

IPEd Student Prize winner 2024

Structural edit report on a manuscript, The Blue Poppy Sea

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Dear Dr Jennaway,

Structural report: The Blue Poppy Sea. Literary thriller. 135,000 words.

Thank you for submitting your manuscript to Sappho Editing Services. You have eloquently crafted a story that explores maternal love and the circumstances in which this love can diminish the sense of self. The reader is challenged with this theme encompassed within a broader political context of transnational migration.

The significance of the title becomes apparent only in the final part of the story, within a scene of calm, reflection, and family love. Throughout the story, the reader experiences moments of panic, fatigue, and impatience, ending with a transcendent sense that the ultimate outcome is beyond any one human's effort or control.

In this report, I have included manuscript extracts where you will see my copyedits in **red**.

This is an exhilarating tale with contemporary relevance. I wish you every success.

Yours sincerely,

Despina Cook
Head editor

Structural report

The Blue Poppy Sea

Prepared for

Dr Megan G Jennaway

Presented on

6 November 2023

Summary and opening comments

At the summit, Julie, an Australian woman of 32 years, remembers the beauty she saw in Afghanistan on her first trip in 1977 – a diverse land of mountains, plateaus, deserts, and fertile valleys. Looking down from the peak at the capital, Kabul, Julie remembers a bustling marketplace of hippies, hawkers, and cloth merchants. At the disapproval of her family and friends, she had left her comfortable Western life behind to be with Qasim, whom she had met while travelling with her then-boyfriend, Phillip. Julie was entranced by Qasim, believing that their love story was one they could construct together in Afghanistan, with his open-mindedness and her willingness to compromise. Azul, their son, is born in a tent in 1991, and together they live a simple peasant life in a home Qasim has built further up the mountain from the village, Ashur-ga.

The narrative is weaved in the early 90s, a time of transformation in Afghanistan initiated by a coalition of insurgents and newly rebellious government troops – they besiege Kabul, overthrowing the communist president. The Taliban emerged in 1994, systematically seizing control of the country and occupying Kabul in 1996. As oppression takes hold in Afghanistan, Julie conforms to this conservatism and is confronted by how she sees her husband's changed actions and behaviour. After Qasim commits a revenge killing, Julie immediately flees to Paris with Azul, where she works and raises her son. Paranoia frequently overtakes her, fearing that they'll be discovered. Her nightmare becomes a reality when Azul is abducted and taken back to Afghanistan. Julie embarks on the journey of her life to reclaim her son. As the story reaches its conclusion, the plot twist is unveiled, providing Julie with long-awaited answers to her questions. However, life has already been permanently altered for her – a testament to the capricious nature of existence.

Part III of this manuscript incorporates the attacks on the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001 through to America's full-scale response, reinforcing the familiar and stark reality of war. A compelling narrative that readers will engage with deeply given the context of war, particularly now in the Middle East.

Theme

The Blue Poppy Sea is a journey into love, trust, betrayal, and disillusionment. Themes have been intricately woven into the context of the oppressive Afghan cultural motifs of violence,

sexism, shame, and revenge. A Pashtun proverb encapsulates this ethos: ‘Women are but half-worth human beings.’¹

Story arc and point of view

Drawing from the ‘five-stage structure’ method in *Manuscript Makeover* by Elizabeth Lyons (2008), the dramatic arc of your story moves protagonist Julie, and the secondary characters, forward in time while recounting the past through sufficient conflicts and crises within three parts of the story.² The dated scenes could serve as distinct chapter separations within each part. This timeline–chapter labelling has also been done successfully in Maggie Shipstead’s New York Times bestseller *Great Circle*.³

I also very much appreciate the drama in starting the story at the final scenes in Paris in part I, jumping to where it all began in Afghanistan in part II, and culminating for the ending in part III – a very effective way to maintain the tension rather than keeping a linear narrative. Part III seamlessly begins to position characters for the climactic end.

Part I is in first person, Julie’s point of view (POV), providing a great deal of connection with Julie’s emotions, following the prologue in third-person omniscient. We become intimately acquainted with Julie’s inner thoughts in the first person – there is a sense of reality about her, and she comes alive easily and rapidly rather than through a distant pronoun.

In the prologue, when we are not in Julie’s head, the narrative allows for intoxicating descriptions of Kabul, rich and detailed. Julie’s name is withheld, and we are only provided with names for the male characters. The character ‘she’ begins to develop, but readers will be keen to know her name out of a desire to feel closer to the lead character.

