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The Kite Runner From A Marxist Perspective

The use of Marxist and other literary theories in the classroom helps students to realize that the subject of English is beyond the rudimentary put your comma here or reading for the sake of fulfilling some predetermined standard (a certain number of minutes of reading per night for example). English is also about critical thinking and analysis, and using literary theory is an excellent way to accomplish this and to engage students: "literary theory can make English about something, transforming texts from artifacts into something vitally social, interesting, significant" (Zitlow 128). Literary analysis gives students the opportunity to study and apply social issues to the text, which gives the text more relevance and meaning. Students are much more likely to be engaged in a text if they can see its relevance to the world around them. Using Marxist literary theory specifically is unique in the sense that it can provide a way for students to analyze the power/class structures in our world: "it helps them and us enter into and understand positions other than our own in a diverse and complex world" (Zitlow 129). Understanding these positions and structures helps to create understanding and to show the realities of the world around us. Therefore, teachers should not be afraid to use theory in their classrooms but instead embrace it.

Keeping this in mind, an excellent text to examine from a Marxist literary perspective is *the Kite Runner* because the quintessential conflict in *the Kite Runner* is the relationship between the main character, Amir, and his servant, Hassan. Their very relationship is defined by social status-Amir is Pashtun, which in turn makes

him the wealthier, socially accepted Afghani. Hassan, on the other hand, is one of his family's servants, a Hazara who, because of his ethnicity, is the social outcast: "The primarily Shi'a, Dari-Speaking Hazaras live in the central highlands and have historically been the most politically and economically disadvantaged group'" (Riphenburg 37). This provides a great opportunity for the teacher to examine the social and class structures within Afghanistan. The class could discuss the plight of the Hazaras and examine why they may have been selected to be at the bottom of the economic and social food chain.

Throughout the text, Amir is at war with himself. He wants to accept Hassan as a friend but doing so results in crossing class lines. Ultimately, his desire but inability to accept Hassan stifle their friendship and tear Amir apart. Amir is only at peace after he finds out Hassan is his half brother. Suddenly, his inability to accept Hassan is irrelevant because their class lines have already been crossed. Furthermore, his father made the sin of crossing them, not Amir. Therefore, he is absolved of his burden.

The students can use the relationship between Amir and Hassan, as well as their father's relationship with each of the boys, to examine how social structure affects their own lives. Have students ever denied being friends with someone or denied talking to someone because they were in a certain social or economic group? At this time, the teacher could ask students how they know people are in certain social groups. Overwhelmingly, the teacher will find students will say the "popular" kids in their school shop at brand name, expensive stores. Thus, it can be assumed that these "popular" students have extra money to spend on clothes and that price is

not a factor. So, once again, the wealthy are on top, ruling the school so to speak. Students are provided with an excellent opportunity to be critical of their own lives and to examine how class structure is prevalent in their own cliques. Most students probably haven't made this connection before. I have found that this sparks great conversation amongst students in the classroom, especially at the high school age when social structure is so prevalent. As a teacher, it was wonderful to see my own students realize how much their lives are fueled by money and consumerism.

Though by the end of the book, the conflict is resolved, the two families, Amir's and Hassan's, are torn apart in the process. Amir and his father have an unusually close relationship with their Hazara servants Ali and his son Hassan. So unusual in fact, that it is often commented on by the other townspeople: "Lucky Hazara, having such a concerned master" (Hosseini 70). It's just this that leads to what ultimately results in the deterioration of the friendship between Amir and Hassan. Students can examine and discuss why this led to a deterioration of Amir and Hassan's friendship, as well as asking themselves the following question: Have you ever, or known anyone who has ever, lost a friendship because a friend crossed over to another social standing or clique? Why did this happen? This can be executed as a discussion or as an opportunity for a writing reflection that can be used as a tool for formative assessment.

