

TOPONYMIC ANALYSIS OF PILGRIMAGE IN “THE KITE RUNNER” BY KHALED HOSSEINI

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Abstract

This study delves into the importance of sacred and shrine-like place names in *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini. Although the novel does not explicitly center around shrine culture, it incorporates religious and spiritual spaces that shape the characters' experiences, reflecting their ethical and spiritual growth. By conducting a detailed analysis of toponyms, this research examines key locations such as the Shah Faisal Mosque, Amir Timur Mosque, and Ghazi Stadium, considering their historical, religious, and symbolic roles in the novel. Furthermore, the discussion situates these place names within broader theoretical perspectives, drawing on concepts from toponymy, sacred geography, and postcolonial literary studies. By investigating these sacred and semi-sacred spaces, this article underscores *The Kite Runner's* exploration of faith, displacement, and redemption, demonstrating how Hosseini employs geographical settings to enrich the novel's deeper thematic layers.

Key words

Toponymy, shrine places, sacred geography, spatial theory, exile, afghan literature.

Introduction. Toponymy, the study of place names, provides crucial insights into historical memory, cultural identity, and narrative construction¹³³. Place names in literature serve as more than just geographical markers; they often carry deep symbolic meaning, reflecting characters' internal and external conflicts. In “*The Kite Runner*”, Khaled Hosseini uses toponyms to root the novel within Afghan culture and history while also illustrating the personal and national transformations experienced by the protagonist, Amir. While “*The Kite Runner*” does not focus primarily on shrine culture, certain sacred and semi-sacred locations function as

¹³³ Berit Sandnes (2021) “Toponyms and Spatial Representations”

spiritual and historical anchors within the narrative. This study examines how these spaces – such as mosques and stadiums – contribute to themes of exile, guilt, redemption, and national trauma. It also explores how these places are transformed in meaning due to Afghanistan’s changing political and religious landscape, particularly under Taliban rule.

Toponymy, Sacred Geography, and Spatial Theory

To analyze the role of shrine-like spaces in *The Kite Runner*, this study draws from three key theoretical approaches:

2.1. Toponymy and Literary Space

Place names, or toponyms, serve as cultural and narrative signifiers. According to Azaryahu¹³⁴, toponymy in literature can be used to commemorate history, establish authenticity, and signify transformation. In *The Kite Runner*, the renaming, destruction, or repurposing of sacred spaces reflects broader socio-political changes in Afghanistan.

2.2. Sacred Geography and Spiritual Spaces

Sacred geography studies how places acquire religious and spiritual significance. Tuan¹³⁵ and Casey¹³⁶ argue that places are not inherently sacred but become so through human experience and historical events. In “*The Kite Runner*”, locations like mosques, shrines, and the Ghazi Stadium shift in meaning, reflecting moral dilemmas, spiritual exile, and redemption.

2.3. Spatial Transformation and Postcolonial Literature

In postcolonial narratives, spaces often symbolize loss, displacement, and the tension between past and present (Soja, 1996). In “*The Kite Runner*”, sacred places like the Amir Timur Mosque initially represent nostalgia and stability but later symbolize war-torn destruction and Taliban control. The novel’s shifting geography mirrors Amir’s personal journey of guilt, exile, and atonement.

3. Shrine-Like Spaces in The Kite Runner

Although “*The Kite Runner*” does not focus on traditional Islamic shrines, it employs several sacred and semi-sacred spaces that function as sites of moral reflection, transformation, and power.

3.1. Shah Faisal Mosque (Islamabad, Pakistan): A Place of Transition

The Shah Faisal Mosque in Islamabad serves as an important setting in *The Kite Runner*, marking a critical moment in Amir and Baba’s journey. As they flee Afghanistan and pass through Pakistan on their way to the United States, the mosque becomes a brief but symbolic stop. It stands as a physical and emotional

¹³⁴ Azaryahu, M. (2011). "Naming the Past: Toponymic Commemoration of Historical Events." *Space and Culture*, 14(3), 253-268

¹³⁵ Tuan, Y.-F. (1977). *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. University of Minnesota Press

¹³⁶ Casey, E. S. (1993). *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*. Indiana University Press

crossroads, representing the divide between their old life in Afghanistan and the uncertain future awaiting them in America. For Baba, who once held power and prestige in Kabul, the moment is one of profound loss and displacement. For Amir, it signifies the beginning of a new chapter, though he remains burdened by the guilt of his past.

