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What It Takes to be a Man

Many issues, whether global or personal, can arise due to the universal conflict of tradition versus change. In *The Kite Runner,* Khaled Hosseini explores traditional gender-related boundaries that separate the two concepts and expresses his own progressive beliefs on what constitutes the character of a true man: servitude and respect, affection and nurture, and selflessness are qualities Hosseini shows to be the most valuable in his male characters, thereby simultaneously showing that traditional male stereotypes dictating a man should first be dominant, unemotional, and mindful of his own reputation are only harmful and confining.

Dominance over family and women is the long-established role men have been told to play. In *The Kite Runner,* Hosseini explores this traditional stereotype and seeks to display how ridiculous and confining it is; through the character of General Taheri, a traditional Afghan man who does his best to uphold the customs of his culture, it can be seen how he views himself as the head of the household and how this prideful behavior only leads to humiliation and harm. For example, the General expresses how he sees his wife and daughter as subordinate to him in the way he treats them as though he is entitled to being served by them; when his wife, Jamila, would place a meal before him, he would take a bite, push it away and sulk as though she had failed at her job to please him, causing her to cry and Soraya to be angry (Hosseini 186). In this situation, it is clear that the General conforms to the traditional mindset that states that women are made to serve and consequently, that men are made to beserved. The injustices and repercussions that result from this type of thinking are further reflected through Soraya’s break down concerning the hypocrisy of the wedding guests’ gossip:

Their sons go out to nightclubs looking for meat and get their girlfriends pregnant, they have kids out of wedlock and no one says a goddamn thing. Oh, they’re just men having fun! I make one mistake and suddenly everyone is talking *nang* and *namoos*, and I have to have my face rubbed in it for the rest of my life (188).

In this statement, Soraya sheds light on the fact that she lives in a broken society where women are severely condemned for an act that men commit all the time with no consequence because in the eyes of society, “every woman need[s] a husband” (187) and therefore a woman must do everything she can to remain pure for her future spouse. In other words, Soraya demonstrates how this stereotype dictating a man is to be served permits the dehumanization of women into objects like meat and how illogical and unjust this thinking is. To further prove a change needs to occur in this mindset, Hosseini uses the character of Hassan, his ideal image of what a truly honorable man should look and act like, to demonstrate the way a man should act instead: with a heart of servitude and respect, especially for women. This is demonstrated in the way Hassan treats his wife: he looks at her with pride (217) and he looks to her when Rahim Khan asks if they would come live with him (218), showing that they decide together as equals. Furthermore, Hassan also treats his newly returned mother with forgiveness and respect, serving her and nursing her back to health, even though he had a valid reason not to (222). As a result of Hassan’s humility and respect for everyone, despite gender, his son is born into what seems like paradise in which family relationships flourish, which is juxtaposed with the authoritative way in which the General maintains his household and family relationships. The fact that Hosseini displays the harsh consequences of male dominance in society in his novel while also showing the positive results that will occur when a man shows service and respect to those around him, blatantly displays his will to abolish the archaic stereotypes that society, particularly Afghan society, set onto men.

Affection, sensitivity, and nurture, these are words that are synonymous with weakness in the eyes of traditional men. That a true man never cries or shows his feelings or affections is one of the first lessons that a young boy learns, and in *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini displays the consequences that follow when a man acts without the care and nurture that is so often associated only with women. Baba is a clear example of this; Amir states that if he were to be a father, that he “want[s] to be just like Baba and [he] want[s] to be nothing like him” (194). In this statement, Amir implies that while he wants to be a great man like Baba, he resents the way Baba raised him – with a lack of the attention, comfort, or encouragement every child craves. This can be seen when Amir recalls Baba taking him to a *Buzkashi* tournament in which Amir witnesses a horseman being trampled over violently by a group of horses (22); after this event, he started to cry and stated he never forgot the “disgusted look on [Baba’s] face” (23). In another situation, after Amir explains to Baba about how he took on and won against the whole class during a game of “Battle of the Poems”, Baba remains aloof and does not do anything to show pride in his son (20). During yet another time, after Amir makes it clear that he had written a story he wanted Baba to read, Baba only feigned interest and never took Amir’s heavily implied offer (34). The connection between all of these scenarios is that Baba completely lacks sensitivity towards his son and makes it clear that he would only get involved with his son if Amir showed interest in activities that a real man would (21). This lack of care in his son’s life not only results in a very dysfunctional relationship between Baba and Amir, but also causes Amir to make the biggest mistake of his life. The broken bond between Amir and his father is blatantly obvious when Amir, as a child states that sometimes he “wished that he could open [his] veins and drain [Baba’s] cursed blood from [his] body”(34). The fact that Amir wished not to have any relation with his father is a result of a lack of nurture and support in his life, and it shows how incredibly damaging it can be. When one also takes into account that the fact that Amir saw his father’s affection as a privilege not a right lead him to believe that “Hassan was the price [he] had to pay… to win Baba” (82), they would see how the tradition that fathers remain solely stoic and disciplinary is completely misguided. Hosseini further justifies this point in the way he juxtaposes Amir’s traumatic experiences with Baba with Amir’s comforting and joyful experiences with Hassan; the contrast between two aspects of Amir’s childhood is justified by the fact that Amir’s and Hassan’s relationship is built on the intense affection and nurturing attitude that they have towards each other while Amir’s and Baba’s relationship is built on fear and discipline. For example, when Hassan cries after a soldier taunts him about his mother, Amir reaches to Hassan and pulls him close, comforting him, not at all uncomfortable about the fact his friend is weeping (8). As well, in another instance, Amir plants a kiss on Hassan’s cheek and lovingly states, “You’re a prince, Hassan. You’re a prince and I love you” (33); these scenarios express the unusually large amount of devotion and nurture that the two boys show towards each other and demonstrates how having affection and love is the answer to forming bonds where unwavering loyalty and trust can be achieved, as can be seen, for example, through Hassan’s fierce will to protect Amir from Assef (45). Thus, this displays Hosseini’s message that parents should not try to mold their sons to their liking (16), as Baba tries to do with Amir by confining him to the stereotypes that dictate a man should not cry or read poetry (21), but rather, parents should teach their sons that treating others with affection and sensitivity is what will reward them the most in life, for relationships are much more valuable than the superficial pride that one gains from conforming to traditional stereotypes.

