

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Kite Runner



Adapted by
Matthew Spangler

Based on the best-selling novel by
Khaled Hosseini

SYNOPSIS

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Adapted from the international best-seller, *The Kite Runner* is a haunting story of friendship and redemption in modern Afghanistan, from the pre-Russian invasion glory days through the horrific reign of the Taliban.

This eloquent tale is told through the lives of two boys growing up in Kabul in the same household, but in two starkly different worlds. Amir is the son of a wealthy yet emotionally distant businessman, while Hassan is the son of Amir's father's servant, an oppressed ethnic minority. Despite the vast gulf in social positions, the two grow up inseparable until Amir and his father flee the country during the Soviet invasion.

Years later, an emotionally crippled Amir returns to Afghanistan to seek out his old friend and atone for his youthful cowardice. But fate, global politics and historical tragedy threaten Amir's ability to make amends for his past.

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“*The Kite Runner*
SOARS.

You would have to be made of stone
to not be deeply affected.”

The Independent



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Contributors: Humaira Ghilzai and Matthew Spangler

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“TRULY A CULTURAL PHENOMENON.”

The Sunday Express

“... POWERFUL FIRST NOVEL ... A VIVID AND ENGAGING STORY ...”

New York Times Book Review

“AN ASTONISHING, POWERFUL BOOK.”

Diane Sawyer



ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Matthew Spangler



Matthew Spangler is a playwright and professor of performance studies at San José State University in California. He teaches courses about how refugees and asylum-seekers are represented through the arts. As a playwright, he specializes in writing plays adapted from novels. His award-winning adaptation of Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* has been produced by theatres around the world, including twice in London's West End, the Dubai Opera House and now on Broadway.

His other plays include: *Operation Ajax*; *The Forgotten Empress*; *Albatross*, from the poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge; *Striking Back*, based on the book by Sinéad O'Brien and Mary Manning; *Tortilla Curtain*, from T.C. Boyle's novel; *The Swimmer*, from the story by John Cheever; and *The Story of Zahra*, from Hanan al-Shaykh's novel. His newest play is an adaptation of Christy Lefteri's *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*, co-written with Nesrin Alrefaai.

Matthew is a member of the Dramatists Guild and Writer in Residence at the Hinterland Literary Festival in Kells, Ireland.

Q&A WITH MATTHEW SPANGLER

What inspired you to write this stage adaptation?

Most of my plays are adaptations of books. I'm also a professor at San José State University in California, where I teach courses about how refugees and asylum seekers are represented through the arts. So this play sits at that intersection.

In 2005, I moved to the San Francisco Bay area, and was looking to write a play set locally. I contacted Khaled Hosseini, the author of

"The Kite Runner," and we met at a coffee shop in San José and talked about a play version of his novel for the first time. He has been a wonderful, supportive and generous collaborator all these years.

How did the book inspire you as a writer?

I was drawn to the epic nature of the book and the challenge of putting something this epic on stage. The book spans 30 years and moves between two continents. It's a story about a father and son, two best friends, husband and wife, refugees and immigration, global politics, class and ethnicity,



and much more. A play could focus on any one of these topics. But this piece of theater has all of them on stage at the same time.

Additionally, I liked what the book has to say about the experience of immigration. Plus, it's a beautiful story of regret and redemption that just feels right in the theatre.

For people familiar with the book, what can they expect to see on stage?

You'll see nearly all of the book on stage. The writing challenge for a play – and this speaks to the art of adaptation – is that the book read aloud is about 12 hours long, but the play is only two hours (plus intermission). So how do you take so much out of the story and still be true to the source? But I think fans of the book will feel the play is very true to the novel.

What are some parts of the book that people will recognize most vividly on stage?

There's a section in the book that focuses on the family's experience of immigrating to the San Francisco Bay Area, and about Amir's initial impressions of California. That's represented on stage in a lot of ways, but one scene tells this part of the novel through music and dance. I love that scene, because it moves away from storytelling, as such, and is more of a total theatrical experience.

Another memorable part of this production is the music. We have a live musician on stage who plays the tabla, a percussion instrument, and underscores nearly everything. Our composer, Jonathan Girling, has created an incredible musical score that threads throughout the performance and enhances all the dramatic moments. The music is like an additional character.

What about for people who are not familiar with the book?

This is a unique stage play because so many themes are on stage at the same time, weaving in and out of each other. So there's some point of connection for just about everybody in the audience.

What message does the play have for us today?

One is that this is a story about immigration and how an Afghan family is forced to rebuild their lives in California. It's about what immigration does to a father and his son, how they respond differently to that experience.

Also, this is a story of guilt and redemption. The main character, Amir, did something terrible in his youth and has tried to set things right as an adult. His story is basically a plea for forgiveness. The audience is asked to empathize with someone who is not always likable, but nonetheless, seeks our understanding. It strikes me that this skill of empathy is a good one to have. ♦



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Khaled Hosseini



Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 1965. In 1980, after the Soviet invasion of his birthplace, Khaled and his family were granted political asylum in the U.S. Khaled studied medicine and practiced as a physician in California until 2004, after which he dedicated himself to writing. He is the author of *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and other books. He has served as a Goodwill Ambassador for UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, since 2006. In 2008, he launched The Khaled Hosseini Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, which provides humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan. He lives in California.

Not only has Khaled Hosseini's *New York Times* Best-Selling Book been adapted into the play by Matthew Spangler, but it also was adapted into the award-winning and Oscar-nominated film in 2007, directed by Marc Forster and adapted for film by David Benioff.



