Hazara—across the nation and within the pecking order of Amir's extended family. Hosseini, who would later become a UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador, probably did more than anyone, at a time when Afghanistan was an enemy nation on the news channels, to help Americans understand the roots

and manifestations of inequality in a place deeply scarred by never-ending bloodshed.

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