The tension arises very early on in part I, fuelling suspense for the reader, as Julie realises that her tween son, Azul, and their housekeeper, Mereille, are missing. This initial transition scene creates panic and reveals to the reader how Julie is internally traumatised by past experiences in Afghanistan that have her perpetually on edge. Scenes in part I oscillate within different spans of time, retracing Azul’s birth in Afghanistan, which provide cultural insight into the village tribespeople and their superstitions. At this point, the narrative builds context by conveying the cultural alienation Julie feels, as compared with the Western world she knows. Psychological conflict emerges between Julie and Qasim, and how their cultural

differences will potentially cause further complications in the narrative. In first person, we feel a narrative distance from Julie, even though we are intimate with her emotions. Her non-visualisation works to confirm Julie's status in this new world of female oppression in Afghanistan. Julie is the protagonist but physically insignificant in contrast to the supporting characters vividly described in the story, often dressed in vibrant colours and ornate jewellery.

The story reverts to Paris, picking up from where Julie is running through the streets, looking for her son, and we feel her plausible frozen panic with the opening description in the scene:

pt I, p 20	All is quiet. Silence has set like lacquer over enveloped the suburbs. I feel as though I'm the only moving part in a motionless tableau picture.
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Confusion arises when Julie feels pursued by a 'skulking, stealthy male assassin'. With relief, he turns out to be Mereille's 'obnoxious' husband, Arnaud, who is 'old enough' to be Mereille's grandfather (pp 28, 55). The personality conflict between Julie and Arnaud effectively creates tension for the reader, as we begin to question whether Arnaud is directly involved in Azul and Mereille's disappearances. Arnaud, in search of Mereille in the dark streets, crosses paths with Julie, and through their shared exchange of information, they realise that it is critical for them to collaborate to find their missing loved ones.

In an introspective scene towards the end of part I, Julie is helplessly stewing over the events – her mind 'is whirling inside' her still body. She is numb, drifting in and out of a dreamlike state. She realises that Qasim has taken Azul back to Afghanistan, and it is her mission now to return to rescue her son. Arnaud volunteers his help, after earlier confirmation of Mereille's murder.

In part II, third-person POV, descriptions of Julie's physical attributes are welcomed – we can finally envision what she looks like: Julie's 'freckled arms' (p 84), 'her freckled face and Celtic green eyes' (p 87), and her 'hair the colour of juniper bark stripped back from the trunk' (p 119). On page 139, Julie recounts the night of Azul's conception, and we learn that she was 31 years old. The dive into the lavish culture of Afghanistan is astonishing – the detailed descriptions of Afghan musical instruments are evidence of the depth of your research. Switching the viewpoint to third person when set in Afghanistan allows for your descriptions to be more sophisticated, verbose, and acutely observant. Again, this is clever in that Julie fades as a female in the cultural context, and having her provide so much detail in

the first person would have been a difficult endeavour. This reaffirms how you have necessarily created the third-person distance when the setting is in Afghanistan. You can, however, still use Julie's name in the third-person POV. Particularly in part II, pages 115–116, where I had to pause on occasion to connect 'her' and 'she' with Julie. This could prove distracting for the reader to have to stop and recall who the character is.

For a short time, ~~she~~Julie is flushed with the sudden blazing heat of exposure, walking westwards into the sun. Then it is gone. The air turns quickly cold. She shivers, pulling her cardigan more tightly around her. Any colder and she will have to stop and dig her thermal jacket out of the backpack. Hopefully she remembered to put it in. ~~It's just that s~~She can't remember seeing it ~~now~~; when she was packing the pumpkin and ~~squashes~~zucchinis into the bag. It must be there, ~~—~~ she'll check in a minute. She really should head back though. Soon there will be no light and she'll be stranded out here on this rocky bluff without ~~even so much as~~ a torch.

The climax of the story in part III, back to first-person POV, sees Qasim following Julie and Azul back to Paris where his intentions are revealed, in his mind, to be noble. You provide a much-needed soft landing after the many complications involved in Azul's rescue amid the current political state of the governing Taliban.

The disconnect Julie now feels with Qasim is evident in their contrasting body language and dialogue: he displays physical intimacy by kissing her neck, eyebrows, and mouth; she is 'in a state of extreme confusion', needing space and time to think (p 418). The resolution of Julie and Qasim parting ways, with the expectation that they may come together again at a point in the future, leaves Arnaud entirely frustrated with Julie after a physically harsh and painstaking journey in Afghanistan. She has all her questions answered, the subplot of Arnaud and Mereille is resolved, and Julie is entirely at peace with her decision.