Victoria Lang Ryan Bogner Tracey McFarland Broadway & Beyond Theatricals Jayne Baron Sherman Hunter Arnold
Kayla Greenspan Franklin Theatrical Group Jodi Kaplan Kate Cannova/Jamie Joeyen-Waldorf/Samantha Squeri
Jon Messner Dominick LaRuffa Jr./Batchelder Gleberman Productions P3 Productions Michael Seiden/Kim Vasquez
Jeremy Handelman Rogers & Ganns Productions Cathy Dantchik Flashner/Michaely Full Out Creative Ken & Rande Greiner
Daniel Marracino Red Tail Entertainment Marcy Syms David Zevin
Daryl Roth, Executive Producer
in association with
Martin Dodd for UK Productions Ltd. Stuart Galbraith & Paul Walden for Flying Entertainment Ltd/Kilimanjaro Productions
present the
Nottingham Playhouse and Liverpool Everyman & Playhouse
production of

The Kite Runner

Adapted by
Matthew Spangler

Based on the best-selling novel by
Khaled Hosseini

starring

Amir Arison

**Mazin Akar Barzin Akhavan Demosthenes Chrysan Danish Farooqui
Azita Ghanizada Joe Joseph Déa Julien Dariush Kashani Beejan Land**

Amir Malaklou Christine Mirzayan Salar Nader Haris Pervaiz

Alex Purcell Eric Sirakian Houshang Touzie Evan Zes

and

Faran Tahir

Scenic & Costume Design
Barney George

Lighting Design
Charles Balfour

Sound Design
Drew Baumohl

Projection Design
William Simpson

Composer & Music Supervisor
Jonathan Girling

Movement Director
Kitty Winter

Fight Director
Philip D'Orléans

Casting Director
Laura Stanczyk, CSA

Production Management
Aurora Productions

Production Stage Manager
James Latus

Company Manager
Deirdre Murphy

Cultural Advisor & Script Consultant
Humaira Ghilzai

Tabla Artist &
Additional Arrangements
Salar Nader

Advertising/Marketing
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Press Representative
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Social Media &
Influencer Marketing
YesBroadway

Associate Director
& Creative Coordinator
Damian Sandys

Resident Director
Arpita Mukherjee

Associate Producer
Victoria Detres

General Management
**DR Theatrical Management
Grant A. Rice & Adam Hess**

Directed by
Giles Croft

The Kite Runner received its world premiere on March 27, 2009 at the San Jose Repertory Theatre, directed by Ira Goldstein (Rick Lombardo, Artistic Director; Nick Nichols, Managing Director).
The Kite Runner also received a developmental production at San Jose State University in February 2007. The film *The Kite Runner* was released by DreamWorks Studios in 2007. The European Premiere of *The Kite Runner* was produced by Nottingham Playhouse Theatre Company and Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse and opened on April 26, 2013 at Nottingham Playhouse, England.
The first performance of this production was produced in the West End by UK Productions Ltd and Flying Entertainment Ltd on December 21, 2016 at Wyndham's Theatre, London, England.

AFGHANISTAN

History and Geography



The Kite Runner deals with the country of Afghanistan from the 1970s to the year 2002. Like all places, Afghanistan has a long and complicated history. The nation is located in Central Asia and is made up of thirty-four provinces. The country's capital is Kabul, which is also the capital of the northeast province of the same name. Afghanistan means "Land of Afghan," Afghan being a name the Pashtun majority used to describe themselves starting before the year 1000.

TOTAL AREA: 250,000 sq mi (647,500 sq km)

POPULATION: 38,920,647

CAPITAL AND LARGEST CITY: (2003 est.) Kabul, pop. 2,206,300

LANGUAGES: Pashto and Dari

ETHNICITY/RACE: Pashtun 42%, Tajik 27%, Hazara 9%, Uzbek 9%, Aimaq 4%, Turkmen 3%, Baluch 2%, other 4%

RELIGION: Sunni Muslim 84.7%, Shi'a Muslim 15%

LITERACY RATE: 38.2% (2020 est.)



DID YOU KNOW?

- ◆ More than 90 percent of the country has cell phone coverage, and there are 22 million cell phone subscribers.
- ◆ The vast majority of Afghans (78%) work in agriculture.
- ◆ The country produces some of the world's finest pomegranates, grapes, apricots and melons.
- ◆ The world's first oil paintings were drawn around 650 BC in the caves of Bamiyan, in the central highlands of Afghanistan.
- ◆ Poetry writing, recitation and competition (a.k.a. shayr jangee), is a revered pastime in Afghanistan.
- ◆ In 2020, there were 135 institutions of higher education in Afghanistan.



AFGHANISTAN

History



1919-1929

King Amanullah Khan and Queen Soraya's attempt to implement educational, gender and infrastructure reforms (modeled after Western ideals) received backlash from religious institutions and the general public. He abdicated in the wake of popular uprising and handed his kingdom to his cousin Inayatullah Khan, who ruled for three days before Habibullah Kalakani took over the kingdom (January 1929-October 1929).

1929-1933

Muhammad Nadir Shah returned from exile, overthrew Kalakani's government, and abolished all of Amanullah Khan's reforms before his assassination in 1933.

1933-1973

Muhammad Zahir Shah, the last king of Afghanistan, inherited the kingdom at the age of 19 after his father's assassination. He ruled peacefully for 40 years.

1973-1978

President Daud Khan overthrew King Zahir Shah, his cousin, in a military coup and declared the country the Republic of Afghanistan in hopes of modernization.

You can see the country's discomfort about the future of Afghanistan and this regime change when Hassan expresses fear to Amir about the country being declared a republic by Daud Khan.

1978

In a bloody coup d'état known as the Saur Revolution, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan massacred Daud Khan and his family at the presidential palace. The new government implemented a series of socialist reforms backed by the USSR.

1979-1989

In 1979, the Soviet Army invaded Afghanistan to support the puppet governments. Government fighters, the Mujahideen, fought against the Soviet occupation with support from the U.S., Saudi Arabia and other Western allies until the Russian army was defeated in 1989; after the Geneva Accords were signed, the Soviet troops withdrew.

This is the historical point in *The Kite Runner* when Baba and Amir leave Afghanistan. Farid and his father are examples in *The Kite Runner* of the Mujahideen.

