



THE FIGURE OF 'MULLAH MOOSA' IN AKRAM OSMAN'S HISTORICAL NOVEL. KUCHE MA

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Introduction

Kuche ma is a novel published in 2004 by Akram Osman, an Afghan intellectual who studied in Iran, wrote for TV and radio in Afghanistan, served in diplomatic posts in Tajikistan and Iran, and eventually lived in exile in Sweden until his death in 2016. Osman occupied an interesting position in Afghanistan's intellectual circles. His father 'belonged to the Muhammadzai clan that ruled Afghanistan between 1826 and 1978', while his mother was from a family of modest means.[1]

Kuche ma explores the cosmopolitan nature of life in Kabul across the twentieth century through the prism of the social relationships of one of the city's 'alleys', or *kuche*. It covers the modernising period of the Musahiban dynasty (1929-1978), the fracturing of social relationships and political culture in the context of the Cold War and the country's descent into civil war after the collapse in 1992 of the government led by Dr Najibullah. An especially important aspect of the book is the focus it places on the thinking and identities of émigrés from the Central Asian Emirate of Bukhara who came to Afghanistan in the years following the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. Challenging nationalist narratives that remain powerful to this day of Afghanistan's Central Asian émigrés as foreigners from 'the other side of the river', the novel emphasises the attachment of these émigrés – both Jewish and Muslim – to Afghanistan, emphasising the extent to which they came to think of the country as their own and built rich social relationships with local people. Osman's unique specific background helps to explain the light the novel sheds on social relations between rich and poor in Kabul during the twentieth century, as well as its sensitivity towards and understanding of the issues facing the country's religious 'minority' communities, including Shii Muslim, Sikhs, Jews, and Hindus.

This brief discussion of *Kuche ma* offered here responds to Faridullah Bezhani's call for scholars of Afghanistan to engage with the writings of Akram Osman. This essay focuses on the light the book sheds on Kabul's cultural and religious cosmopolitanism. *Kuche ma* emphasises the ways in which Kabulis of multiple religious, ethnic, class, and regional backgrounds historically coexisted in the city. *Kuche ma* also provides penetrating insights into the lived nature of relationships between ordinary and elite Kabuli families.

The novel's central narrative device is an alley (*kuche*) in Kabul in which people of different ethnic, religious, and social backgrounds live with one another and get on with their daily lives. Besides emphasising the varying social identities of Kabulis, however, the book also presents its characters as fully fledged humans with unique individual personalities. The book is not restricted to a discussion of



Street scene in Kabul,
Afghanistan in November 1961.
(AP Photo/Henry Burroughs)

religious or ethnic differences – the class and status positions of the book's central characters are diverse: included in its pages are ambassadors and government officials, antique dealers, tailors, and kebab makers. The Kabul alley upon which the novel focuses is depicted as a microcosm of the city as a whole.

Amin, Moosa and Agha: a religiously mixed friendship circle

Three characters play a particularly important role in the novel. Amin is a young man from a wealthy family whose father is an ambassador. Despite his wealth and elite background, Amin's life is shattered at various stages of the novel because of family conflicts, especially those revolving around his relationship with his ambassador father. Amin's character is depicted as being diametrically opposed to that of his father – a selfish, self-centred, and cruel man with an uncontrollable temper. Across the novel, Amin falls in love with a woman of incomparable beauty who is not only the daughter of a Central Asian émigré but also Jewish.

The novel's second major character is Mohammad Mohsin Khan, also known as Agha. Agha runs an antique shop in the alley that is replete with rare and wondrous items. In addition to selling antiques, Agha also does a swift business in wine. Agha is a close friend of Amin and, a third character, known in the novel as Mullah Moosa. Mullah Moosa is a Jewish émigré from Bukhara living in Kabul. Mullah Moosa is presented in the novel as a knowledgeable man whose humour and cheerful personality endears him as a close friend to both Amin and Agha. Mullah Moosa has a deep knowledge in particular of politics and history, regularly discussing historical personalities such as Hitler and Stalin with his two close friends. Amin and Agha also often turn to Mullah Moosa for advice on various aspects of their lives. These three friends of very different backgrounds spend a great deal of time conversing about their daily experiences. By opening their hearts to one another, sharing secrets and seeking advice on intimate aspects of their lives they form strong bonds of friendship.