Character development

The passage through time illustrates the gradual shrinking of Julie's world, reflected in her character transformation: from well-travelled, determined, and outspoken at 17 years of age, to the subdued and accommodating woman she becomes in Afghanistan. Her young spirit remains intact, however, symbolically represented by secret and forbidden music lessons with 'shamaness' Zainab, a member of the Kyrghiz tribe (a distinct nomadic community).

Qasim's evolution is apparent: from the young open-minded man who indulges in hashish with travelling hippies, intoxicating Julie with his exoticism and 'royal blue turban' (p 5); evolving, as his country is gradually suppressed under the Taliban regime. Now Qasim is 'a ~~fully grown~~ fully grown man, a household head, and sole protector of his family' (p 6). His half-brother, Karmal, tells Julie:

part II, p 252	Karmal snorts. "He's just a coward-, that's all. Soft-hearted. Couldn't even bear to shoot anything when we were little. We'd go hunting and as soon as I shot down a goose or a bird, he'd rush over and pick it up. He'd want to take it home and nurse it."
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After a decade of fighting alongside the mujahedin, Qasim wrestled with his identity, but atoned himself with Julie. He earned the respect of the community and established a solid reputation as a family man. The turbulent political landscape of Afghanistan sees Karmal harassing Qasim to enlist in General Dostum's army, as power struggles among warlords intensify in the country. Karmal is the opposite of Qasim's gentle nature – the beast in him is evident. Karmal's actions reveal a stark hypocrisy in contrast to the Muslim life he claims to follow. His quick temper and his act of sexual violence against Julie mark the ultimate turning point for both Qasim and Julie.

I found a particular fascination in the convergence of two characters as dissimilar as Julie and Arnaud, brought together by unfortunate circumstances, often getting on each other's nerves. As the story progresses, Arnaud's attitude towards Julie subtly changes, and in the end, they become each other's saviours in distinct ways.

Pace

The Blue Poppy Sea is a multifaceted narrative, delving into ethnography, and often maintaining a tranquil rhythm, reflecting the daily domestic responsibilities of the everyday. However, it occasionally shifts into a shamanic tempo; into the ethereal and hauntingly mystical, with psychological depth and intensity.

As tension mounts and the sky often darkens, the mood is evidently intensified, for example, when Julie is rushing to get home from her secret music lessons with Zainab:

pt II, p 180	Yet tonight there is a heaviness in the sky, a kind of brooding. As she stands there trying to define her own unease, three black vultures rise out from a high crag to the northeast and dive towards the opposite bluff; in the direction of the Kyrghiz camp. Alighting Touching down on the escarpment, they fluff out their wings as though if to signal hostility. Perhaps there is carrion over there nearby , the flesh of some unfortunate animal, trapped in a crevice or injured in some way. Like Just as she Julie might have been, had were it not been for those the Kyrghiz.
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Part I includes a slow, descriptive scene: Julie has returned home from Mereille's funeral in Chagonard. The scene ends with what I thought was an abrupt transitional final sentence.

p 59	But-y You're not here. Once again I'm all alone in the flat . The door clunks shut behind me and I jump, startled.
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The scene's final sentence was an opportunity for a cliffhanger – I was anticipating an action scene to follow, but the pace slowed instead to a scene where Julie is looking out her window on a rainy day, making observations of passers-by. The entire scene is internal dialogue of how she misses Azul, which is anticlimactic for the reader, realising the door simply shut behind Julie as she walked into her apartment with no further event. Including more of Julie's paranoia and panic in this part could be an opportunity to enhance the tension.

You have, however, included a delicious sex scene to intensify the pace of part I, p 139. Sex scenes play a crucial role – it's wonderful that you didn't overlook this. Sex is also part of the setting, unveiling aspects of your storyworld and contributing to the vital details. You have kept this hot for the lead characters and the inside of your story, even though it was all of four unexpected sentences. In part II, pp 169–170, while this scene starts at a slow pace, the lead characters turn on the heat in the first sensually romantic scene of the story.

At the shrine of Hazrat Ali in part II, p 206, the build-up of tension is slow, immersive, and unexpected. The ascension to the scene's climax is full of suspense. Qasim is performing a musical repertoire and Khalzani, the drummer, is absent. As the music plays and takes her spirit, Julie feels an overwhelming urge to take Khalzani's place. As she does, the narrator is omniscient and philosophical – the performance comes to a halt and the crowd's

eyes are on her. Qasim takes Julie's drum and smashes it in front of everyone. The reader knows Julie's life is about to change because of her impulsive decisions in a culture marked by the oppression of women.