1992-1996

Burhanuddin Rabbani was nominated as interim president of the Islamic State of Afghanistan. Despite a common leader, the Mujahideen splintered into factions with competing ideals resulting in civil war.

In *The Kite Runner*, Rahim Khan describes the fear in Kabul during this time. "The infighting between the faction was fierce and no one knew if they would live to see the end of the day," he remembered. In 1996, the Taliban took control of Kabul. After so many years of insecurity and violence, the people welcomed the takeover. "We all celebrated in 1996 when the Taliban rolled in and put an end to the daily fighting," Khan said.



1996-2001

The Taliban, led by Mullah Omar, took advantage of an Afghanistan fatigued by war by promising peace. After gaining control of the country, the Taliban brutally enforced their interpretation of Sharia Law and renamed the country the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

2001

The United States invaded Afghanistan after the attacks on September 11 to remove the Taliban from power and take down Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, the organization behind the attacks.

The end of *The Kite Runner* occurs in 2002, when a provisional government was in place. It wasn't until 2004 that Hamid Karzai, was elected president.

2002-2014

Hamid Karzai, backed by the United States became the President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The US continued deploying troops to Afghanistan with ever-changing military policy and goals.

2015-2021

President Ashraf Ghani, hoped to quell corruption and move the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to stability. Progress was slow and bloody due to issues arising from the US's peace negotiation directly with the Taliban.

2021

After US and NATO troop withdrawal, on August 15, 2021, the Ashraf Ghani government collapsed and in a soft-coup the Taliban forces took over the country.

When Kabul fell to the Taliban in 2021, more than 78,000 Afghan allies were admitted into the United States following the U.S. troop withdrawal that ended America's longest war. Many refugees are still arriving.

The Taliban have fallen back to their edicts and repressive policies. The current Taliban regime is not recognized by any country in the world. With economic sanctions and isolation, Afghanistan has collapsed and there is widespread hunger for over 50% of the population. ♦



GLOSSARY



Agha: Sir; master; Mister.

Ahesta Boro: Walk slowly. Literally, Ahesta means “slow” and Boro means “go.” It is a song, similar to “Here Comes the Bride,” played to welcome the bride and groom’s entrance to the wedding hall in Afghanistan, Iran and Tajikistan. Usually, the accompanied couple is walked slowly under the sanction of the Qur’an as the attending guests rise in honor of the holy book. This song is a very strong tradition in marriage ceremonies, originally written by Sarban, who had his inspiration from Tajik folklore.

Allah-u-akbar: God(is) greatest, omnipotent; (Arabic) Akbar means “great” and Allah means “God.”

Babalu: Boogeyman.

Bachem: Word meaning “my son,” “my child” or “my baby.”

Balay: Yes.

Bas: Enough.

Chapan: A traditional coat for men popular among the Turkic population of northern Afghanistan, but worn also by other Afghans. It is a long, buttonless caftan with knee-length sleeves which, in warm weather, is worn open with a sleeve thrown over a shoulder. In cold weather, fur-lined or quilted chapans are worn, tied around the waist with a cummerbund. It comes in various colors, often striped, and is fashioned of cotton or silk.

Dostet darum: I love you.

Farsi / Dari: Official language of Afghanistan.

Hazara: A term describing the Hazara people, an ethnic minority originating in the mountainous region of Afghanistan called Hazarajat. They are characterized by their Asiatic facial features, adherence to Shi’a Islam, and long history of persecution.

Inshallah: Word meaning “God willing.”

Jan: Word of endearment. It’s short for “Janem,” of my body.

Khala: Maternal aunt (Amah is a paternal aunt). Afghan children are encouraged to call adult women Khala, as a sign of respect.

Khan: Title of tribal chiefs, landed proprietors and heads of communities. Now, Khan is used like “mister” when placed after the name of a person.

Khastegari: A boy’s family’s proposal for marriage to a girl’s family. Usually mothers, aunts and grandmothers propose marriage.

Khoda hafez: Good-bye. (Farsi) Literally, Khoda means “God” and hafez means “safe,” so this construction means “God keep you safe.”

Mashallah: Praise God. Originally an Arabic, word, typically said when seeing someone beautiful or smart—anything that one wants to praise.

Mazar-i-Sharif: A large city in Afghanistan famous for its Blue Mosque. The Taliban massacred the Hazara population there in 1998.



Mujahideen: A term used to describe a group of Muslims engaged in a war or conflict. In *The Kite Runner*, it describes the Afghanistan Mujahedin Freedom Fighters Front, which challenged the Soviet forces and later lost against the PDPA (People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan) government.

Namaz: Five times a day prayers, one of the five pillar of Islam.

Namoos: Reputation; fame; renown; esteem; honor; dignity.

Nang: Honor; reputation; estimation.

Pashtun: An ethnic group forming a majority in Afghanistan and surrounding areas. Characterized by adherence to Sunni Islam as well as Pashtunwali (or Pushtunwali), an ancient code of tradition.

Puppet Government: A government which is endowed with the outward symbols of authority but in which direction and control are exercised by another power.

Qur'an/Koran: Religious text of Islam. Muslims believe the Qur'an to be the book of divine guidance and direction for mankind, and consider the original Arabic text to be the final revelation of God.

Rafiq: Friend.

Sahib: Referred to an honorable person with high regard.

Salaam: Peace, hello.

Salaam alaykum: Peace be upon you.

Shahnamah: "The Book of Kings" is an enormous poetic opus written by the Persian poet Ferdowsi around 1000 AD and is the national epic of Iran. The Shahnamah tells the mythical and historical past of Greater Iran

from the creation of the world up until the Islamic conquest of Iran in the 7th century.

Shi'a Muslim: One of the two sects of Islam. Shi'a Islam believes that the teachings of Muhammad were carried through his descendants and do not accept the caliphate.

Shorawi: The Farsi term for the Soviets, who invaded Afghanistan in 1979 and occupied the country for a decade.