Mullah Moosa left Bukhara because of the instability caused by the Bolshevik revolution, seeking refuge in Afghanistan, and staying rather than moving elsewhere. Mullah Moosa recollects his flight from Bukhara and how the elders of his community stayed in Central Asia, only being able to secretly send messages to Afghanistan. The messages were not written but took the form of photos. If a photo was taken using a vertical aspect it conveyed a message about the situation being bad, while if the photo was taken horizontally it relayed the situation as being satisfactory. English officials, however, often destroyed these photos before they reached their intended recipient.

Everyday cosmopolitanism in Kabul during politically fraught times

Émigrés 'from across the river' in Central Asia are presented in the novel not as a threat to Kabul's cultural and social integrity but intricately enlaced within it. A Bukharan exile living in Kabul, Mullah Moosa is nevertheless deeply versed in the history and culture of Afghanistan. He often talks with Amin and Agha about religious inequality in Afghanistan and the experiences of the country's religious minorities. Mullah Moosa leads the prayers at the synagogue in the 'Chicken Street' (*kuche murgha*) of Kabul's New City, the *shahr naw*. Mullah Moosa speaks fluent Persian yet in what is depicted by Osman as being the 'sweet' dialect of Bukhara. Moosa is depicted as a very hospitable man.

Hospitality and the sharing of food and drink are central to the ways in which Kabulis of different backgrounds build relationships with one another. On most Friday evenings, Moosa invites Agha and Amin to share his table, serving them delicious Afghan and Bukharan dishes, including *kebab qeema* (mincemeat kebab), *kebab degi* (meat roasted in a pot), *kebab shami* (kebab patties), *kachalu sorkh karda* (fried potatoes), *paneer biryan* (fried homemade cheese), *khiyar nowbar shor* (pickled cucumbers) and also homemade yoghurt with wild garlic (*most*) and many different types of salad. Moosa makes his guests feel welcome and encourages them to eat by telling them in the sweet dialect of Farsi in which he speaks, '*khordan girid*', thanks them for coming by saying '*rahmat kalon*', and wishes them safe journeys when they travel by remarking '*rahi safed*'. On the evenings during which Amin and Agha were guests in his home, Mullah Moosa was a generous host who also served wine alongside plentiful Afghan and Bukharan dishes. The friendship circle is also

represented as being made up of two-way exchanges: Agha also often invites Mullah Moosa to his house and the two drank wine and ate homemade kebab while enjoying their time with one another.

Women's role in Kabul's cosmopolitanism, most particularly by integrating families of diverse backgrounds to one another, is also a focus of discussion across the book. Moosa is referred to as 'Mullah' because of his deep knowledge, wisdom, and insights. Yet his wife, Bibi Acha, is also depicted as a woman of great understanding. She was the close friend of the wife of an Ambassador from Bukhara (known in the novel as Bibi Bukharayee), who often travelled to Afghanistan specifically in order to meet her. Bibi Bukharayee was also a close friend of Amin's grandmother, underscoring close relationships between the political elites of Afghanistan and Bukhara. These two elite women often sought Bibi Acha's advice about sensitive and intimate family issues, including inheritance and marriage.

Markets played a critical role in the forms of cosmopolitan coexistence of importance to everyday life in Kabul. Relationships between Jews and Muslims in Kabul, for example, are founded on deep bonds of trust materialised in relationship to financial exchanges. Mullah Moosa's business activities are discussed in some detail. He ran an antique dealership in 'Chicken Street' but also sold different types of wine. Mullah Moosa is depicted as a deeply trusted figure in Kabul. The trust is materialised in financial transactions with the city's political elite (including with an uncle of Amin). Additionally, he provided loans to Muslims living in the city. His social respect and reputation in Kabul derived not only from the honest way in which he dealt with people's finances, however. Mullah Moosa's knowledge of the minutiae of Afghanistan's history, and the leadership and policies of the Soviet Union, India, Great Britain, Turkey and Germany also cement his social reputation in Kabul. Mullah Moosa always contextualises his analysis of political events in Afghanistan in relation to the policies and strategies of the great powers.

The characters in the novel are reflective people who derive pleasure in observing Kabul's diversity, rather in the manner of the figure of the flâneur. During a period in which he carried out military service, for example, Amin spends his time with the famous poet and writer, Nainawaz, and a celebrated intellectual and political activist, Tahir Badakhshi. The description of Amin's relationships illustrates the complex intellectual dynamics of Kabul during this period. In another part of the novel, Amin is depicted as walking through the streets of Kabul's old city (*shor bazaar*). He finds doing so a pleasant experience because of the city's religious cosmopolitanism, materialised in the many red tilaks and yellow turbans of its Sikh and Hindu population.