Beautiful, descriptive sentence structures

Many sentences in the story are crafted beautifully. I can picture the vivid detail in this scene in part I, p 24, when Arnaud has found Julie in the streets of Paris, and in this moment realises that Mereille has not gone shopping nor is she visiting her mother – she is missing:

I watch the way he drives, gripping the steering-wheel with both hands, white-knuckled, his chin thrust forward. When we stop at a ~~set of~~ red lights he starts drumming the wheel ~~leather~~ with the flat of his hand before gripping it again to take off.

Descriptions of local geography are detailed and vivid. In the prologue (p 2), Julie remembers how Kabul used to be a vibrant, bustling city, but is now reduced to gravel.

~~But~~ In her mind's eye the city was forever unchanged: - the streets snowbound, the male cyclists in pyjamas and turbans, the schoolchildren in nothing but sandals and shorts or skirts, even in midwinter.

The scene was always Chicken Street, with its steady trickle of hippies wandering in and out of the cafes, its hawkers, and cloth-merchants.

Chicken Street is also referred to in Khaled Hosseini's (2007, ch 11, 3:21–3:34) historical fiction *A Thousand Splendid Suns*: 'They walked on to a place called Kocheh-Morgha, Chicken Street. It was a narrow, crowded bazaar in a neighbourhood that Rasheed said was one of Kabul's wealthier ones.'⁴

Beautiful examples of descriptive sentences, too, are written about the village Chagonard in France, where Mereille grew up:

pt I, p 50	... bursting with life and sunshine, with its array of houses spread out over the rolling hills like a carpet of wildflowers.
	... the road winds between fields of sunflowers, tomatoes, grapes, and alfalfa grass . Fresian cattle indolently graze beside stands of apple-green poplars.

	It is a place of curving streets and disappearing gables and turrets, crofters' huts, water towers, all sliding away behind the hump of a hill, or slipping below the dip of the river.
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Consistency

At part II, p 198, dated 21 March 1994, Julie thinks of how it must feel for Azul to be 'a three-year-old amid this forest of legs' at the shrine of Hazrat Ali. A chronological disjunction occurred to me here, given in the preceding scene Azul is five years old in 1993.

The following table sequences the events from Azul's conception, birth, and his being 'twelve' years old in 2001, revealing a misalignment.

Scene map	Date	Event	
pt II, p 139	16 February 1991	Azul was conceived on this night of Julie's birthday.	✓
pt I, p 94	May 1991	Julie is 'already nine weeks pregnant'.	✓
pt I, p 99	June 1991	'... the baby is not due until November.'	✓
pt II, p 151	November 1991	Julie gives birth to Azul.	✓
pt II, p 196	August 1993	Qasim proudly announces to Julie that their ' five-year-old son ' shot a quail.	Date change or edit required.
pt I, p 30	1993 [based on Azul's year of birth]	[memory] ' <i>...my husband must be mad to have left our <u>two-year-old son</u> alone on the back of a young and frisky stallion ...</i> '	✓
pt II, p 198	21 March 1994	'a three-year-old amid this forest of legs'	Azul would be two turning three years of age – this is ok. ✓
pt II, p 211	April 1994	"My name is Azul. <u>I am three and a half years old.</u> "	Edit required.

pt II, p 240	June 1996	Sometimes she thinks Qasim goes too far, takes too many risks <u>with a boy of not yet four.</u>	Edit required.
First transition: pt I, p 15	2 September 2001	Julie is frantically looking for Azul in the streets of Paris. A mother in the park asks Julie how old Azul is, as well as the group of boys with him. Julie replies, “ <u>Twelve</u> . Some are older, thirteen, maybe fifteen.”	Azul would be 9 turning 10 years here.
pt III, p 331	17 September 2001	It’s worse than the chill that went through me that night I gave birth to you, in our first home here: – that tiny little nomad’s tent made of felt and flimsy little sticks, <u>eight years ago.</u>	Edit required.
pt III, p 396	10 October 2001	Before Azul was born —a mere <u>eight years ago.</u>	Edit required.