Although the definition of pride is subjective to each person, it always has to do with maintaining one’s own dignity or superiority. It is evident in *The Kite Runner* that pride is of utmost value to Afghan men and that maintaining reputation is an important duty to be taken seriously. Hosseini proves throughout the novel, however, that this act of prioritizing society’s perspective over all things ironically does not do much to maintain one’s dignity and that sacrificing one’s self for others rather than trying to raise oneself up is an act that men and women alike should take on, contrary to the universal custom that it is women, such as mothers, who always pay the ultimate sacrifices. Hosseini demonstrates how pride can be harmful through the General; Iqbal Taheri keeps his family on welfare and does not even consider working in America in a job “unsuitable for a man of his stature” (186); Soraya expresses her humiliation at this when she talks about how her becoming a teacher would be much better than collecting welfare (192). The injustice of the situation is that Soraya as well as her mother have to suffer through shame and most likely financial issues all because the General believes that his reputation as a general is more important that doing all that he can to provide for his family. A more severe situation in which Hosseini warns readers of the dangers of pride is when Amir finds out that he and Hassan were half-brothers (253). This had been withheld from the two because Baba had wanted to keep his reputation safe and his shame hidden away. Rahim Khan explains later, however, that this caused even more shame for Baba for he could not love Hassan openly as he had wanted to and that this had haunted Baba for the rest of his life (316). These acts strongly contrast with the multiple acts of selflessness that reveal how true manhood is achieved when one puts others ahead of him. These noble acts of sacrifice are seen when Hassan stands up for Amir in the alley against Assef (80), when Baba stands up against the Russian soldier (122), and when Amir stands up to the General when the latter inquires about the “Hazara boy” (380). What all of these people have in common in their situation is that they are seen as truly heroic men that stand up for others despite truly severe consequences; especially in the last situation, it can be seen that Amir does not care anymore about reputation, he only cares about Sohrab and this is crucial for it distinguishes Amir from the coward he thought himself to be before his moment of redemption fighting Assef (303). Through this, Hosseini demonstrates that sacrificing for reputation only merits shame, but sacrificing for somebody else merits the title of a true man, proving that the stereotype that confines a man to believing that his reputation is of the utmost importance does not make any sense at all.

Society has made people believe that they have to act a certain way based on their sex for so long that they do not remember or care to think of why this custom came to be; “mothers *only* provide nurture, fathers *only* provide discipline”, these are the confinements that men and women are plagued with even though no one knows the reason behind why specific qualities are to be had by a specific gender. Throughout *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini displays characters going through hurts and pains, many of them caused by controlling, insensitive, and prideful behavior, the very behavior that society dictates what constitutes a true man; Soraya having to face unfair judgment everywhere she goes, Baba’s and the General’s broken relationships with their children, these are things that came to be because of male mindsets and stereotypes. In order to explicitly demonstrate this, Hosseini also juxtaposed the supposedly manly behavior with examples in which a man behaves in the opposite or more feminine way and gains fruitful results because of this; Hassan’s paradise that he created for his family with Rahim Khan, Amir’s amazing childhood spent with Hassan, Amir rescuing Sohrab from Assef, these things came to be when males acted with servitude, sensitivity, and selflessness. In this way, Hosseini not only proves why stereotypes are harmful, but he also shows that it is not his desire to provide new guidelines for men to follow; on the contrary, Hosseini’s message for men is that they should not act a certain way for fear of judgment from others; men should act in a way so that when they judge themselves, they see that their qualities allow them to help others and improve their relationships with others. In other words, contrary to what tradition has dictated for so long, a true man has qualities that raise others up, not only himself.

Works Cited

Hosseini, Khaled. *The Kite Runner.* Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2004. Print.