



Mirroring Violence and Ethnic Discrimination in Khaled Hosseini's Novel *The Kite Runner*

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Abstract: Afghanistan has a rich heritage, a proud history and a combination of multiple cultures and ethnicities. It possesses the wealth of literature, both oral and written in Dari (Persian) and Pashto language. Poetry and fiction have been the dominant forms for Afghan writers. The contemporary Afghan writers who choose English as the medium of their representation are non-residential writers. Some common elements are explored by these writers such as isolation, marginalization, identity crisis, economic crisis, futility of war, violence ethnic discrimination, etc. this paper aims to trace violence and ethnic discrimination in Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner*.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, Violence, Ethnic Discrimination.

Introduction:

Afghanistan has a rich heritage, a proud history and a combination of multiple cultures and ethnicities. The country is known by three principle names – Aryana, in the ancient times; Khorasan, in the mid- eighteenth century and Afghanistan, at present. The name “Afghanistan is believed to be as old as the ethnonyms Afghan, which is documented in the tenth century geography book Hudud al – ‘Alam. The root name “Afghan” was used historically in references to a member of the ethnic Pashtuns, and the suffix “stan” means “place of” in Persian. Therefore, Afghanistan translates to “land of Pashtuns”. Afghanistan, officially the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, is a landlocked country in Asia. The first Mughal Emperor, described its capital, Kabul as “excellent mercantile center” with “the most pleasing climate in the world”. More than five thousand years ago, it was regarded as a centre of culture and learning. The population of Afghanistan mostly composed of ethnic Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks. Their official languages are Pashto and Dari. The land had historically been home to various peoples and has witnessed numerous military campaigns, including those by Alexander, the Great, Mourya, Muslim Arabs, Mongols, British, Soviets and the United States with the allied countries. Initially the literature of Afghanistan was widely influenced by the Persian writings. Later, in nineteenth century, Russian literature and Russian figures had also deep influence on Afghanistan's novelists. Atiq Rahimi, Nadia Hashimi, Tamin Ansary, Assef Soltanzadeh, Nushin Arababzadah, Homeira Qaderi, Yelda Asmatey, Khaled Hosseini, Wajma Admady, etc. are widely known Afghani writers. Poetry and fiction have been the dominant forms through which Afghan writers have expressed the trauma of violence, terror and displacement, economic crisis and loss of identity. One such writer is Khaled Hosseini.

Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan-American novelist and physician. He was born on March 4, 1965 in Kabul, Afghanistan. His father was a diplomat and his mother was a secondary school teacher. Their family moved to Paris, France, in 1976 when Khaled Hosseini was eleven years old. Their family was unable to return their homeland due to invasion of the Soviet Army. In 1980, when Hosseini was fifteen years old, their family was granted political asylum in the United States and they moved to California, San Diego. He received a bachelor degree in Biology in 1988 from Santa Clara University. He received his medical degree in 1993. He also the

founder of the not-for profit organization “The Khaled Hosseini Foundation” which provides humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan. He also a Goodwill Envoy to the UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency. Hosseini began writing his first novel “*The Kite Runner*” in 2001 when he was practicing medicine. He left his profession of physician after his success of his first novel “*The Kite Runner*” which got published in 2003. He used fiction as a medium to reflect the realities of Afghanistan during pre-Soviet invasion, Mujahideen, Taliban and post-Taliban period. His other works are “*A Thousand Splendid Suns*” (2007), “*And the Mountain Echoed*” (2013), and “*Sea Prayers*” (2018). His works *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* were released in more than thirty different nations. Khaled Hosseini dealt with various themes in his works.

The Kite Runner:

The novel *The Kite Runner* was published in May 2003. It is the story of the friendship of two Afghan boys namely, Amir and Hassan. Both the boys grew up in the same household but in different social class and ethnic. One of the major themes of the novel is sin and redemption. In the novel, Amir redeems for his betrayal to Hassan. Khaled Hosseini has depicted the common life of Afghanistan as mentioned in the novel, “... used to climb the popular trees ... annoy our neighbors by reflecting sunlight into their homes with a shard of mirror . . . sit across from each other on a pair of high branches, our naked feet dangling...” (*The Kite Runner* 3). Even though Hosseini stated that he wanted to remind people of a peaceful Afghanistan, also revealed the suffering the nation has experienced due to war and conflict. In words of Amir, “... suddenly Afghanistan changed forever” (32).