Ambiguity is also revealed with Qasim’s main character trait. Throughout the manuscript, we are told of how Julie is intoxicated by Qasim’s blue eyes.

pt I, p 48	I drift off again, remembering <u>Qasim’s clear blue eyes</u> , the colour of the sea.
pt I, p 54	<u>His sharp blue eyes</u> pierce right through me, pinning me down.
pt I, p 67	<u>His kajal-rimmed eyes were the most intense blue colour</u> I’d ever seen, the colour of the sea.
pt I, p 70	He gazed at me with <u>his riveting blue eyes.</u>
pt II, p 153	But Qasim is a Pashtun, and <u>his eyes blaze with an electric-blue intensity</u> that burns right through her whenever she looks at him.

pt II, p 170	So They smoked the whole joint down to the roach and her tongue went very dry and the moon grew even larger and more impossibly yellow, casting a burnished light on his smooth-skinned face and highlighting the whites of his eyes around their <u>deliquescent pale blue centre</u> .
pt II, p 270	But Qasim is still staring at her with <u>his crazed blue eyes</u> , as though he has lost his mind.

You also describe Qasim’s eyes as ‘dark’, which was briefly puzzling, until I realised you must be referring to dark rings around his blue eyes. Below are extracts with my suggested edits:

pt I, p 52	Qasim enters the tent, dark- eyed rings around his eyes , and hot from his long ride into Mazar-i-Sharif, clutching a parcel.
pt II, p 170	<i>Yet on another level, she was entirely unafraid, as though she already knew him, and could already trust him;. and it felt completely natural to sit down with this dark-eyed stranger with dark rings around his eyes who – he spoke a beguilingly naïve kind of English and sold hand-made Afghani rugs in the markets, – and smoke a reefer with him.</i>
pt III, p 413	I turn to see the face I’ve been dreading all this time, the dark rings around his eyes like deep black ponds, the beautiful skin, elegant cheekbones.

In part II, page 215, Julie buys Azul a ‘green and yellow canary, a creature with the most melodious song’. This canary also speaks English and screeches, ‘My name is Azul. I come from Afghanistan’. A brief internet search reveals that, although canaries do possess beautiful singing voices, they don’t talk, or at most, they can say a word or two. You may need to consider replacing this bird.

Dialogue

Much of the dialogue is written to tell readers how a character feels, and this may feel patronising for a reader. The reader is already deciphering the narrative – it’s best not to spell it all out so that some mystery is left for the reader to want to proceed with the story. Aside

from the dialogue below, there are another four counts of these dialogue tags to the scene's end. Readers want to feel the emotion in the dialogue, instead of reading the facts. The dialogue itself already conveys the emotion, and that is credit to the beats you have written. Assume your readers are intelligent enough to read your work and allow for the dialogue to flow naturally.

Excerpts:

<p>pt 1, p 23</p>	<p>“So where ‘ave ’ave you been?” he growls, cutting across my reverie His growl interrupts my daze. “Out,” I stammer, I’m not sure where to start. “Out looking for Azul.” I realize it doesn’t make sense. “He wasn’t at the apartment,” I add. “I couldn’t find anyone...Mireille....” I trail off. “So where is Mireille now?” he asks. “S – she is looking too?”</p>
	<p>An iron bar clunks in my brain. For a moment I stop breathing, and Then my heart starts pounding again. “So you haven’t seen Mireille either, Arnaud? She wasn’t at the apartment?” “No!,” he answers harshly. “I thought she was with you.” He jerks his head sideways, as though wanting to pull out of a wrestler’s grapple. I notice a vein in his neck pulsing above his polo collar. Then he adds, “I’ve been driving around looking for her, just in case she’d tried to walk home.”</p>
<p>pt I, p 44</p>	<p>The Inspector is addressing us both now. “We need to know” he says, “if you can positively identify this woman” –he The Inspector addresses us both and indicates the trolley with a wave of his large, long-fingered hands. - “and how sure you are that it’s who you think it is. Obviously if you are not completely sure, you must tell us.”</p>

The dialogue tags in the following extracts may simply be removed, as it is clear who is speaking – moreso given Arnaud’s use of French dialogue. I also suggest removing the ‘is’ as his accented version of ‘his’. This unusual spelling will divert the reader’s attention away from the dialogue and onto deciphering what the word is. In this case, the ideal way to get a character’s geographical background across is through word choice. French people refer to soccer as ‘football’ or ‘le foot’.