Cosmopolitanism and the State

'The state' plays an ambiguous role in the narrative of the novel - at some junctures it maintains and preserves Kabul's diversity, at others it significantly undermines cosmopolitanism. Mullah Moosa often speaks about pressures deriving from state policy upon Kabul's religious cosmopolitanism, and the way in which the treatment of non-Muslims changes over time and in relation to evolving government policy. He remarks on one occasion to Agha that 'God created Jewish and Hindus to give bribes to the government and the police and to face painful experiences on a daily basis'. Moosa also shares with his friends a legend in which, on the occasion of his son's wedding, a king gave cooked food to Muslims, raw food to Hindus, and burned offerings to Hazaras, a largely Shii and marginalised community. He also shares with Amin and Agha his personal experience of discrimination by Muslims. Mullah Moosa told them, for example, how the windows of his house had been broken by stone-throwing Muslims who had also wounded his daughter during the course of the attack. On listening to this story, Agha recollected how Sikhs and Hindus had been required by law to wear yellow turbans and Jews black kippas ('arqchin) in order to distinguish them from Muslims. The era of Amanullah Khan (1919-1929) is presented as one characterised by social and legal justice for rich and poor, Muslim and non-Muslim. Mullah Moosa remembered, for example, how during that period the government was independent and life was bright, though the atmosphere in the country quickly darkened and the country's foundations came to be built on cruel and uncompassionate leadership.

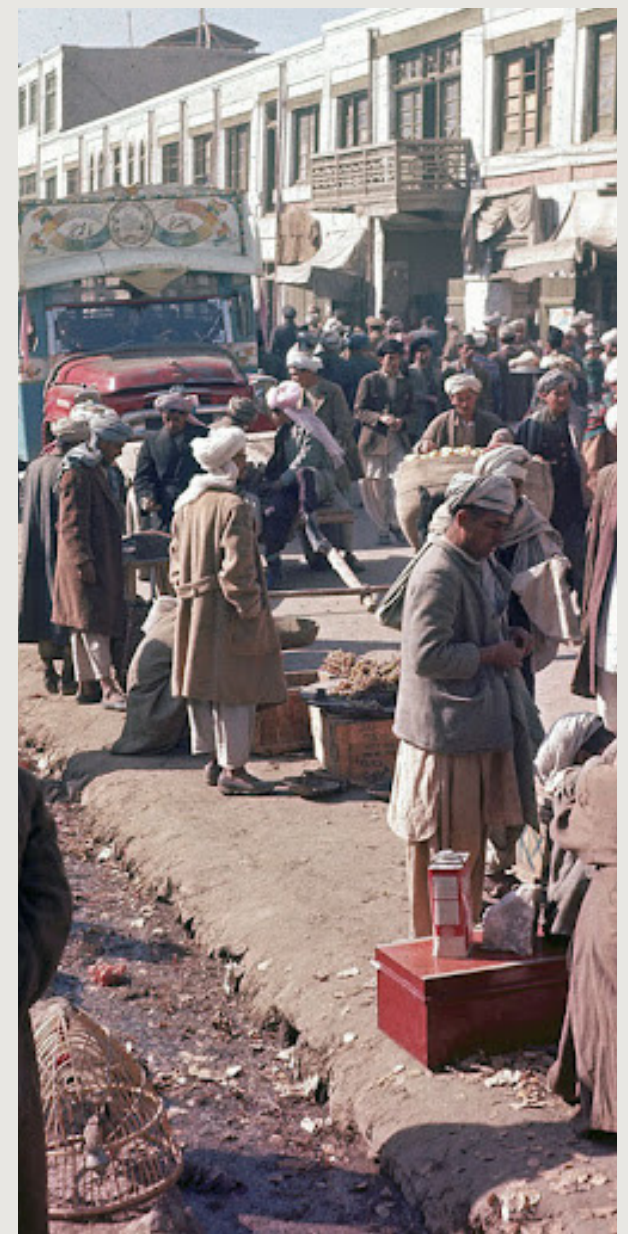
In the 1930s and 1940s, day-by-day the relations between Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and Jews deteriorate. Jews in particular become the target of attack by Muslims. Stones are thrown on the houses of Jews, and Jews walking in the street are also stoned and injured. In 1950, an Afghan representative in New York helps the Jews and they are eventually given permission to leave the country. Jews leave Afghanistan in large groups, choosing to do so because of their regular experiences of direct and indirect discrimination. According to Moosa, this was the second time that a religious minority left Afghanistan in the thousands, the first being the flight of Hazaras in the wake of Abdur Rahman Khan's military suppression of Hazaras in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Mullah Moosa, however, opts to remain in Afghanistan because the love he feels for his adopted country means that leaving it would have also meant leaving his life.