Amir belongs to Sunni Muslims, Pashtuns which is the major ethnic group in the country while Hassan and his father, Ali who are the servants living with Amir’s family are “Shi’a Muslim an ethnic Hazara” (7). Shia Muslim, Hazaras are considered a minority tribe in Afghanistan. They are teased by named like “Babalu or Boogeyman” and are referred as “*mice-eating, flat-nosed, load carrying donkeys*” (8-9). The novel clearly depicts the conflicts based on ethnic discrimination. Discrimination means treating someone unfairly because of personal characteristic. It is often used to represent the actions of a dominant majority group in relation to a weak minority group. Discrimination is described as “behavior directed towards category members that is consequential for their outcomes and that is directed towards them not because of any particular deservingness or reciprocity, but simply because they happen to be member of that category” (Correll et al 46). Quillian defined Ethnic discrimination as any “differential treatment on the basis of ethnicity that disadvantages (a member of) an ethnic group.” M.L. Greene et al. defined it as “unfair, differential treatment on the basis of race or ethnicity.” In it some population groups consider themselves superior to other minor groups. Discrimination on the basis of ethnicity is used as a base to suppress Hazaras and to prove their superiority over them. Pashtuns considered themselves as of higher status. When Amir talked to his teacher about the book containing the chapter on the Hazaras, the teacher “wrinkled his nose ... like it was some kind of disease” (*The Kite Runner* 9). Similar account can be traced when Amir refused to call Hassan as his friend. Even though Amir spent most of his time playing, eating and reading stories to Hassan but he does not consider him as his friend with an opinion that “... history isn’t easy to overcome ... I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara...” (24). Hassan, a half-brother of Amir was though “drawn to the mystery of words” (27) remained illiterate as asserted in the novel, “like ... most Hazaras had been decided the minute he had born, ... what use did a servant have for the written word” (26). Being a Hazara boy, he was just work as a servant for Amir like making bed, polishing shoes, ironing his dress, packing his books and other household works with Ali. The writer highlight that the Hazara community is deprived of the basic rights and equality within their own community. In the novel, Assef, a German-Afghan boy shows hatred towards Hassan. For him, “Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns” (38) and Hazaras are “dirty” people who “pollute” (38) their homeland. Amir being called “Agha” also shows the status difference in the country. Assef bully him by calling him “flat-nosed, dirty”. Bullying is equally harmful. It is intentional, unwanted, non-essential behavior that results in harm. Bullying can be successful means of attaining social status (Faris 245-48)). The entire novel centers around the single act of violence. C.N. DeWall, et al. defined Violence as “an any aggressive act that has its goal extreme physical harm, such as injury or death” (246). Violence is an extreme form of aggression, such as assault, rape or murder” (n.d.). In the novel *The Kite Runner* all these forms are depicted by the author. Violence pervades in the novel, even in the harmless activity of kite flying. Assef, who hates Hassan trapped him with his friends, Wali and Kamal. Hassan was raped by Assef when the former refused to give the kite which he caught as a gift for Amir, who won the Kite tournament. Assef’s violence against Hassan shows the expression of social dominance. He justifies his violent and sinful act by saying “there’s nothing sinful about teaching a lesson to a disrespectful donkey” (*The Kite Runner* 71).

The whole incident was witnessed by Amir but he remained indifferent in front of Hassan. Amir “was grateful for the early shadow that fell on Hassan’s face and concealed his” (73). Violence leaves a dark effect both on the person who experience it and the society. According to World Health Organization (WHO) Violence is “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation.” (Krug 5). Further it effects the psychological health of that person which can be traced in the novel as well where Amir noticed, it seems that “all he wants to do is sleep” (*The Kite Runner* 75). Even after weeks, he looked very tired, Amir noticed that “he’d lost weight and grey circles had formed under his puffed up eyes” (81), a happy jolly boy turned into an “old ... Lines had etched into his tanned face and creases framed his eyes” (86). Other than this there are various instances of violence mentioned in the novel during the Taliban rule. Foucault asserts that “power is always exercised at the expense of the people (211). “The intellectual’s role,” he explains, is to engage in “a struggle against power, a struggle aimed at revealing and undermining power where it is most invisible and insidious” (Foucault 207-208). With the coming of Taliban, the inequality and oppression on Hazaras increased. Wahab in his book *A Brief History of Afghanistan* asserts, “In Afghanistan, the discrimination against minority ethnic groups especially the Hazaras is still conducted by the Pashtuns. Due to Hazaras’ differences in races, beliefs, languages, and culture, they are often disrespected and discriminated against” (14-16). The novel clearly depicts the terror and fear that was generated during the Taliban Rule, “the Taliban banned Kite fighting ... later ... the massacred the Hazaras in Mazar-i-Sharif” (*The Kite Runner* 197). There is lot of difference between the social and economic status of Pashtuns and Hazaras. Pashtuns are rich and powerful while Hazaras are weak and poor race. Talibani’s could not accept the Hazaras to be apart of their country. When they came to know about Ali and his family living in big house f Wazir Khan, they interrogated Ali and disbelieving all the story of Hassan, they ordered him to move out. Ali protested them and as a result he and Farzana, Ali’s wife was shot dead. The narrator, Amir gave the fearful picture of Afghanistan where beggars are mostly children with their mothers as fathers are “a rare commodity” there. Another brutality is shown when an adulterers were murdered in front of a large crowd in Ghazi stadium. Not just that the Hazaras were massacred by Taliban as if it was a fun for them as Assef told to Amir, “ “Door to door ... calling for men and the boys... shoot them right in front of their families... Let them remember who they were, where they belonged” ... “Sometimes, we broke down their doors and went inside their homes.... Sweep the barrel of machine gun around the room and fire and fire until the smoke blinded me” (254). The hatred towards Hazaras can also be witnessed in this work when Sohrab, Hassan’s son was ill-treated by Assef as an animal. When Amir saw Sohrab, he was “dressed in a loose, sapphire blue *pirhan-tumban* ... head shaved ... eyes darkened with mascara ... bells strapped around his anklets” (256-57). Assef’s hatred can be seen in the words, “... pride in your people, your customs, your language. Afghanistan is like a beautiful mansion littered with garbage, and someone has to take out the garbage ... Ethnic cleansing. I like it. I like the sound of it” (261). The threat of violence against Hassan and Sohrab is frightening but the violence against Assef at the end to save Sohrab does not create any such fear. In fact, it offers the satisfaction of dispatching a devious enemy.

Conclusion: The writer has depicted the real picture of Afghanistan under different political rules. It contains a great deal of violence and cruelty. The novel shows terror and fear that was generated in the Afghan people during the war and the rule of the Taliban. It reflects how violence effects the life of the people directly and indirectly. The novel deals with the issue of ethnic discrimination against the minor ethnic group, Hazaras.

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