Kite running is a popular sport in Afghanistan. The children fly kites and the object is to cut other kites down. The objective of the kite runners is to retrieve fallen kites, the ultimate prize being the last one fallen. In *the Kite Runner*, Amir is the kite flyer, while Hassan is the kite runner. Due to Hassan's Hazara ethnicity, he

cannot be more than a kite runner. The relationship between the kite flyer and the kite runner amplify the social and class differences between the two races. Amir is in charge because he is the kite flyer who is, quite literally, in the case of the kite, above Hassan. At Amir's command, Hassan is to retrieve the last fallen kite, almost a hybrid game of catch: "Pashtuns—saw Hazaras as infidels, animals, other" (Zabriskie 1). Hassan, like a faithful pup, responds: "'For you a thousand times over!'" (Hosseini 67). At this, Hassan, who is ever devoted, runs off to retrieve the kite for his master.

This opens up a plethora of areas for discussion. The class could learn about the sport of kite running in Afghanistan along with Afghan culture and life before the Taliban took over. Then, students could talk about, examine, compare and contrast life in Afghanistan pre-Taliban and during Taliban rule. The teacher should focus less on the Taliban rules and mistreatment of women because that would be more of a feminist discussion. Instead, the teacher should focus on who the Taliban were (ethnicity and religion) and how they're coming to power affected the lower class, the Hazaras:

> The striking Pashtun dominance in the Taliban movement cannot be ignored. The Taliban leader, Amir Mullah Mohammed Omar, and all but one member of the supreme *shuna* (leading council) were Kandari Pashtuns. (Sullivan 96)

Because the teacher is approaching the text from a Marxist standpoint, they should spend time examining and discussing this. There are a variety of articles the teacher could use as a resource and in the lesson on the plight of the Hazaras as a result of the Taliban. Some resources include: *The Weekly Standard's* article "Terror Against

Hazara Muslim Minority in Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan" and The *European Resettlement Networks* article "Afghan Refugees in Iran and Afghanistan".

Why is it the group was given so much power? They were the ethnic majority and thus the top of the socio-economic food chain. In fact, the Taliban, Pashtun, rise to power could have been largely motivated by recent rise to power of the minority:

> The fall of the Najibullah communist regime was followed by dominance of the government in Kabul by Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Hazara/Shia for the first time in Afghan history and created anxiety among the Pashtuns who had dominated the government for over 300 years. (Sullivan 96)

Therefore, the teacher should examine the Taliban rise to power as a class struggle, a revolt against trying to flip the social and economic classes.

During the kite fighting tournament, Amir faces another threat—Hassan is exceptional at kite running, better than he, Amir, could ever hope to be: "I wasn't just slower than Hassan but clumsier too; I'd always envied his natural athleticism" (Hosseini 53). It is because he feels his dominance is being threatened that he, in his mind, begins to put Hassan back in his place and denies Hassan the very thing he desires most, Amir's friendship. In his search for Hassan, he justifies his search to others by referring to him as "his servant's son"; he does not even give Hassan the acknowledgement of a servant. Instead, he puts him down a notch even farther in social standing: He is merely the son of one of their servants.

Students could examine how this might relate to the anxiety felt by the Pashtuns when the Hazaras dominated the government. Like Amir, the Pashtuns

were afraid that the lower class Hazara would prove better and dominate to them. In fact, Amir and Hassan's entire relationship and the kite running tournament specifically, could be an analogy to this very struggle and anxiety before the Taliban took over. This would be a great opportunity for a Socratic discussion about the relationships between the two characters. Analyzing the class and ethnic relationship between the two characters provides a way to relate the text specifically to the "real world" and thus increases the chances of student interest and enjoyment.

Amir finally finds Hassan being bullied by the richest of the rich kids in the neighborhood, Assef. Amir does not let himself be seen by the group because he is afraid of Assef. Meanwhile, Hassan, in his eternal devotion to Amir, refuses to give up the kite and Assef rapes him. Although Amir can hear everything, he stays out of sight. Amir could have stopped it but doesn't. Why? Because deep down inside, it satisfies him—not sexually but mentally. Assef's actions lower Hassan's worth again, so Amir no longer needs to feel threatened.