Sunni Muslim: The largest denomination of Islam. Sunni Islam accepts the caliphate, meaning that it considers the Caliph, or head of a Muslim state, a successor to Muhammad.

Tashakor: Thank you.

Wah wah: Well done.

Wazir Akbar Khan: A wealthy suburb of Kabul. The neighborhood is named after the Akbar Khan, son of King Dost Mohammad, and is a common place for foreign workers to live. The streets are laid out on a grid with Western, two-story houses that date back to the 60s and 70s.



KITE FIGHTING

Artistry In The Air



Afghanistan: Artistry In The Air –
Kite Flying Is Taken To New Heights
November 15, 2002

By Grant Podelco

Kite flying is more than a pastime in Afghanistan — it is a national obsession. The streets of the capital, Kabul, are filled with shops selling kite-flying equipment, and the skies above the city are decorated each day with hundreds of colorful kites fluttering in the wind. Banned by the Taliban as un-Islamic, kite flying has now hit new heights of popularity in the country. It is a sunny day in Kabul, and the fighting is fierce. This is a battle for control of the skies above the old city — not between flying machines made of metal and rivets, but between delicate airborne art constructed from paper and string. Afghans have elevated kite flying — or “gudiparan bazi” — to an art form, and one of its chief attractions is kite fighting. To the first-time visitor, the skies above Kabul appear to be filled with fluttering birds or pieces of paper caught in the wind. A closer look reveals hundreds of brightly colored kites soaring high into the air.

The Taliban regime banned hobbies such as kite flying and bird keeping, in the belief that such pastimes were un-Islamic. Karim is 12 years old and is helping his friend Muhasel fly a kite. He recalls what the Taliban would do if they caught someone flying a kite. “During the Taliban, kite flying was not allowed. If you flew a kite, [the Taliban] would

beat you and would break the spool and tear the kite up. Even if you had a pigeon in your hand, or any other birds, they would beat you and make it go free.” The fall of the Taliban in the capital one year ago (13 November), however, meant that Afghans could again fly kites without fear of punishment. Many Afghans have returned to the pastime with a vengeance.

Kite flying is a two-person affair. One person, the “charkh gir,” holds the wooden spool around which the wire, or “tar,” is wound. The second person — called the “gudiparan baz,” or kite flyer — actually controls the movement of the kite in the air. In Afghanistan, wherever there are kites, there is kite fighting. During the fight, or “jang,” two kites are flown close to one another, often at great heights. The object is to use the wire of your kite to cut the wire of your opponent’s kite and set it free.

Twenty-five-year-old Muhasel stands on the shaky roof of his small videocassette shop in southeastern Kabul, engaged in a kite fight with an unseen opponent elsewhere in the neighborhood. He explains what appeals to him about gudiparan bazi. “I enjoy [flying kites] because I’m interested in it. When I see people are flying kites, then I buy a kite to fly and fight with the other kites. I enjoy it very much if my kite can cut off the other kite and make it go free. But if my kite gets cut free, then I buy another to fight with. If, for example, during the kite fighting I’m running out of wire, then there is nothing else to do but to cut the wire off the spool



and let it go free in order to beat my opponent. And he, too, has to let his wire go until his kite goes free.”

Everything in Afghan kite fighting depends on the quality of the wire and how it is prepared. First, glass is finely ground and combined with an adhesive mixture to make a thick paste. The wire is then coated with this paste to make it strong and sharp. After it is dry, the wire is wound around the spool. Kite fighters often wrap a piece of leather around their fingers to protect themselves from the taut wire, which can cut to the bone. When an opponent’s kite is cut free, it flutters like a colorful, dying bird into the far reaches of the city. Such kites are said to be “azadi rawest,” or “free and legal,” and can be retrieved by neighborhood children to fly another day. Each neighborhood crowns its own “sharti,” or kite-fighting champion. Kabul is filled with shops selling all manner of kite paraphernalia. Twenty-six-year-old Jawid runs such a shop in the Shur Bazaar, the kite-selling market in old Kabul. “People have been flying kites [in Afghanistan] for more than 100 years. It was banned during the Taliban. They would say that kite flying was illegal. We sell and buy from 500 to 2,000 kites every day in our shop. The Taliban banned this and used to beat children when they flew kites. Long ago, kite flying was part of our national games, and my father won a trophy 25 years ago during (former Afghan President Mohammad) Daoud Khan’s time.”

Jawid gives a tour of his shop, pointing out the spools, the various lengths of wire, and the bright kites themselves, in many different sizes, or “parcha.” “This is a spool. Those are smaller ones for kids — about 100 to 500 meters in length. Those are 4,000- to 5,000-meter spools that are used by adults. These are for kids. These are different kites. For example, this is four parcha

(having four parts). There is five parcha. And that is seven parcha. That is half parcha (one of the smallest). That is farfara, which is made of plastic. And that is eight parcha (the largest).” The kites cost from 2,000 afghanis — just a few cents — for tiny children’s kites no bigger than a magazine, to 100,000 afghanis — just over \$2 — for large kites usually handled only by the most experienced flyers.

Jawid says he still sold kites during the days of the Taliban, but that everywhere it was done in secret. “During the Taliban, we were doing our business here, but if they found out, they would come and destroy our kites, spools, and other stuff, as they did many times. They burned our kites and other stuff, asking who the owner was. But we could not say anything, because if they knew, they would imprison us in Amribelmaroof (prison).”

Winter is one of the most popular times for kite flying in Afghanistan. The winds are strong, and schools are closed because of the cold weather. While it brings mostly smiles, kite flying is also dangerous. Many people are injured when they fall from roofs chasing free kites or when they lose concentration during a heated battle.

