



Between Life and Death: A Thanatopolitical Reading of *The Kite Runner*

Niya V Raj

MA English Language and Literature

Christ Nagar College, Maranalloor, Trivandrum, Kerala

Abstract

Thanatopolitics – a concept that examines how power operates not merely through the governance of life but through the sovereign decision over who may live and who must die, and how this power is sometimes resisted by those who are neglected or condemned to death. This paper tries to explore Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003), through the theoretical framework of thanatopolitics, where personal guilt and collective violence intersect to expose the ethical implications of sovereignty, class, and ethnicity of Afghanistan. In his debut novel, Hosseini portrays the life and friendship of two young boys – Amir and Hassan – who live in a war-torn Afghanistan. His narrative reveals the systemic marginalization and dehumanization of the Hazara community, positioning them as subjects of exclusion. The novel explores themes such as, friendship, betrayal, guilt, redemption, familial relationships, political instability, cultural disintegration, the enduring impact of imperialism, and the quest for both national and personal identity, life and death. The recurring motifs of sacrifice, redemption, and moral awakening showcase how individuals are trapped in the vicious web of a regime that determines value and disposability of life. The study employs the methodology of close reading of the novel and textual analysis, to delve deep into the narrative where thanatopolitical argument is both reproduced and resisted, altering the personal redemption into a critique of the moral and political economies of death in postcolonial Afghanistan, where they decide who will live and who will die.

Key Words: Thanatopolitics, *The Kite Runner*, Power, Death, Life, Afghanistan, Hazara, Marginalization, Dehumanization, Sovereignty.

Literature has been evolving and experiencing new forms of changes throughout the coming of age, through the birth of new genres, literary theories and writings. One such theory is, *Thanatopolitics*, a concept rooted in the thought of Michel Foucault – a French philosopher – and further developed and theorized by Giorgio Agamben and Achille Mbembe, which explores how political regimes exercise power not solely through the regulation of life but through the capacity to determine who is rendered disposable, who may be killed with impunity, and which bodies are excluded from the sphere of recognized humanity. It simply means “the politics of death”, evolving from Foucault's concept of *Biopolitics* and closely related to Mbembe's concept of *Necropolitics*. The suzerain logic of deciding life and death becomes especially visible in the contexts marked by ethnic hierarchies, imperial legacies, and ideological states, where populations are stratified according to their pre-conceived worth. Many literary works could be portrayed through the lens of this particular concept, when looked into it without the conviction one is holding onto. Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) offers a rich narrative experience in which the intersection of sovereignty, guilt, ethnic power structures, and personal complicity reveals the mechanics of thanatopolitical power in Afghanistan and how it

affects the lives of the natives. Through the exploration of themes like personal betrayal, ethnic violence, and systemic marginalization of the Hazara community, the novel exemplifies how death becomes not merely a fact of conflict but a regulated destiny imposed upon subjugated lives, which are meant to be un-alive according to the system. The story of Amir and Hassan, is embedded within the larger history of Afghanistan's decline into war and sectarian suppression, which illustrates how thanatopolitics functions both on the intimate, individual level and in the sweeping historical realm of collective violence and exclusion of a particular community or humanity as a whole.

The novel, opens with the blooming friendship of Amir – a Pashtun, by ethnicity – and Hassan – a Hazara boy, working in Amir's house, still marked by the invisible lines of power and hierarchy. The story takes place in three time lines jumping back and forth in time showing off, how the children grew up and lived through the war. Their relationship occupies a position of entrenched social subordination, despite growing up in the same household, as the dominant and the subjugated. Hassan was a great kite runner only for Amir, whom he believed as his brother and friend. Throughout the novel, Hosseini makes it clear that Hassan's identity renders him inherently vulnerable in a system in which the worth of lives is unequally distributed. When Amir gets all the privileges, Hassan is surviving there with the leftovers. Hassan embodies what Agamben (1998) refers to as bare life, a category of existence stripped of political agency and exposed to the possibility of violence without legal or moral consequence. The novel takes a major turning point, when Hassan is sexually assaulted by Assef, who initially tried to bully Amir and Hassan came to the rescue, while during this time when Hassan is the victim, Amir hesitates and fears to even move from his position. This event is not merely a personal atrocity but a deeply political one, reflecting an ethnic logic in which Hazara bodies are considered available for use, abuse, and degradation. Amir's silent complicity, deeply rooted in fear and class anxiety, exposes the subtle ways in which ordinary individuals reproduce the structures of death-bound jurisdiction by choosing inaction over intervention.