Consider Assef for a moment: "Born to a German mother and Afghan father, the blond, blue-eyed Assef towered over the other kids" (Hosseini 38). Although Assef is part Afghani, he displays Aryan qualities, which were the ideal in Germany during Hitler's time of power. This can't be discounted as a mere coincidence. Assef is meant to encompass both the power and wealth of his family in Afghanistan as well as a perhaps more threatening and eerie description that reminds the reader of Nazi Germany. Both things set him apart physically and economically—he is

dominate in both: “His family lived a few streets south of our home, in a posh, high-walled compound with palm trees” (Hosseini 37).

The teacher should take time to examine and discuss Assef and pose the following questions: Why does Assef have a German mother and Aryan qualities? What is the purpose of this? How does his heritage and appearance play into his character’s development and ultimately his “top dog” mentality? Asking these questions helps the student to think more critically about the text and to examine the role that heritage and socioeconomic status plays in this novel and in the development of the characters.

Assef, like Amir but perhaps more consciously, gains his self worth out of being dominate economically and physically. Hassan threatens him even more than Hassan threatens Amir because if Hassan appears better than Assef at something, kite running for example, Assef’s entire social structure threatens to crumble. So his act of raping Hassan does two things: It asserts his dominance both literally and metaphorically. Assef must remain on top; even if that means crushing people like Hassan in the process: “Hassan didn’t struggle. Didn’t even whimper…I caught a glimpse of his face…It was a look I had seen before. It was the look of a lamb” (Hosseini 76). Because of his status as an inferior Hazara, Hassan accepts his fate, perpetual domination, which also seems to be the fate of the Hazara in modern day Afghanistan.

As earlier stated, Amir sees the rape happen and turns away, which is similar to how the Pashtuns (the upper class of Kabul) turn away from the plight of the Hazaras:

> They have a reputation for industriousness yet work in the least desirable jobs. Their Asian features-narrow eyes, flat nose, broad cheeks-have set them apart in a de facto lower caste, reminded so often of their inferiority that some accept it as truth. (Zabriskie 1)

Pashtuns know the Hazaras' suffering is unjust but interrupting would disrupt and compromise their way of life. If Amir interrupts or stops the rape of Hassan, life as he knows it risks being compromised because he risks two things: Being raped himself and losing the blue kite that Hassan had run for him, which, in his mind, is the key to his father's love and affection: "Maybe Hassan was the price I had to pay, the lamb I had to slay, to win Baba" (Hosseini 77). Amir uses Hassan as an object, a commodity, in order to achieve his goals.

At this point, the teacher can help the students to examine how the Hazara in Afghanistan, like Hassan, have been used as pawns and scapegoats by the economically and socially superior Pashtuns, Sunni Muslims, who have used the Hazaras' ethnicity and religion, Shi'a Muslims, against them. Evidence of this in the book can be supported with details of actual events in Afghanistan that are glossed over in the book. For example, when referring to the massacre of Hazaras that happened in 1998, the book merely says: "in 1998, they massacred the Hazaras in Mazar-i-Sharif" (Hosseini 213). The teacher should take this opportunity to supplement the students with reading information and discussion to examine in depth the significant role that class and ethnic status, which goes hand in hand with class in Afghanistan, plays in the country. A good example of this would be the following excerpt from an article examining the massacre:

> Taliban forces carried out a systematic search…During house-to-house searches, scores and perhaps hundreds of Hazara men and boys were summarily executed, apparently to ensure that they would be unable to mount any resistance to the Taliban. (Afghanistan 2)

It is only with a more in-depth look at events like this that relate back to the book, that students can truly be able to look at and analyze how much class has infiltrated Afghanistan culture and fueled its conflicts. The teacher could also use this as an opportunity to discuss class relations in the U.S. and discuss: Have any races or groups of people been used as scapegoats by the U.S.?

Once the kite is retrieved, Amir has the thing that he wants, and he casts Hassan away like a dirty rag. In fact, his consideration towards Hassan is shockingly small to nonexistent: "He had the blue kite in his hands…And I can't lie now and say my eyes didn't scan it for any rips…he steadied himself. Handed me the kite" (Hosseini 78). Although Amir might have some feelings of friendship towards Hassan, his upbringing in a class/ethnically separated society, keeps him from caring too much. He pretends not to notice what happened to Hassan or the pain Hassan was in because doing so would be admitting that the class structure and values on which his family's wealth and success are based on are unjust.