pt I, pp 23–24	Arnaud is fumbling with his cigarette, burning away in his fingers. It is little more than a stub now. He brings it up to his lips and sucks hard. “I wait for her,” he says . “I think she has gone out to the store, or to pick up your son from ‘is soeet le foot . I turn on the television, I try her cell phone, no answer. I eat some cheese, drink a glass of wine. I wait for her. But she doesn’t come back, she doesn’t ring. Nothing.”
pt I, p 24	“They probably went out somewhere together earlier,” I say . We both pause again. There’s a question still sitting on my brain hanging . “How long ago were you there?” I ask slowly .
	“If they’re not at the apartment, I think we should go straight to the police,” I say .
	“ <i>Eh?</i> [rom.] What?” he says . “Non. <i>Pah</i> [rom.], the police will be a waste of time.
pt I, p 24	I’m more agitated than ever, watching him. I try to muzzle my hysteria . “Has Mireille ever gone missing like this before?” I ask, trying to keep my hysteria down .

I recommend a review of the dialogue in the entire manuscript to see where you can edit and tighten up dialogue tags. Your writing includes sufficient speaker attributions, so your reader will know who is speaking.

Please also be mindful to minimise ‘-ly’ adverbs:

pt I, p 22	“No,” he answers <u>harshly</u> .
pt I, p 24	“How long ago were you there?” I ask <u>slowly</u> .
pt I, p 34	“It could be just coincidence, you know,” Arnaud breaks in unhelpfully interjects, offering little assistance .

If you’re unsure, it’s almost always best to simply use the verb ‘said’ and allow character beats to define the tone of dialogue. This will free up the reader from having to imagine how the dialogue was said rather than instinctively reading and knowing. You’ve written a great example below and have done well to emphasise a word – one emphasis is sufficient – given how Arnaud is mocking the police liaison officer.

pt I, p 34	He digs in deeper : “That’s two lots of ten years [rom.] plus five. Got it? Twenty-five <u>years</u> .”
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With a grand flourish, he traces the number in the air with his forefinger.

You have written descriptive scenes that build atmosphere and create a sense of place and context, particularly in chapter II, where this is set in the heart of village life in Afghanistan. Given the many descriptive scenes in chapter II, look for scenes where dialogue can interweave and replace this same information rather than static explanations of family trees, what became of family members during the war, or reasons as to why the clan – or *khater* – are prioritising aid in building homes for one man’s family over another.

Excerpt:

pt II, pp 112–113	Qasim’s Uncle Qadir, father of Abdul and Jamal-, is the son of Mina’s father’s brother. Their grandfathers had been brothers. But Abdul and Jamal have consistently downplayed the relationship, even stating baldly that their <i>khater</i> has grown too large and that it would be better if Qasim broke away and started his own <i>khel</i> . Your <i>khel</i> [remove bold], cousin Qasim, could still be part of our <i>khater</i> [remove bold], but separate too – you’d have your own independence, they say. But Qasim is offended. †Their behaviour does not sit well with his own notions of Afghan generosity and collective cooperation. For all Abdul Hakim’s friendly words, Qasim knows that the proposal is a sham: a <i>khel</i> of just one adult male would have no political clout in the village. It would lose out to the other three <i>khater</i> , despite being nominally attached to one. -Even the other two <i>khater</i> – that of the Ghulchik clan and Khayeed-Daoud [en dash for relationship, not hyphen] clans – have difficulty getting their own way against the combined might of the Hakims.
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Suggested edit:

Qasim’s second cousins, Abdul and Jamal, consistently downplay the sibling relationship of our grandfathers. He recalls Abdul’s bold suggestion, “Honestly, Qasim, we’ve been thinking ... Our <i>khater</i> has grown too big. Maybe it’s time you consider starting your own <i>khel</i> .”

Jamal nods. “Yes Qasim, you can still be part of our <i>khater</i> , but you’d have to have your own independence.”

Qasim is offended by their behaviour – it does not sit well with his own notions of Afghan generosity and collective cooperation. Qasim thinks carefully and responds, “I appreciate your friendly words my cousins, but I know this proposal is a sham.” Qasim understands that a *khel* of one adult male would have no political clout in the village. It would lose out to the other three *khater*, despite being nominally attached to one. The Ghulchik clan and Khayeed–Daoud clans still have difficulty getting their own way against the combined might of the Hakims.

This change also eliminates the italics used to distinguish Qasim’s dialogue from his cousins’ and the **bold type** to highlight foreign words in that same memory. Rogers and Lasky-Finch (2023), in *In favour of simple writing*, describe this mix of italics and bold type as the ‘equivalent of a peanut butter, ham and Gorgonzola sandwich on banana bread: a combination of ingredients that add up to an unpleasant, off-putting whole’.⁵

Grammar, syntax, and style

Throughout the manuscript, there are many sentences starting with ‘but’ and ‘often’ or including the adverb ‘even’. There are 486 sentences beginning with the word ‘but’ in total. These can, in almost all instances, be safely removed without affecting the sentence.