Thirty-six-year-old Sharif is flying a kite beside the dry, trash-filled bed of the Kabul River in central Kabul. He says he’s been flying kites for about 20 years, always on Fridays. Sharif recalls the glory days of kite flying in Kabul, before the Taliban. “Before the Taliban, people used to fly kites in a place called Chaman-i-Babrak [in northern Kabul], and kite flying competitions were held there. Kids, young people, and older people from all over Afghanistan and Kabul City would gather there. They used to lay wagers on fighting kites.” Sharif smiles. He wants to get back to his kite flying. There is a battle to be won. ♦

KITE FIGHTING

A Different Kind of War



With Color and Panache, Afghans
Fight a Different Kind of War
New York Times, December 15, 2007

By Kirk Semple

KABUL, Afghanistan — The kites appear suddenly, whimsical flashes of color that kick above the beige landscape here of relentless dust and desperation. They reveal themselves, like dragonflies, at the most unexpected moments: through the window of a grim government office, beyond the smoke curling from the debris left by a suicide bomber, above the demoralizing gridlock of traffic and poverty. To a new arrival in this chaotic city of three million, they are unexpected and wonderfully incongruous. Banned during the Taliban's rule, kite flying is once again the main recreational escape for Afghan boys and some men. (It still remains largely off limits to girls and women.) And with the American release Friday of the film *The Kite Runner*, based on the best-selling novel of the same name, a much wider audience will be introduced to Afghan kite culture. Follow a kite's string to its source and you will most likely find an Afghan boy standing on top of his roof or in an empty lot, playing the line in deep concentration.

But this is not the stuff of idle afternoons or, as in American culture, carefree picnics in the park. This is war. The sole reason for kites, Afghans will tell you, is to fight them, and a single kite aloft is nothing but an unspoken challenge to a neighbor.

The objective of the kite fight is to slice the other flier's string with your own, sending the vanquished aircraft to the ground. Kitefighting string is coated with a resin made of glue and finely crushed glass, which turns it into a blade. The big kitefighting day is Friday, the Muslim day of prayer, when thousands of boys and men flock to their rooftops and to the summits of the craggy hills that ring the city, carrying stacks of kites fashioned from bamboo and brightly colored tissue paper, and miles of sharp string on wooden spools.

On a recent Friday afternoon, there were scores of kites locked in duels above Tapeii-i-Maranjan, a high bluff in a southeastern neighborhood of the capital and the city's most popular kite-flying venue. All strata of Kabuli life — male Kabuli life, that is — were well represented: schoolchildren were fighting ministerial officials, doctors were battling day laborers. They fought in teams of two, with one person tweaking the string and the other handling the spool. Packs of boys too poor to buy their own equipment were sprinting after defeated kites as they fell to earth. They were the kite runners. "We don't have, like, soccer, baseball or basketball," said Ahmad Roshazai, a translator at a medical clinic near Bagram who was flying kites on the hill with two of his brothers. He had cuts on his fingers from handling the bladelike fighting string. "We don't have any good places for that," he said. "No green places." He added: "This is the only game we have every Friday. That's it." The inveterate kite fighters speak of their craft as part science and part art. The key to excellence depends on a combination of factors, both empirical and ineffable: the flexibility



and balance of the kites' bamboo frames, the strength of the glue binding the tissue paper skin, the quality of the string, the evenness of the spool and, of course, the skill of the fliers and their ability to adjust to the vicissitudes of the wind. Rashid Abedi, 25, a business administration student, described the satisfaction of killing another kite. "It has a taste," he said, and he likened it to the thrill of horse riding or driving a car. "These things all the time have a special taste."

Kite-fighting string in Afghanistan was traditionally homemade by a laborious process that involved coating cotton string with a concoction of crushed glass and glue. But factories in other more-developed kite-flying nations like Pakistan, India, Thailand, Malaysia and China now churn out tens of thousands of spools of machine-made nylon fighting string that swamp the Afghan market. Unlike in other Asian countries, like Pakistan and India, where kite flying is wildly popular, Afghanistan's kite industry is still homespun and humble. There is still no Afghan kite federation, no national competitions, no marketing. While nearly all the string sold in Afghanistan is now factory-made and imported from other countries, most of the kites are still made by local artisans.

By consensus in Shor Bazaar, a blocklong market of tiny kite shops in Kabul, the best kite maker in the capital is Noor Agha, a slender and vain 53-year-old man who lives in a squalid mud-and-stone hovel in a cemetery and is missing most of his teeth. "Nobody can beat me, nobody can do what I'm doing," he said one recent afternoon as he sat barefooted on the carpeted floor of his workshop making a kite. "Even computers can't beat me." His tools were arrayed before him: long stalks of bamboo and sheets of tissue paper; pliers and blades to cut and whittle the bamboo into long, flexible dowels for the frames; scissors to shape the tissue paper; and a bowl of glue. "My prestige is higher than the interior minister," he said. Noor Agha, like most Afghan kite makers, inherited the craft from his father, who made kites until he was

too old to grip the tools. Alone, he can make about 40 kites a day, he said. But his business has become so large that he has enlisted the help of his two wives and several of his 11 children.

While most kites in Shor Bazaar sell for less than 30 cents, Noor Agha's kites can fetch upward of \$1. He sells custom-ordered kites to Afghan and foreign corporations and clients for much more, he said. His local fame attracted the attention of the producers of *The Kite Runner*, who hired him to train the film's child stars in the art of kite fighting and to make hundreds of kites used in the film. For the kite fliers of Kabul, the release of *The Kite Runner* will help to draw the culture of Afghan kite flying out of the shadows of the much larger and more prosperous kite-flying nations in Asia. It might also go some way toward explaining a particular Afghan kite ambush of an unsuspecting American kite flier in Maryland in 2004. That spring, Shoab Sharifi, a Columbia University student recently arrived from Kabul, was visiting Ocean City when he spotted several people flying kites on the beach. He bought a kite from a vendor and did what for him was the natural thing: He started to kite fight. "I thought people were doing it here, too," he said in a telephone interview from New York. Mr. Sharifi went on: "There was a little girl and I did the maneuvers and cut her string from below." As the wind carried the girl's kite into the ocean, and Shoab celebrated his first kite-fighting victory on American soil, the little girl broke down in tears. When the lifeguards descended on him and accused him of "disturbing the peace," it dawned on Mr. Sharifi that he had stepped into a cultural rut between Afghanistan and the United States. "In the United States, I think people try to avoid conflict," he concluded. "In Afghan culture, everything is about fighting." He added: "It was a very educational experience." ♦

ISLAM


Religion of Afghanistan



Islam is a monotheistic religion which embraces over 1.6 billion people of many races and cultures worldwide. It is the religion of virtually all Afghans. The word *Islam* is Arabic and means *submission*. The followers of Islam, called *Muslims*, believe in God—in Arabic, *Allah*—and that Muhammad is His Prophet.

