



The Kite Runner

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Falling to earth: *The Kite Runner*

THE KITE RUNNER, based on Khaled Hosseini's bestselling novel, is one of those films in which a world troublespot (in this case Afghanistan) forms the background to a personal story. We think of dramas like *The Deer Hunter* (Vietnam) or *The Killing Fields* (Cambodia). However, sadly, it lacks the emotional power and resonance of those two earlier movies.

The narrative begins in San Francisco in 2000. Amir, an Afghan émigré who has just published his first novel, receives a phone call from an old family friend, Rahim Khan, asking him to come to Pakistan to see him on an important matter.

The film then divides into three acts. In the first, we are whisked back to Amir's childhood in Kabul in the late 1970s, just before the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. He is being brought up by his rich widower father, Baba, a secular liberal Pashtun who is equally contemptuous of both the communists and the mullahs, whom he designates as 'monkeys'.

Amir is a timid, bookish boy who believes that his father is ashamed of his cowardly nature and blames him for his mother's death in childbirth. He wonders if Baba loves Hassan, the son of his servant from the minority Hazara ethnicity and Amir's best friend, more than himself. Rahim, his father's business partner, understands him better and supports his love of writing stories.

Amir and Hassan spend their spare time listening to passages from the Persian epics which Amir reads to his illiterate friend, going to the cinema to watch films like *The Magnificent Seven*, and flying kites. Together they take part in kite-fighting competitions which involve cutting the strings of your opponent's kite in the air and then recovering it after it has fallen to the ground.

One day Amir gains the opportunity to impress his father when he wins the city's kite-fighting tournament. Hassan, who is the 'kite runner' of the title and has the knack of knowing exactly where the fallen kite will land, is retrieving it when he is attacked and raped by a trio of Pashtun boys led by Assef, a future Taliban fighter. Amir, witnessing the attack from behind a wall, is too scared to intervene, and neither boy talks about it.

Amir clearly feels ashamed of his cowardice, but we are then asked to believe that it turns into hatred and resentment of Hassan as he projects his guilt on to the victim. But is religion (Sunni versus Shiite), ethnicity (Pashtun versus Hazara), or class the real source of the growing resentment? These questions are left annoyingly hanging in the air.

To force Hassan to leave, Amir tests his loyalty to breaking point, and in one scene he even pelts ripe pomegranates at him, hoping for retaliation. Instead, Hassan picks one of them up and, Christlike, rubs it in his own forehead. Amir tries again, this time pretending that Hassan has stolen his watch by planting it under his pillow. When confronted by Baba, Hassan confesses to a crime he didn't commit, but Baba forgives him. Hassan's father then intervenes and, despite Baba's protests, they leave his employment in disgrace.

What Amir has done to Hassan requires strong atonement. Alas, it is missing in this film. Amir and his father flee Afghanistan

when the Russians take over, finally settling in America, and the second act is a drab account of his life in San Francisco, where he marries Soraya, also from an émigré family, and Baba grows frail and dies. We are given no sense that he is burdened by any guilt or suffering at what he has done to his friend.

To make matters worse, when he travels to Pakistan in response to Rahim's phone call and discovers that Hassan, who has been killed by the Taliban, has a son, Sohrab, he doesn't want to know until Rahim tells him that Hassan was really his brother. So instead of an uplifting tale of friendship finally overcoming religious, political, class or ethnic barriers, we are presented with little more than the fulfilment of a blood loyalty.

The final act has Amir sneaking into Taliban-controlled Kabul in Ramboesque fashion to seek out Sohrab in an orphanage. Melodrama and farce now take over. Assef, having raped Hassan, is now raping his son – Dickens would be spinning in his grave at this far-fetched sodomistic coincidence. Amir rescues him, thanks in no small part to Sohrab's adeptness with a sling. Thus Amir redeems himself for his failure to save Hassan from the same person's earlier pederasty – a most unlikely scenario.

Also hanging over the whole enterprise is the US metaphor: we neglected Afghanistan, let the Russies and then the Taliban in, and now we need to atone by being in there to rescue the country from these evil, misogynistic, paedophile monsters. In the first act, before 1979, the violence is sanitised: Hassan's rape is not depicted as the painful and defining moment it should be. But in the last section the violence is laid on with a trowel – there is, for example, a brutal stoning of a woman in a sports stadium. The depiction of Hassan himself as a saintly victim who doesn't resist abuse is symbolic of the mass of the Afghan people who cannot help themselves and need to be rescued by some external force, i.e. the USA, aided by the 'enlightened' stratum of society.

Whether intentional or not, all this can only have the effect of justifying a continued American presence in the country. There may be an argument for such intervention, but it is not honestly presented here because an open examination of power and politics is avoided in favour of manipulative innuendo.

The *Kite Runner* invites comparison with other recent films. *Atonement* is another story about corrupted childhood redeemed by adult grace. It too has its weaknesses, but it is uncompromising in its depiction of the horrors of war. Infinitely superior to both as a story of lost innocence is *I'm Not Scared* (see No 113), surely the best dramatisation of a child's moral development in the entire history of cinema.

The *Kite Runner* has its good points. The acting is generally commendable, especially Homayoun Ershadi as Baba and Ahmad Khan Mahmoodzada as Hassan. As a sucker for foreign language children's films, I found the first part before the rape a joy to watch, and the kite-flying scenes create a real sense of freedom and exhilaration, even though (or perhaps because) they are computer-generated. But, like the cut kites, the whole film takes a nosedive afterwards and falls flatly to the earth.