Cosmopolitanism, Love and Intimacy

The close relationship between Amin and Zulaika presents the reader with a more intimate aspect of Kabul's cosmopolitanism. On one Thursday evening, for example, Amin returns home from military service and Zulaikha (the beautiful daughter of Moosa) invites him home for a Friday lunch. Yet as Zulaikha goes to Agha's shop to invite Amin, she sees him chatting and joking to a girl who is studying at school, and feels jealous. Amin and Agha go to Mullah Moosa's house to eat Bukharan dishes, including *aash* (noodle soup), *mantu* (dumplings stuffed with meat), and *qabili palaw* (rice cooked with carrots, meat and raisins), *mash aba* (a soup with beans and rice) and Uzbek jams and pickles, all of which is prepared by Bibi Acha. At the end of the day Zulaikha does not go to the door to say goodbye to Amin. Some days later, however, Amin falls ill with a fever and Zulaikha visits him in hospital.

Later in the novel, Mullah Moosa agrees to give his daughter in marriage to Yaqoub, a Jewish merchant from Afghanistan living in London - underscoring the social relationships that connected Kabul to the wider world in this period. But Zulaikha thinks it is better to drink poison than marrying such a disreputable man. Having attempted suicide, she is taken to hospital. When Zulaikha regains consciousness she finds Amin sitting beside her bed and puts her hands into his and smiles; Amin caringly squeezes her hand. Everybody present realises the two are in love with one another. With the exception of Bibi Acha, Zulaikha's family is willing to have Amin as a Muslim son-in-law. Bibi Acha says, however, she will only accept Amin as her son-in-law if he becomes Jewish. Mullah Moosa curses Bibi Acha, saying 'Amin's dog is more honourable than Yaqoub': he tells her never again to expect Amin to change his religion. Mullah Moosa is depicted not only as knowledgeable but also as kind and somebody who does not focus on distinctions between Muslim and Jew, instead offering his help and support to anybody in need. The novel also mentions him providing accommodation and employment to homeless and destitute Muslims in Kabul, including Bakhtawar and her husband, a Hazara couple who had been violently assaulted by Amin's father, the ambassador.

Close to the start of the era of Mohammad Daoud Khan,[2] Jews were given equal rights by a new constitution (1965) - shopkeepers doing business in 'Chicken Street' felt secure for the first time in thirty to forty years. After Daoud Khan was murdered in a communist orchestrated coup in 1978, the new government arrested politically active youths including friends of Amin and Amin himself. Amin meets Zulaikha one day in Kabul and shows her the street in which politically active youths had been killed by the security services of the new government. After telling her of the tragic events he had witnessed, he embraces her and they kiss before going to eat kebab and *angur hussaini*, a particularly delicious variety of grapes from northern Afghanistan (*angur hussaini*). Zulaikha tells Amin she will always love him and nothing can pull them apart from one another,



Busy street with road-side vendors, Kabul, Afghanistan, Nov. 1961. (AP Photo/Henry S. Bradsher)

even death. Like her father, Zulaikha also helps anyone in need, giving financial support to a Hazara family who were arrested and jailed by the government because their son's poetry was interpreted by the security services as encouraging the youth to rise against the government.

Conclusion

Osman's novel captures many of the complexities of social life in Kabul over the course of the twentieth century. The novel brings attention to Kabul's religious diversity and the cosmopolitan openness to religious and cultural difference of its inhabitants. Kabulis are depicted as being aware of, informed about and connected to the wider world; the city's social life is enriched not threatened by the presence and participation of Jewish émigrés from Central Asia and Hindu and Sikh merchants; Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs establish relations of trust in relation to financial deals but such relations are not economic in any narrow sense, instead being woven into people's friendship circles, familial dynamics and social worlds. Written after the violence of the 1990s, however, the novel is not nostalgic in any naive sense: it recognises the fragility of the social relations, legal conventions, and political dynamics underpinning Kabul's cosmopolitanism. *Kuche ma* is a sensitive portrayal of Kabul that brings attention to aspects of life in the city as well as its relations to the region and wider world rarely captured in scholarly work.



Emir Alim Khan of Bukhara, last emir of the Uzbek Manghit dynasty, rulers of the Emirate of Bukhara in Central Asia

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<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/global/research/researchprojects/afterlivesofurbanmuslimasia>

[1] See Bezhan 2008 for an overview of Osman's life and work.

[2] Mohammad Daoud Khan who overthrew King Zahir Shah in a coup d'état in 1973 and created a republic which he led as President.