For the remainder of the book, Amir is at war with himself. There is the part of him that wants to tell the world of the injustice that happened to Hassan, and there is the other part of him that knows what the implications of such a confession would be. He risks bringing attention to injustice and "stirring the pot" of gossip and anger within the community. After examining how deeply rooted the

ethnic/class conflict is in Afghanistan, students should be able to better understand and examine what Amir is going through. Without this understanding, it is easy for the reader to feel angry with Amir and how he is handling the events in his life, which can cloud the reader's ability to give the book a true analysis.

Slowly, Amir's inner conflict with class and injustice tears him and Hassan apart. Amir withdraws from Hassan because Hassan is a constant reminder of what he failed to do (the right thing). "Hassan milled about the periphery of my life after that. I made sure our paths crossed as little as possible, planned my day that way" (Hosseini 88). Hassan wants to spent time with Amir, but because Amir has chosen to embrace his father's love and affection, the privileges of his class and acceptance, Amir rejects Hassan continually. It isn't until Amir tells Hassan to leave him alone for good that Hassan, an ever-faithful pup, obeys and leaves his master alone.

Students can use the literary theory of Marxism to analyze Amir's actions in-depth and to make sense of the rest of the book. Consider Amir's relationship with Hassan's son, Sohrab, for example: Why does he feel the need to rescue him 20 years later? Does his adoption of Sohrab serve as an atonement? Has Amir finally been able to cross over social and class barriers or is his acceptance of Sohrab due to the fact that Amir finds out Hassan is his illegitimate half brother and thus half Pashtun?

Ultimately, Amir's repentance comes from his father's actions. Throughout the book, Amir is struggling with his relationship with Hassan: Are they friends or servant and master? Amir struggles with crossing over class lines and the implications of doing so—the entire social structure that he grew up with, life as he

knows it, would be compromised. However, Amir is granted with a sort of gift when he finds out that Hassan is actually his half brother:

> I was learning that Baba had been a thief. And a thief of the worst kind, because the things he'd stolen had been sacred: from me the right to know I had a brother, from Hassan his identity, and from Ali his honor. (Hosseini 225)

The "wrong" of crossing class lines had already been committed by Amir's father, Baba, when he fathered Hassan with Ali's Hazara wife. It is with that realization that Amir is truly freed from his inner turmoil and is left with the task of retrieving Hassan's son, his nephew, from Afghanistan. It is because of the realization that Hassan's son is in fact part Pashtun, family, that Amir finally decides to rescue him.

This part of the book and Amir's repentance so to speak, opens up a great opportunity for debate and analysis within the classroom. Students can be presented with the information above and come to their own conclusions, which teach them to think critically about the book and the characters. The teacher could approach the end of the book in a few ways. The first would be a Socratic discussion where students can work together to debate and form their opinions, which teaches them how to collaborate and how to be open-minded when forming their own conclusions. The second way is a debate. Students could pick one of two sides: The end of Amir's inner turmoil comes from himself and his own actions or that it comes from the realization that Hassan is his half brother. A debate would teach students to think critically about the text but also how to gather information and support to prove their viewpoint, which would be beneficial in the sense that it prepares them

for learning in the post-secondary classroom. Regardless of how the teacher decides to end the discussion of the book, however, the use of a literary lens to analyze the book and create lessons will help the students to better understand the information presented to them.

Dierdre Paul states in her review of Appleman's book *Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents*, "I find many benefits arise from young people's ability to sift through the information that bombards them daily to arrive at reflective, open-ended conclusions" (79). Just as students are bombarded with information in their daily life, they are also bombarded with information in *the Kite Runner.* Using a literary theory as a guide for looking at and analyzing a text not only serves as a good jumping off point, but it also provides a focus for the students and the teacher. Having a focus helps students to better make sense of and analyze the material because otherwise, they're not sure what to look at: Amir's relationship with his father? Afghan immigration? The Taliban? Kite Running? Students in today's classroom have a limited attention span and having a focus such as a literary theory will make it that much easier for them to make sense of the novel and the teacher's lesson. A literary theory provides an in-depth analysis of a few things instead of a scattered and brief analysis of everything.

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