The Prophet Muhammad was born in 570 AD in the town of Mecca, which is located in present-day Saudi Arabia. At the age of 40, Muhammad began to receive the first of a series of revelations from God, transmitted to him through the angel Gabriel over a period of 22 years. These revelations are contained in the Qu’ran, or Koran, meaning *recitation*, regarded as the sacred scripture of Islam. The Prophet Muhammad preached against socioeconomic inequities, ill treatment of widows and children, slavery and denounced the practice of idol worship.

Islam can be summarized under a code of rituals called the Five Pillars of Islam:

1. *Shahadat*, the profession of faith. A Muslim’s profession of faith says: “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger.” Anyone who sincerely testifies to that fact is a Muslim.
 2. *Salat*, prayer, which is to be performed five times a day, facing the qibla, prayer direction, the location of the *Ka’ba*, a building in Mecca (built by Abraham, according to the Qur’an). Prayers include recitation of the Arabic text accompanied by bowing and kneeling. *Salat* can be performed in public or private. A ritual cleansing, *wudhu* is required before prayer.
 3. *Zakat*, almsgiving, is the requirement to give either a percentage of one’s wealth or of one’s yearly income to the poor.
 4. *Sawm*, fasting (*roza* in Dari), is observed during the Muslim month of Ramazan (Ramadan), “the month during which the Koran was sent down.” From sunrise to sundown, the believer is to abstain from food or drink. Children, the ill, pregnant mothers, travelers and soldiers in war are exempt, but those prevented must make up this obligation at a later time.
 5. *Hajj*, pilgrimage, is suggested, but not required, of every adult Muslim to travel at least once in a lifetime to Mecca, provided that s/he is economically able to do so. Thousands of Afghans now travel yearly in special flights to Saudi Arabia, and one who has performed pilgrimage carries the honorific title of *hajji*.
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SHIA AND SUNNI

What's the Difference?



Both Sunni and Shia Muslims share the most fundamental Islamic beliefs and articles of faith. The differences between these two main sub-groups within Islam initially stemmed not from spiritual differences, but political ones. Over the centuries, however, these political differences have spawned a number of varying practices and positions which have come to carry a spiritual significance.

The division between Shia and Sunni dates back to the death of the Prophet Muhammad, and the question of who was to take over the leadership of the Muslim nation. Sunni Muslims agree with the position taken by many of the Prophet's companions, that the new leader should be elected from among those capable of the job. This is what was done, and the Prophet Muhammad's close friend and advisor, Abu Bakr, became the first Caliph of the Islamic nation. The word "Sunni" in Arabic comes from a word meaning "one who follows the traditions of the Prophet."

On the other hand, some Muslims share the belief that leadership should have stayed within the Prophet's own family and blood line. The Shia Muslims believe that following the Prophet Muhammad's death, leadership should have passed directly to his cousin/son-in-law, Ali. Throughout history, Shia Muslims have not recognized the authority of elected Muslim leaders, choosing instead to follow a line of Imams which they believe have been appointed by the Prophet Muhammad or God Himself. The word "Shia" in Arabic means a group or supportive party of people. The commonly known term is shortened from the historical "Shia-t-Ali," or "the Party of Ali." They are also known as followers of "Ahl-al-Bayt" or "People of the Household" (of the Prophet).



From this initial question of political leadership, some aspects of spiritual life have been affected and now differ between the two groups of Muslims. Shia Muslims believe that the Imam is sinless by nature, and that his authority is infallible as it comes directly from God. Therefore, Shia Muslims often venerate the Imams as saints and perform pilgrimages to their tombs and shrines in the hopes of divine intercession. Sunni Muslims counter that there is no basis in Islam for a hereditary privileged class of spiritual leaders, and certainly no basis for the veneration or intercession of saints. Sunni Muslims contend that leadership of the community is not a birthright, but a trust that is earned and which may be given or taken away by the people themselves. Shia Muslims also feel animosity towards some of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, based on their positions and actions during the early years of discord about leadership in the community. Many of these companions (Abu Bakr, Umar, Aisha, etc.) have narrated traditions about the Prophet's life and spiritual practice. Shia Muslims reject these traditions (hadith) and do not base their religious practices on the testimony of these individuals. This naturally gives rise to some differences in religious practice between the two groups. These differences touch all detailed aspects of religious life: prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, etc.

Sunni Muslims make up the majority (85%) of Muslims all over the world. Significant populations of Shia Muslims can be found in Iran and Iraq, and large minority communities in Yemen, Bahrain, Syria and Lebanon. It is important to remember that despite all of these differences in opinion and practice, Shia and Sunni Muslims share the main articles of Islamic belief and are considered by most to be brethren in faith. In fact, most Muslims do not distinguish themselves by claiming membership in any particular group, but prefer to call themselves simply, "Muslims." ♦

PASHTUN AND HAZARA

What's the Difference?



Pashtun and Hazara are two of the Ethnic groups in Afghanistan. The serious conflict between the two is at the heart of the story of *The Kite Runner* – Amir and Baba are Pashtun and Hassan is Hazara.