Prologue, p 6	And n Now Qasim was a fully-grown man, a household head, and sole protector of his family.
	She’d expected Amanda, of all people, to understand. But t Too bad. Too bad if everyone thought her foolish. Even i If they were right, <u>even if</u> it all came unstuck, Julie knew she had to give it a g chance.
pt I, p 9	Like those isolated secluded coves I’d discovered on Ios, twenty-five years ago;; or, even Joni Mitchell’s favourite haunt on the southern coast of Crete, the one with the honeycomb caves – Matal h a, that was its name.
pt II, p 227	Often s She is lonely, looking after her three-year--old and trying not to step on Mina’s toes. But Mina is <u>often</u> away too, attending the births that seem to proliferate around this time of year. Mina is not only the best midwife in Ashur-ga, but she’s also in high demand for births as distant as Ishkashim and Jurm. Often s She too is away for days at a time.

Clichés

Writing sentences that appear cliché dilutes the story's originality and can read stale. Using an en dash here with 'a king tide of memories' seems cliché, especially when another cliché immediately follows in the next paragraph.

Prologue, p 2	But they rounded the bend and then As they manoeuvred the mountain curve, it hit her. It came up out of nowhere like huge freak waves on a flat sea – a king tide of memories an overwhelming surge of memories washed over her.
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Changing the sentence to remove the subordinating conjunction, removing the en dash, and breaking up the sentence alleviates the cliché and provides drama.

In the following paragraph, I have removed the starting conjunction and replaced the cliché.

Prologue, p 2	'But in her mind's eye Inside her mind, the city was forever unchanged ...'
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There are many other clichés and idioms throughout that can be revised, as shown in the following table.

pt 1, p 11	For once, the entrance to the apartment stairwell is wide open and I thank my lucky stars that I don't have to deposit my bags on the ground while I fish around for my swipe card I'm relieved. Usually I just key use my code into the keypad so that Mireille can open up, but invariably I always make the mistake of thinking myself capable of lifting my right arm up to the pad despite the weight of the my bags slung over it and I end up spilling them.
pt I, p 17	But for the fire, it was completely dark inside; the lamps kept sputtering out in the icy blasts of wind that kicked up the flaps of our tent like an armed bandit and rushed inside, extinguishing every flame Inside was darkness, momentary specks of flame. The lamps kept sputtering out from the icy wind blasts jolting through the tent flaps.
pt II, p 188	Usually it takes until he has reached the end of the valley and gone halfway up the mountain, Koh-e-Sharat, where his father first taught him

	to shoot all those years ago. He knows this mountain like the back of his horse, knows every hump of earth, every tussock of grass or rocky cairn commemorating a dead warrior. Every small crevasse placed there by Allah, to remind him always that death is only a footstep away.
pt II, p 198	This time, Qasim had been asked to perform in the grand old city of Mazar-I Sharif, in the centre of Bamiat province, and just a stone's throw from close to Karmal's house in the village of Shigel.
pt III, p 318	All the way up he'd been exasperated that his mobile phone was out of range. Adding insult to injury, and just half an hour into the journey, his short-wave radio had run out of battery.
pt II, p 197	Most latecomers are just pushing their way in, any old how.
pt III, p 325	I sink into my own thoughts, wondering whether or not this policeman can be trusted, whether he will just take us to some far-flung place out in the country and order us all to get out of the car where upon he will shoot us and no one will be any the wiser.

Likewise, the idioms below are unnecessary in keeping with the tone of the narrative:

pt III, p 301	So a At last, we are going to Badakshan!:- My heart leaps. like a goat across a rockface.
pt III, p 325	At irregular intervals, vestigial splotches of tar cling to the surface like icing slopped from a pastry cook's bowl – presumably a legacy of the Soviet days.
Epilogue, p 421	The boat traverses the peaks and troughs of the enormous swells. like an insect surmounting a blade of grass or balancing on a leaf.

Sensitivity

This manuscript spans the globe – a feature I love. However, I must be judicious in stating sensitivity issues as it's likely that other readers will too.