Beyond its narrative role, the Shah Faisal Mosque carries deeper toponymic and symbolic significance. As one of the largest and most architecturally striking mosques in the world, it serves as a strong emblem of Islamic identity and cultural heritage. Its grandeur contrasts with Amir's internal struggle—though he is deeply tied to his Afghan roots, he is also seeking escape and reinvention. The mosque thus functions as more than just a landmark; it highlights Amir's complex relationship with faith, identity, and belonging, reinforcing the novel's broader themes of exile and transformation.

3.2. *The Amir Timur Mosque (Kabul, Afghanistan): A Lost Spiritual Anchor*

The Amir Timur Mosque is closely linked to Amir's childhood, representing the stability and cultural richness of pre-war Kabul. As a young boy, Amir experiences a sense of security in the familiar spaces of his home city, and the mosque stands as a symbol of that world—a world filled with tradition, faith, and familial connections. Before the Soviet invasion and subsequent Taliban rule, places of worship like the Amir Timur Mosque served as central gathering points for the community, reinforcing shared beliefs and values. The mosque's presence in Amir's memories reflects a time when Afghanistan had not yet been torn apart by war and ideological extremism.

However, as the novel progresses, the Amir Timur Mosque fades from significance, much like the Kabul of Amir's youth. Its absence in the later parts of the story mirrors the decline of faith, morality, and traditional values in a country ravaged by conflict. Under Taliban rule, religious spaces are no longer simply places of worship—they become instruments of control and oppression. The diminishing relevance of the mosque in the narrative underscores how war disrupts not only the physical landscape of a nation but also its spiritual and cultural foundations.

3.3. *Ghazi Stadium (Kabul, Afghanistan): From Entertainment to Fear*

Once a vibrant center for sports and communal gatherings, Ghazi Stadium undergoes a chilling transformation under the Taliban regime. In Amir's early memories, the stadium is a place of celebration, where people come together to enjoy soccer matches and experience a sense of national pride. It represents entertainment, unity, and the joy of shared experiences—a space where the people of Kabul could momentarily escape the struggles of everyday life.

However, after the Taliban seizes control, Ghazi Stadium becomes a site of

public executions, turning a once joyful space into a horrifying stage for violence and punishment. This drastic shift reflects the brutality of the Taliban regime, which repurposes familiar public spaces to instill fear and enforce its rigid ideology. The toponymic transformation of the stadium highlights how physical places can take on new, often sinister meanings based on political and historical changes. Through Ghazi Stadium, *"The Kite Runner"* illustrates how war and extremism can pervert even the most ordinary and beloved spaces, stripping them of their original purpose and replacing them with terror.

Thematic Implications of Sacred and Shrine-Like Spaces

Sacred spaces in *"The Kite Runner"* highlight the spiritual displacement of characters. The journey from Kabul to the Shah Faisal Mosque marks Amir's physical and religious estrangement, reinforcing themes of exile and cultural identity. Sacred spaces also serve as sites of reckoning. Amir's return to Afghanistan to rescue Sohrab mirrors his attempt to spiritually and morally reclaim himself. The journey through changed spaces—from ruined mosques to Taliban-occupied stadiums—emphasizes personal and national redemption. By repurposing stadiums for executions and erasing traditional places of worship, the Taliban engages in toponymic erasure—rewriting the sacred geography of Afghanistan to enforce a new ideological and religious order.

Conclusion. This study has demonstrated that while *"The Kite Runner"* does not focus explicitly on shrine culture, it employs sacred and semi-sacred spaces to reflect historical transformation, spiritual exile, and moral redemption. The Shah Faisal Mosque, Amir Timur Mosque, and Ghazi Stadium function as more than just locations; they embody narrative shifts and ideological struggles. Through a toponymic lens, Hosseini's use of place names deepens the novel's engagement with faith, memory, and the reshaping of identity. These spaces serve as both anchors and markers of loss, reinforcing the novel's central themes of guilt, redemption, and cultural change.

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