

## Afghanistan's National Traditions and Superstitions in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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### ABSTRACT

In contemporary art, folkloric elements inevitably find their place and that are widely included in artistic depictions. For this reason, it is impossible to fit all the folkloric elements, within the boundaries of an article. Because of that, it would be appropriate to investigate these elements under separate titles. In addition, the abundance of folkloric elements in artistic works is an indication that they are rich in content. From this perspective, the value of such studies will increase even more. In this study, the national traditions and superstitions of Afghanistan mentioned in Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner* are evaluated, taking into account the mentioned topics. Investigations of *The Kite Runner* by researchers from different perspectives shows the richness of this novel in terms of content and its strength in terms of technique, and further increases the importance of the study. During the study, it was found that traditions were mentioned more in the novel *The Kite Runner* and detailed information was given about them; that superstitions are discussed less and detailed information is not given. In addition, in this study, the national traditions and superstitions of Afghanistan are explained with details.

**Keywords:** Tradition, Superstition, National, Afghanistan, *The Kite Runner*, Novel

### 1. Introduction

Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan-American novelist that was born in 1965 in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. He left the country with his family during the wars in Afghanistan and settled in California, USA. Hosseini's fame spread worldwide with his novel *The Kite Runner*, published in 2003. After he became known worldwide with this work, he left his profession as a doctor and devoted all his time to writing. Apart from his novel *The Kite Runner*, he also

has two novels, *And The Mountains Echoed* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, also a work called *Sea Prayer*, which is an elegy.

Tradition, which is considered a part of culture, that emerges among the people through improvisation; it is a folkloric element that transferred from person to person and from generation to generation. It can be seen that traditions are different from other elements of folklore literature. While many of the folkloric elements do not change in the course of history, traditions cannot resist external factors and change over time. Tradition is an element that evolves over time. (Gürsoy,2019: 9). “*More clearly, tradition refers to the representation of revealed principles as law, knowledge, art, social structuring, institutions and life in traditional societies.*” (Aslan, 2010: 6). Tradition is a collection of attitudes that are effective in the formation of social life and determine the limits of people's behavior in society.

The traditions and customs of a nation are an element that shows the cultural richness of that nation. Culture, on the other hand, is “*The name of the set of creations and equipment created by humans and added to nature from the beginning.*” (Çobanoğlu, 2012: 3). Cultural richness means having a long historical process. “*Culture, which consists of what humanity has added to nature, is actually a set of original contents.*” (Çapcıoğlu/ Beşirli, 2015: 215).

The novel *The Kite Runner* has been researched and evaluated by researchers from different perspectives; but no researcher has touched on the national traditions and superstitions in this book. The evaluation in question was deemed necessary; in this study, the national traditions and superstitions of Afghanistan in the work considered are taken into account and evaluated with the necessary explanations.

When the novel *The Kite Runner* is reviewed in general, it is noticeable how important this investigation is. In addition to the plot being formed around the kite game, which is one of Afghanistan's national traditions, the work begins with the depiction of kites and ends with a kite competition. Two kite competitions are depicted in the novel. Emir, the main character of the story, wins both competitions. The first takes place in Kabul when Emir was a child; the second takes place in America, when Emir is middle-aged. While the first gain is shown as the beginning of the feeling of regret for Emir, the protagonist of the novel; the second gain is shown as the beginning of hope for Emir. While Emir thinks about winning his father's heart in the first competition, he thinks about winning Sohrab's heart in the second competition. The author tries to give his message through the relationship between these two events.

This article has been prepared according to documentary research method. First, the novel under review was read carefully, issues related to national traditions and superstition were determined, and then the article was written, also while writing the article, explanations about national traditions and superstitions were made when necessary.

The idea that considering of this richness in the novel *The Kite Runner* will contribute to the development of folk literature, the history of literature and especially the development of the novel genre has led to the research of such a subject. Based on this idea, in this article we will try to investigate the national traditions and superstitions of Afghanistan in Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner*.

## 2. Traditions

When Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner* is considered in terms of tradition and customs, it becomes clear that it reflects nationalized traditions and customs. The name of the novel is

also proof of this claim. The kite game is the crossroads of the topics discussed in the novel; we can see this from the first part of the novel. Let's look at this piece as an example: *"Then I glanced up and saw a pair of kites, red with long blue tails, soaring in the sky. They danced high above the trees on the west end of the park, over the windmills, floating side by side like a pair eye looking down on San Francisco, the city I now call home."* (Hosseini, 2014: 1-2). Thus, until the end of the novel, events revolve around the kite game.