“The Pashtuns had precluded and oppressed the Hazaras, driven them from their lands, buried their homes and sold their women. The reason of Pashtuns had oppressed the Hazaras that Pashtuns is Sunni Muslim, while Hazaras is Shia” (Hosseini, 2003, p.8)

The novel describes individual acts of violence within a continuum of national history in which sovereignty is repeatedly contested and reasserted through mechanisms of death. Many deaths including that of Hassan and his wife and the assault of their son is included. Afghanistan's massive changes, from monarchy to Soviet invasion to Taliban domination, are all phases of political reconfiguration in which the value of life is renegotiated and redistributed. Under Taliban rule, violence against the Hazara population becomes explicitly state-sanctioned, crystallizing the workings of thanatopower. As Stuart J Murray say in his work, *“Thanatopolitics: On the Use of Death for Mobilizing Political Life”* (2006), “If biopolitics is a productive power that necessitates or silently calls for death as the consequence of “making live,” then thanatopolitics is not merely the lethal underside, of biopolitics but is itself a productive power in the voices of those who biopolitical power “lets die” (Murray, 2006, p.718), when power changed and get transited from one hand to the other, subjugation increased beyond its already existing level. The annihilation of Hazara neighborhoods and public executions demonstrate how potentate control is maintained not through governance of life but through the exemplary spectacle of death (Foucault, 2003). This conditionality of existence is captured in the narrative's recurrent references to silence, absence, and erasure, through the portrayal of the character Amir. His guilt and silence are the major factors, which signal a political field where certain deaths do not disrupt the moral order because the lives extinguished were never fully recognized as lives in the first place.

“I could stop into that alley, stand up for Hassan the way he'd stood up for me all those times in the past and accept whatever would happen to me. Or could run, in the end I ran. I ran because I was a coward” (Hosseini, 2003. p.72)

Amir's redemption arc intersects with the logic of thanatopolitics, as the trauma he witnesses and internalizes reflects the larger cultural normalization of Hazara disposability. Amir even after belonging to a higher ethnicity and even after having the power to give a helping hand to Hassan decided to run, because of his

selfishness. His journey back to Afghanistan becomes not merely a quest for individual moral recovery but a forced reckoning with the history of exclusion that shaped his silence. Redeeming the power over himself and rescuing Sohrab – Hassan’s son – was nothing but a self-satisfactory act of being guilt-free. The fact that Hassan continues to embody loyalty and dignity, even in the face of systemic violence, underscores the ethical contradiction inherent in societies where the marginalized exhibit greater humanity than their supposed superiors. The novel suggests that redemption is intertwined with recognizing how certain lives have been consigned to expendability and how survivors are haunted by the traces of those abandoned to silence and death. Guilt becomes a form of resistance to thanatopolitical logic only when it moves beyond introspection to a confrontation with the conditions that produce disposable lives.

“For you a thousand times over” (Hosseini, 2003, p.340)

The recurring tension between life and death in *The Kite Runner* operates on both symbolic and literal levels, where the deaths of Hassan and his wife under Taliban control, the orphan-hood of Sohrab, and the persistent sense of living under threat of death illustrate how entire communities inhabit what Agamben terms zones of indistinction, where the boundary between life and death is permeable and subject to political whim (1998). The novel’s treatment of suffering, displacement, and trauma is not incidental but central to understanding the governance of death in Afghanistan’s socio-political history. The Hazaras’ dehumanization, justified by ethnocentric narratives and religious rhetoric, enables their reduction to a state in which their survival is not guaranteed by any moral or legal framework. The intimate dimension of Hassan’s assault, therefore, reflects the broader national reality in which the Hazara body is already inscribed as a site of permissible violence.

“In the end, I ran, I ran because I was a coward. I was afraid of Assef and what he would do to me. I was afraid of getting hurt. That’s what I told myself as I turned my back to the alley, to Hassan. That is what I made myself believe. I actually aspired to cowardice, because the alternative, the real reason I was running, was that Assef was right: Nothing was free in the world. Maybe Hassan was the price I had to pay, the lamb I had to slay, to win Baba. Was it a fair price? The answer floated to my conscious mind before I could want it: He was just a Hazara, wasn’t he?” (Hosseini, 2003, p.73)

Furthermore, Amir’s act of leaving Afghanistan for America mirrors a form of privileged mobility that aligns with the privilege of escape from the consequences of thanatopolitical complicity, where others, especially Hassan suffered here in the war-torn Afghanistan. His ability to leave a collapsing regime while Hassan cannot emphasizes the asymmetry between those who are bound to zones of abandonment and those who are not. The United States, in this narrative, does not simply function as a geographical escape but represents a transfer from one regime of power to another, highlighting the global dimensions of how certain populations are marked as dispensable. The hierarchy of lives extends across borders, and even in exile, Amir’s guilt reflects his past participation in a world stratified by death’s uneven distribution.