Pashtuns (also called Pushtuns, Pakhtuns, Pakhtus, and Pathhans) are the largest and traditionally most politically dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan. With a population estimated at seven million (1997) they are concentrated mostly in the west, south and east of Afghanistan with an additional seven million across the Durand Line in Pakistan.

Hazaras, residents of an isolated region in Afghanistan's central highlands known as Hazarajat—their heartland, if not entirely by choice. Accounting for up to one-fifth of Afghanistan's population, Hazaras have long been branded outsiders. They are largely Shiite Muslims in an overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim country. They have a reputation for industriousness yet work the least desirable jobs. Their Asian features— narrow eyes, flat noses, broad cheeks— have set them apart in a de facto lower caste, reminded so often of their inferiority that some accept it as truth.

The ruling Taliban—mostly fundamentalist Sunni, ethnic Pashtuns—saw Hazaras as infidels, animals, other. They didn't look the way Afghans should look and didn't worship the way Muslims should worship.



WHO ARE THE TALIBAN?



The Taliban, or “Students of Islamic Knowledge Movement,” ruled Afghanistan from 1996 until 2001. They came to power during Afghanistan’s long civil war. Although they managed to hold 90% of the country’s territory, their policies—including their treatment of women and support of terrorists—ostracized them from the world community.

The Taliban’s Rise to Power

The Taliban were cultivated on the borders of Pakistan and Afghanistan in Madrasas, Saudi-backed schools, during the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-89). After the withdrawal of Soviet forces, the Soviet-backed government were ousted. In 1992, Kabul was captured and an alliance of mujahedin set up a new government with Burhanuddin Rabbani as interim president. However, the various factions were unable to cooperate and fell to fighting each other. Afghanistan was reduced to a collection of territories held by competing warlords. Groups of Taliban, or religious students, were loosely organized on a regional basis during the occupation and civil war. Although they represented a potentially huge force, they didn’t emerge as a united entity until the Taliban of Kandahar made their move in 1994. In late 1994, a group of well-trained Taliban were chosen by Pakistan to protect a convoy trying to open a trade route from Pakistan to Central Asia. They proved an able force, fighting off rival mujahedin and warlords. The Taliban then went on to take the city of Kandahar, beginning a surprising advance that ended with their capture of Kabul in September 1996.



Afghanistan under the Taliban

Many Afghans, weary of conflict and anarchy, were relieved to see corrupt and often brutal warlords replaced by the devout Taliban, who had some success in eliminating corruption, restoring peace and allowing commerce to resume. The Taliban brought about a very strict interpretation of Sharia, or Islamic law. Public executions and punishments became regular. Frivolous activities, like kite flying, were outlawed. In order to root out non-Islamic influence, television, music and the Internet were banned. Men were required to wear beards, and subjected to beatings if they didn't.

When the Taliban took Kabul, soon after they forbade girls to attend school. Moreover, women were barred from working outside the home, precipitating a crisis in healthcare and education. Women were also prohibited from leaving their home without a male relative—those that did so risked being beaten, even shot, by officers of the “ministry for the protection of virtue and prevention of vice.” A woman caught wearing fingernail polish may have had her fingertips chopped off. All this, according to the Taliban, was to safeguard women and their honor.

The Taliban was ousted from power in December 2001 by the U.S. military and Afghan opposition forces in response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the U.S.

In 2018, the United States signed a peace agreement with the Taliban. After US and NATO troops withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban forces took over the country. ♦

PRE-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. Amir, the main character in *The Kite Runner*, is forced to leave his native country (Afghanistan) because the political unrest makes it too dangerous for his family to remain. Can you imagine having to flee from your homeland? What would it take to make you feel you had to uproot your family and take up residence in another country?
2. In Afghanistan's recent history (particularly the 1970s), many Hazara were killed because of their ethnic heritage and religious beliefs. Can you name other ethnic/religious populations throughout the world who are facing or have faced genocide? Why do you think this practice is so widespread, worldwide? What do you think it would take to stop it?
3. Kite fighting is not just a national pastime in Afghanistan, it is a source of great national/cultural pride for those who participate in the sport. Compare and contrast this activity (in which anyone can participate) with sports as they are played in the United States.
4. This play is an adaptation of the novel. What do you imagine the process of script adaptation is like? What kinds of things must a playwright think about that might not be concerns for a novelist? How do we learn about characters in a play in ways that are different from how we learn about them in a novel?
5. The Islamic religion is based on a set of principles that are adhered to by all Muslims. However, there are differences in interpretation that have divided Muslims into separate factions (Sunni and Shia). How does this compare with other religions who have a particular set of principles or beliefs as their cornerstones, but whose interpretations cause their practices to vary widely?



POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. Had you read the novel, *The Kite Runner*, prior to seeing the play? If so, how do you feel the novel compared to the play? What devices were used to bring the story off of the page and onto the stage?
2. What was the significance of The Shahnameh to the story? In what way was the story of Rostam and Sohrab reflected in the lives of Amir and Hassan?
3. Why do you think Rahim Khan took such an interest in Amir, and in his writing, when he was young? And why do you think he ultimately revealed Baba's secret to Amir? Is there anyone else who could have been a catalyst for the actions that Amir ultimately undertook to rescue Sohrab? Why or why not?
4. Amir and Assef grew up in the same neighborhood, with parents that moved in the same social circles. What was it, then, that caused them to be such vastly different people, even from a young age? Could anything have intervened, early on, to keep them from being such opposing characters/forces? If so, what? If not, why not?
5. The theme of forgiveness permeates the fabric of this story from beginning to end. How many incidences and references to forgiveness can you think of in this story? Why do you think it is easier for some people to forgive than it is for others?
6. *The Kite Runner* is, essentially, a story about men's relationships. What contributions do women make to this story? What role do they play in illuminating the male characters, characteristics and relationships?