I cannot stress the importance of verifying how people of a nation prefer to be addressed. The term 'Afghani' is used only in reference to the unit of Afghan currency. Using

this term in reference to the people of Afghanistan is incorrect and is sometimes perceived as offensive. This reference appears again in the following scenes:

Prologue, p 9	I could wear my finest Afghani silver and let you eat the entire menu.
pt II, p 216	“Do you think Afghani s will accept him then? As their leader?”
pt II, p 250	“But how did you actually meet ing in India, a foreign woman like you and my brother, an Afghani i man. It’s not possible, is it?”
part III, p 284	And w With my fast-recovering Dari, I might almost pass for an Afghani i woman.

An important misspelling is your reference to the Kochi or Kuchi people throughout part III as ‘koochies’. ‘Koochie’ or ‘coochie’ is a slang word for vulva and must be edited to the correct spelling.

The ethnic slur ‘skinny’ should never be used with reference to black people – ‘lanky’ is as offensive as using the word ‘skinny’.

pt I, pp 9–10	Crossing the intersection, I pass lanky African schoolgirls with corkscrew plaits and green box plaits , holding hands three or four abreast three and four at a time .
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It can be difficult to describe Asian eyes without being offensive – a lot of anti-Asian racism uses the physical attribute of eye shape.⁶ Racism will only ever be appropriate in character dialogue, such as when Karmal, Qasim’s distasteful half-brother, is wrestling a Hazara:

pt II, pp 264	“Camel’s dick,” says Karmal. “I saw no such thing. You’re just making it up to protect a fellow <u>slit-eye</u> .”
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However, using the term ‘slit-eyed’ within the narration is insensitive. Given Karmal’s distasteful character shines through in his dialogue, the description can simply be removed from the preceding narration.

pt II, pp 263	Slowly but surely the light-haired northerner forces the slit-eyed Hazara backwards, pressing down on his arms and twisting the top of his trousers in a way that entraps his legs.
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As a side, in context to derogatory language, Julie’s friend Emile displays offensive behaviour towards the police in France, referring to them as ‘the pigs’ in a portion of the text in part I, page 64. This slur is used in Australia, but in France the equivalent is ‘*les poulet*’, meaning ‘chickens’. It is likely that Emile would use the French slur.

Conclusion

I commend you on your deep research into the history, life, culture, and language of Afghanistan woven into the narrative. The setting of Kabul and the political transformations that unfolded over the decades leading into the 90s, as well as the consequences of America’s ‘war on terror’, serve as a pertinent ‘through line’, especially in this volatile time in world history involving the Middle East. This excerpt in part III, p 347, could be superimposed in the current Israeli– Hamas conflict – a war for which there is no end in sight:

‘Australians, like others in Washington DC, San Francisco, Barcelona, and London, have taken to the streets in their hundreds of thousands, protesting ~~against~~ the prospect of war. Hearing of the 200,000 strong who paraded through the streets of Sydney ...’

My favourite extract is the last paragraph of part II, p 240, which carries, for the first time, the eponymous words of this story’s title. In a tiny village ascended in a mountain, a young boy asks his father about the big blue ocean that separates Afghanistan from Australia:

“So what’s it like Baba-jan? The sea.”

“Well then,” says Qasim ... “Try to imagine a vast field of poppies, as beautiful a blue as lapis lazuli, stretching out as far as the eye can see. That’s what the ocean is like, Azul. Like a blue poppy sea.”

Congratulations, Dr Jennaway, on crafting a magnificent work.

¹Gopal, A. (2023, September 6). "Swift Justice" looks inside a sharia courtroom. *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-documentary/swift-justice-looks-inside-a-sharia-courtroom>

²Lyon, E. (2008). *Manuscript Makeover: Revision Techniques No Fiction Writer Can Afford to Ignore* (1st ed.). Penguin Publishing Group.

³Shipstead, M. (2021). *Great Circle*. Transworld Publishers Ltd.

⁴Hosseini, K. (2007, May 2). *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (A. Leoni, Narr.). [Audiobook]. Simon & Schuster Audio. https://www.audible.com.au/pd/B00FG9DSR2?source_code=ASSORAP0511160006&share_location=pdp

⁵Rogers, T., & Lasky-Finch, J. (2023, 5 September) as cited in *In favour of simple writing* (2023, 28 September). *The Economist*. <https://www.economist.com/culture/2023/09/28/in-favour-of-simple-writing>

⁶Stella. (2014, November 6). Describing Asian eyes. *Writing With Color*. <https://writingwithcolor.tumblr.com/post/101967940901/describing-asian-eyes>