“The beggars were mostly children now, thin and grim faced, some no older than five or six. They set in the laps of the burqa-clad mother’s alongside gutters at busy street corners and chanted “Baksheesh, baksheesh!” and something else, something I hadn’t noticed right away: Hardly any of them sat with an adult male – the war had made fathers a rare commodity in Afghanistan.” (Hosseini, 2003, p.226)

The narrative also offers moments where thanatopolitical power is resisted, though such resistance is fraught with risk and inadequacy. When Amir seeks to rescue Sohrab, even if it’s for his own emotional redemption, he steps into a role that momentarily subverts the logic of disposable life. Yet the trauma Sohrab carries, demonstrates that survival does not guarantee liberation from the structures that decide who may live and who must die. Sohrab’s attempt to end his own life, further illustrates the collapse between life and death for those who carry generational wounds left by autocratic violence. His silence embodies the muted existence of the subjugated ones, whose lives persist but not with full access to speech, representation, or agency. The novel’s further engagement with sacrifice and redemption is intertwined with the moral economies of death in postcolonial Afghanistan, where Amir’s attempt to atone is haunted by the recognition that individual action

cannot fully undo systemic violence. However, the attempt itself signifies a symbolic resistance to the thanatopolitical order. In taking responsibility not only for his betrayal but also for the political conditions that shaped it, he confronts the reality of how entire communities are made to inhabit spaces where death is both imminent and normalized. Redemption, in this sense, becomes a critique of the structures that determine the disposability of lives rather than a purely internal transformation. Especially, after the incident where Amir gets to know that Hassan is his own blood and he couldn't save him because of his fragile childhood ego.

“I felt like a man sliding down a stop cliff, clutching at shrubs and tangles of brambles and coming up empty handed. The room was swooping up and down, swaging side to side. “Did Hassan know?” I said through lips that didn't feel like my own. Rahim Khan closed his eyes, shook his head” (Hosseini, 2003, p.206)

In exploring the ethical implications of the monarchical rule, *The Kite Runner* reveals how power operates through both spectacular violence and silent consent. Amir's reflection on his betrayal and silence exposes how ordinary individuals are socialized into accepting the disposability of others. His guilt becomes a space in which the politics of death intersects with the politics of memory, compelling a retrospective awareness of how lives were rendered invisible. This act of remembrance becomes a fragile form of resistance, challenging the political economy that denies the humanity of the marginalized. The novel does not offer facile resolutions but instead presents redemption as an ongoing negotiation with the past, shaped by histories of exclusion and violence. By portraying death not as the interruption of life but as a regulated outcome of sovereign power, Hosseini tries to explore the deeper ethical crisis of a world structured by inequalities of existence. Ultimately, the novel demonstrates that the boundary between life and death in postcolonial Afghanistan is politicized, and that the struggle for redemption cannot be separated from the recognition of how sovereignty determines value and disposability. Through its portrayal of Amir and Hassan's lives, the novel critiques the structures that enforce silence, normalize exclusion, and perpetuate cycles of violence. The narrative thus becomes not only a story of individual guilt but a thanatopolitical meditation on the lives deemed unworthy of protection and the haunting legacy of those decisions.

Thanatopolitics in the novel is inseparable from the construction of ethnic, cultural, and class hierarchies that dictate who is protected and who is left to die. The social fabric of Afghanistan, as portrayed by Hosseini, is marked by inherited myths that rationalize the exclusion of the Hazara community. The political transitions in the country do not dismantle these hierarchies but often intensify them, as regimes seek to legitimize their power through domination over those already exposed to death. The novel makes visible how state and non-state actors alike deploy the rhetoric of purity, lineage, and nationalism to justify their control over life and death, rendering the experience of the Hazara population a crucial case study of thanatopolitical exclusion. By tracing the personal, the political, and the historical through a thanatopolitical lens, the novel reveals the mechanisms by which power inscribes itself onto bodies and communities. It challenges the reader to reconsider the moral boundaries of survival, complicity, and responsibility in societies where death is both a weapon and a verdict. The disposability of Hazara lives, the silence of witnesses, and the intimate violence that shapes the fates of individuals are all part of a larger structure in which sovereignty manifests through the control of death rather than the preservation of life. The narrative forces an uncomfortable yet necessary acknowledgment, that the most profound violence is often those rendered invisible by the very systems that authorize them.

The Kite Runner functions as a literary intervention into the politics of death in postcolonial contexts, in foregrounding the intertwined links of guilt, ethnic stratification and sovereign violence. It exposes the fragile ethics of remembrance and redemption in societies where the marginalized are written out of the narratives of both nation and humanity. The story of Amir and Hassan thus becomes a lens through which the reader can understand how death is not merely a consequence of war or personal cruelty but a deliberate outcome of political rationalities that decide whose lives are valued and whose deaths are permissible. Therefore, the thanatopolitical reading of the novel sheds light on the dynamic, revealing the ethical urgency of confronting the mechanisms that produce exclusion, silence, and erasure of people belonging to lower community, deciding who os to live and die.

References

Agamben, Giorgio. (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (D. Heller-Roazen, Trans.). Stanford University Press.

Foucault, M. (2003). *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976* (D. Macey, Trans.). Picador.

Hosseini, Khaled. (2003). *The Kite Runner*. Riverhead Books.

Murray, Stuart J (2006). “*Thanatopolitics: On the Use of Death for Mobilizing Political Life*” Bloomsbury Handbook to Literary and Cultural Theory, ed. J.R. Di ,718–19.