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



Non-Fiction

- ◆ *A Bed of Red Flowers: In Search of My Afghanistan* by Nelofer Pazira
- ◆ *Afghanistan* by Thomas J. Barfield
- ◆ *Afghanistan* by Louis Dupree
- ◆ *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History (Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics)* by Thomas Barfield
- ◆ *Afghanistan: A Memoir from Brooklyn to Kabul* by Cat Parenti
- ◆ *Afghanistan: A Modern History* by Angelo Rasanayagam
- ◆ *Afghanistan: A History from 1260 to the Present Day* by Jonathan Lee
- ◆ *Afghantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-1989* by Sir Rodric Braithwaite
- ◆ *Another Afghanistan: A Photographic Journey Through The Afghan Spring* by Ginna Fleming
- ◆ *An Unexpected Light: Travels in Afghanistan* by Jason Elliot
- ◆ *A Woman Among Warlords* by Malalai Joya
- ◆ *Bleeding Afghanistan* by Sonali Kolhatkar
- ◆ *Charlie Wilson's War* by George Crile III
- ◆ *Destiny Disrupted: A History of the World through Islamic Eyes* by Tamim Ansary
- ◆ *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* by Steve Coll
- ◆ *Education in Afghanistan: Developments, Influences and Legacies since 1901* by Yahia Baiza
- ◆ *Forbidden Lessons in a Kabul Guesthouse* by Damien Lewis and Saraya Sadeed
- ◆ *Games Without Rules* by Tamim Ansary
- ◆ *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* by Steve Coll
- ◆ *Government and Society in Afghanistan* by Hasan Kakar
- ◆ *I am a Bacha Posh: My Life as a Woman Living as a Man in Afghanistan* by Ukmina Manoori
- ◆ *I am The Beggar of the World: Landays from Contemporary Afghanistan* by Eliza Griswold
- ◆ *In the Graveyard of Empires* by Seth Jones
- ◆ *Kabul Beauty School: An American Woman Goes Behind the Veil* by Deborah Rodriguez
- ◆ *Kabul in Winter* by Ann Jones
- ◆ *Mataluna: 151 Afghan Pashto Proverbs* by Edward Zellem
- ◆ *Modern Afghanistan* by Amin Saikal
- ◆ *No Good Men Among the Living: America, The Taliban, and the War Through Afghan Eyes* by Anand Gopal
- ◆ *Open Skies: My Life as Afghanistan's First Female Pilot* by Niloofar Rahmani
- ◆ *Opium Nation* by Fariba Nawa
- ◆ *Raising My Voice* by Malalai Joya
- ◆ *Return of a King: The Battle for Afghanistan* by William Dalrymple
- ◆ *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* by Ahmed Rashid
- ◆ *The Afghanistan File* by Prince Turki Al-Faisal Saud
- ◆ *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* by Craig Whitlock
- ◆ *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana* by Gayle Tzemach Lemmon



- ◆ *The Envoy: From Kabul to the White House, My Journey Through a Turbulent World* by Zalmay Khalilzad
- ◆ *The Favored Daughter* by Fawzia Koofi
- ◆ *The Long War: The Inside Story of America and Afghanistan since 9/11* by David Loyn
- ◆ *The Lovers: Afghanistan's Romeo and Juliet, the True Story of How They Defied Their Families and Escaped an Honor Killing* by Rod Nordland
- ◆ *The Places In Between* by Rory Stewart
- ◆ *The Punishment of Virtue* by Sarah Chayes
- ◆ *The Silk Roads: A New History of the New World* by Peter Frankopan
- ◆ *The Underground Girls of Kabul: In Search of a Hidden Resistance in Afghanistan* by Jenny Nordberg
- ◆ *The Women of Afghanistan Under the Taliban* by Rosemarie Skaine
- ◆ *The World is a Carpet: Four Seasons in an Afghan Village* by Anna Badkhen
- ◆ *The Wrong Enemy* by Carlotta Gall
- ◆ *The Wars of Afghanistan* by Peter Tomsen
- ◆ *The Will to Resist* by Dahr Jamail
- ◆ *To the Mountains: My Life in Jihad, from Algeria to Afghanistan* by Abdullah Anas
- ◆ *We March at Midnight: A War Memoir* by Ray McPadden
- ◆ *West of Kabul, East of New York* by Tamim Ansary
- ◆ *Zoya's Story* by John Follain, Rita Cristofari, and Zoya
- ◆ *Zarbul Masalha: 151 Afghan Dari Proverbs* by Edward Zellem

Fiction

- ◆ *A Curse on Dostoevsky* by Atiq Rahimi
- ◆ *A House Without Windows* by Nadia Hashimi
- ◆ *And The Mountains Echoed* by Khaled Hosseini
- ◆ *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear* by Atiq Rahimi
- ◆ *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini
- ◆ *Earth & Ashes* by Atiq Rahimi
- ◆ *One Half From East* by Nadia Hashimi
- ◆ *Patience Stone* by Atiq Rahimi
- ◆ *Return to the Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* by Deborah Rodriguez
- ◆ *Silent Trees* by Nasir Shansab
- ◆ *Sparks like Stars* by Nadia Hashimi
- ◆ *The Bookseller of Kabul* by Asne Seierstad
- ◆ *The Breadwinner* by Deborah Ellis
- ◆ *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* by Deborah Rodriguez
- ◆ *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* by Nadia Hashimi
- ◆ *The Secret Sky* by Atia Nawabi
- ◆ *The Watch* by Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya
- ◆ *The Widow's Husband* by Tamim Ansary
- ◆ *This Shall Be a House of Peace* by Phil Halton
- ◆ *When the Moon is Low* by Nadia Hashimi

Short Stories, Poems and Plays

- ◆ *Blood and Gifts* by J.T. Rogers
- ◆ *Kabuliwala* by Rabindranath Tagore
- ◆ *Sea Prayer* by Khaled Hosseini
- ◆ *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings* by Abolqasem Ferdowsi