Kite competitions are played in all provinces of Afghanistan during the winter months; therefore, it is considered one of the national game traditions of Afghanistan. In the novel *The Kite Runner*, kite-fighting tournament held in Kabul during the winter months are described as follows: *"Every winter, districts in Kabul held a kite-fighting tournament. And if you were a boy living in Kabul, the day of the tournament was undeniably the highlight of the cold season."* (Hosseini, 2017: 46). The tradition of preparing for the kite competition and the way the kite is made are also mentioned in the novel.

*"For a while, Hassan and I used to build our own kites. We saved our weekly allowances in the fall, dropped the money in a little porcelain horse Baba had brought one time from Herat. When the winds of winter began to blow and snow fell in chunks, we undid the snap under the horse's belly. We went to the bazaar and bought bamboo, glue, string, and paper. We spent hours every day shaving bamboo for the center and cross spars, cutting the thin tissue paper which made for easy dipping and recovery. And then, of course, we had to make our own string, or tar. If the kite was the gun, then tar, the glass-coated cutting line, was the bullet in the chamber. We'd go out in the yard and feed up to five hundred feet of string through a mixture of ground glass and glue. We'd then hang the line between the trees, leave it to dry."* (Hosseini, 2014: 47).

In this piece evaluated, the construction method of the kite is declared. In addition, the materials required for kite construction and the procurement of materials are also explained. Kites are sometimes made by individuals and sometimes by kite masters. Kites made by masters are generally preferred in kite-fighting tournaments. Although the way kite is made varies in different regions of Afghanistan, this game is considered a national game. This issue is explained in the novel *The Kite Runner* as follows: *"Kite-fighting tournament was an old winter tradition in Afghanistan. It started early in the morning on the day of the contest and didn't end until only the winning kite flew in the sky-I remember one year the tournament outlasted daylight."* (Hosseini, 2014: 48). Kite-fighting is generally played in autumn and winter. In other seasons in Afghanistan, everyone is busy. While some go to school, some work in the fields, farming, fruit vineyards, etc. everyone is busy with work. When winter comes, work slows down and everyone focuses on different games and entertainment. The kite-fighting tournament does not have a specific duration. This competition continues until that only one kite left in the sky (the winning kite). Kite-fighting tournament dimension also vary. Sometimes it is organized among the young people of a town, sometimes it is organized among the young people of a province, sometimes several provinces. Not only young people are interested in kites; sometimes middle-aged people and sometimes older people show interest in playing kites.

The tradition of weekly work in Afghanistan is different from other countries. While other countries people work five days a week; but in Afghanistan people works six days a week. In addition, while Saturdays and Sundays are considered weekends in other countries;

but Friday is considered the weekend in Afghanistan. Hosseini addresses this issue in his work to draw attention to this tradition. *“People went to work Saturday through Thursday and gathered for picnics on Friday in parks, on the banks of Ghargha Lake, in the gardens of Paghman.”* (Hosseini, 2014: 41). While talking about the working tradition, Hosseini also mentions the picnic areas in Kabul. Since the people of Kabul generally live in apartments, they are very fond of picnics, and Paghman is an indispensable picnic area for them. In the rest of the novel, this issue is described as follows: *“You can take Afghans out of Paghman, but you can’t take Paghman out of Afghans,” I said.*” (Hosseini, 2014: 334). With these statements, the author emphasizes the importance of Paghman.

Yelda celebration is considered one of the national traditions of Afghanistan. Across the country, people celebrate this long night of the year; they break the night with parties and festivities. *The Kite Runner* author did not skip this tradition and tried to explain it beautifully in his novel.

*“In Afghanistan, yelda is the first night of the month of jadi, the first night of winter, and the longest night of the year. As was the tradition, Hassan and I used to stay up late, our feet tucked under the kursi while Ali tossed apple skin into the stove and told us ancient tales of sultans and thieves to pass that longest of nights. It was from Ali that I learned the lore of yelda, that bedeviled moths flung themselves at candle flames, and wolves climbed mountains looking for the sun. Ali swore that if you ate watermelon the night of yelda, you wouldn’t get thirsty the coming summer.”* (Hosseini, 2014: 132).

Special preparations are made for yelda night. The Afghanistan people try to hide the watermelons until this night of winter; In addition, pomegranate is considered one of the special fruits of the yelda night. Apart from these, bananas, oranges, kiwis, etc. are also keep fruits like these on the table. During the celebration, traditions of reading poetry, telling epics and telling stories to children are also performed. In poetry books, the endless nights of lovers are compared to the yelda night.

The tradition of burning *isfand* is one of the nationalized traditions of Afghanistan. In homes where there are babies, it is often burned to protect the baby from the evil eye. This tradition is reflected in the book as follows: *“She burned isfand for him on a skillet to cast out nazar, the evil eye.”* (Hosseini, 2014: 196). *Isfand* is a herbal substance. They throw the dried plant on the fire and smoke the coastal corner of the house with its smoke.

The *oghlaq* tradition, which is one of the national traditions of Afghanistan, did not escape the author's attention. This traditional game is popular among peoples of the Central Asian Turkish Republics and Turkic people of northern Afghanistan; although the *oghlaq* game is a traditional game in the north of Afghanistan, it has spread to all regions of Afghanistan in the last century and has gained a national dimension. This game is called (*oghlaq*) or (*oghlaq tartti*); But in the novel it is called *buzkashi*.

*“I remember one time Baba took me to the yearly Buzkashi tournament that took place on the first day of spring, New Year’s Day. Buzkashi was, and still is, Afghanistan’s national passion. A chapandaz, a highly skilled horseman usually patronized by rich aficionados, has to snatch a goat or cattle carcass from the midst of a melee, carry that carcass with him around the stadium at full gallop, and drop it in a scoring circle while a team of other chapandaz chases him and*

*does everything in its power-kick, claw, whip, punch-to snatch the carcass from him.” (Hosseini, 2014:19-20).*

In the considered passage, it is explained that the *buzkashi* tradition is held on New Year's Eve in Afghanistan. If we consider that game is a tradition throughout Afghanistan, it is a tradition performed on New Year's Eve. However, if this traditional game considered as a tradition of Afghanistan Turkic people, then it gains a different dimension. Because Afghanistan Turkic people carry out the *oghlaq* tradition on their wedding days as well as New Year's Eve. This tradition seems to be beautifully depicted by the author. But recently, some changes have been brought to these games by the dominant government. Since it is a waste to throw away the carcass of an edible animal, animal skin stuffed with pieces of cloth is put forward instead of the animal carcass. Although this traditional game has lost its former excitement among its players and society, it has been held frequently in recent years.

Although the wedding tradition in Afghanistan varies by region, it also has nationalized dimensions. Hosseini draws attention to such traditions. *“So weddings had come and gone and no one had sung ahesta boro for Soraya, no one had painted her palms with henna, no one had held a Koran over her headdress, and it had been General Taheri Who’d danced with her at every wedding.” (Hosseini, 2014: 137).* *Ahesta boro*, henna and the tradition of keeping the Koran on one's veil are among the nationalized traditions in Afghanistan weddings. The bride wandering around during the wedding is not tolerated by Afghans. Even though Soraya lives in America, she does not wander around during the wedding, following this tradition. *“In keeping with tradition, Soraya was not present.” (Hosseini, 2014: 154).*

Considering Baba's illness, some traditional customs were not performed at Emir and Soraya's marriage ceremony. One of these traditional customs is the engagement ceremony.

*“According to tradition, Soraya’s family would have thrown the engagement party, the Shirini-khori-or ‘Eating of the Sweets’ ceremony. Then an engagement period would have followed which would have lasted a few months. Then the wedding, which would be paid for by Baba. We all agreed that Soraya and I would forgo the Shirini-khori. Everyone Knew the reason, so no one had to actually say it: that Baba didn’t have months to live.” (Hosseini, 2014: 156).*

Wedding arrangement, flow, duration, etc. although that are described in detail in the novel, since this study is about national traditions, only the nationalized traditions of the wedding are included. One of these is the tradition of holding a mirror. At the wedding table, after the marriage ceremony, the bride and groom hold a mirror to each other. The mirror is an indication that the bride and groom should be pure-hearted and pure-hearted, like a mirror in front of each other. This tradition is described in the novel as follows.

*“I remember sitting on the sofa, set on the stage like a throne, Soraya’s hand in mine, as three hundred or so face looked on. We did Ayena Masshaf, where they gave us a mirror and threw a veil over heads, so we’d be alone to gaze at each other’s reflection. Looking at Soraya’s smiling face in that mirror, in the momentary privacy of the veil, I whispered to her for the first time that I loved her. A blush, red like henna, bloomed on her cheeks.” (Hosseini, 2014: 157).*

These wedding traditions are the traditions performed at the wedding of a couple who live in America and organize their wedding there. Although the novel characters are depicted as people living abroad, they are depicted as not giving up their national traditions and performing their weddings according to their own traditions.

### 3. Superstitions

Superstition is considered one of the most used customs by the people of Afghanistan. When you go to every region of Afghanistan; it can be seen that different superstitions are using by different segments of society. Generally, older people and people with a lot of life experience believe in superstitions. They immediately attribute the mistakes made by young people to superstition and try to prevent them in a way. For this reason, there are inevitably superstitions in novels about Afghanistan. Examples of superstition can be seen on many pages in the novel *The Kite Runner*. For example, the superstition of reflecting sunlight with a mirror is explained in the novel as follows: “*He would take the mirror and tell us what his mother had told him, that the devil shone mirror too, shone them to distract Muslims during prayer. ‘And he loughs while he does it,’ he always added, scowling at his son.*” (Hosseini, 2014: 4). There are two striking things in this piece. First, the novel character repeats his mother's words. By describing the expression in this way, the author emphasizes that this superstition is transmitted from generation to generation and is a folkloric element. Secondly, the author tries to establish a connection between superstition and people's beliefs. This description that he is trying to express also has a philosophy. Because generally the elderly person, who try to use superstition in this way. In addition, this superstition is used in every region of Afghanistan and has a national dimension.

There are superstitions in every ambit in Afghanistan. Superstition can be seen in every situation, from dressing to eating and drinking. For example, in the novel, biting an eggshell is associated with the following superstition. “*I bit into my egg and asked Baba if it was true what a boy in school had told me, that if you ate a piece of eggshell, you’d have to pee it out. Baba grunted again.*” (Hosseini, 2014: 14). Superstitions are sometimes expressed from the mouth of a child, sometimes from the mouth of an adult.

One of the common beliefs among the people in Afghanistan is the tradition that the child resembles the father. Fathers generally want their children to look like them. In a dialogue in the novel, this issue is discussed as follows: “*I know, I know. But he’s always buried in those books or shuffling around the house like he’s lost in some dream.’ ‘And?’ ‘I wasn’t like that.’ Baba sounded frustrated, almost angry.*” (Hosseini, 2014: 21). Since it is said in families at every opportunity that the son should resemble the father, sons generally try to imitate themselves like their fathers; they attempt to adopt attitudes like their fathers and even continue their father's profession. The children of a doctor father become doctors, the children of a teacher father become teachers, the sons of an engineer father become engineers, etc. it is seen very often.

### 4. Conclusion

In this study, the novel *The Kite Runner* was evaluated in terms of national traditions and superstitions in Afghanistan. Although there is a small amount of superstition in this novel, the traditions and customs of Afghanistan are taken into account to a large extent.

Moreover, the events in the novel occur around the kite game, which is a national tradition of Afghanistan. The novel, which begins with the description of a kite, ends with a kite race.

The novel reflects the numerous traditions of Afghanistan; but in this evaluation article, only nationalized traditions were evaluated, adhering to the study limitation. Among these nationalized traditions: the kite tradition, the *oghlaq* tradition, the *yelda* celebration tradition, the weekly work tradition, the tradition of burning *isfand* and the wedding tradition were evaluated. In addition to the statement of how the traditions are depicted in the novel, explanations about these traditions are also given.

The superstitions that passing in the novel *The Kite Runner* are not discussed in detail but are perhaps only presented as a reminder. The number of superstitions mentioned is also very small; the total does not exceed three. These are: reflecting light with a mirror, biting the eggshell, etc. since no details were given in the novel, these superstitions were detailed, and explanations were made.

A nation's traditions, customs and superstitions are among the elements that show the cultural richness of that nation. In today's world, not only nations; but countries also have nationalized traditions, customs and superstitions. Therefore, it is important for the researchers to investigate the traditions, customs and superstitions used in other books in order to show the nationalized cultural richness of the countries.

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