

THE PROBLEM OF RACISM AND ETHNICITY IN *THE KITE RUNNER* BY KHALED HOSSEINI

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Abstract.

Racism is a worldwide matter issue is a discrimination based on the physical characteristics of people possessed by certain people, their ethnicity, nationality and so on which make some people superior and some inferior. Racism and ethnicity are usually considered as the same concepts while in fact ethnicity is a sub-class of racism. In every nation, there are some ethnic groups with the same origin and similar customs that may or may not be judged equally by the power-handler ethnic groups. An example of such country is Afghanistan which is severely an ethnic country. This study explores the social, cultural, and scientific investigations done on the people's races and ethnical characteristics by using Afghan. The novel *The Kite Runner* depicts the two major Afghan ethnical populations, Pashtun and Hazara, and their social, cultural, and religious conflicts. Accordingly, this article will try to examine the root of ethnic prejudices and oppression among the Afghan people in the novel and the reasons for their ethnic conducts are explained and analyzed based on the Feagin's denial of human difference.

Introduction

Racism is a bitter reality throughout the ages and all societies. One subcategory of racism is ethnicity, considered as a divisive substitute of the term racism. To be obvious, ethnicity may or may not be in a race. Actually, ethnicity refers to a group of people who are of the same "origin, history, values, attitudes, and behavior" but may differ in terms of clothing, customs or religion. Ethnicity is in fact the cultural differences that exist among the people of a nation. Ethnicity could also be called *cultural identity*. Hence, it is culture that plays a role in dividing people into different groups since people's clothes, rituals, and even morals are structured by it. These cultural objects are materials like costumes and clothes or non- materials like language and customs.

Racism is divided into two types; one is the racist behavior of the powerful countries against the colonized countries and the other is the conflicts and challenges among the ethnical groups. For decades, Afghanistan which is a race affected and ethnocentric country suffering from foreign interventions. E.g. The Soviet occupation in 1979 is a case in point. Internal conflicts and wars including the period of Taliban rule over Afghanistan are a severe racial issue that vastly killed minority ethnic groups in Afghanistan like the Hazara.

The Kite Runner, which is adapted in a film was produced in 2007 and received many attentions. It is an English novel written by the Afghan-American writer Khaled Hosseini in 2003. This novel illustrates the story of a young Afghan boy named “Amir” and his wealthy father who are from the Pashtun ethnic group of Afghanistan and live with their servant “Ali” and his son “Hassan”, who are from the Hazara ethnic group. Although Hazaras are inferior to Pashtuns and are treated inhumanly by Pashtuns, Amir and Hassan are two close friends. However, as the story goes forward, a distance is made between these friends and when Soviet invades Afghanistan, Amir with his father, Baba, goes to America to live there. In America, the father and son face some difficulties with some Americans who do not have a positive view toward Afghans. However, they keep on living there and at last Amir becomes a successful writer in his adulthood. At the end of the novel, Amir comes back to Afghanistan and brings Hassan’s son with himself to live with him and his wife in America.

Although this novel has many themes within itself like war, friendship, migration, poverty, and so on; this article discusses the theme of racism in an argument concerning the clash and conflict between the Pashtun and the Hazara, the two ethnical Afghan groups, through the lenses of the American sociologist "Joe R. Feagin" by whom the idea of inferiority of some people to others is denied. Thus, the aim of this paper is to take out the main reasons for racial and ethnic behavior of Afghan figures in *The Kite Runner* and bring the social, scientific, and political justifications of racist people in the novel to prove that as Feagin points out all these are just some excuses that the authoritative groups in a nation or generally in the world use to gain their plans which is their domination over other people and their meagre use of natural resources due to the absence of mineral and agricultural resources. Besides, Amir’s reaction as the protagonist of the novel in the later chapters of the novel in bringing back Hassan’s son to America and his sympathy with him can be representative of Hosseini’s concern for the existence of ethnic and racist views in his country.

Afghanistan is an ethnically assorted nation, the objective of the present research is to study the racist and ethnic views among Afghans in the Khaled Hosseini’s novel, *The Kite Runner*. The text is analyzed and interpreted by using Feagin’s argument on the human difference with the individuals’ role in construction of this notion in society. This idea is rejected by Feagin that some specific groups because of their physical and biological are distinguished from others and according to him such

definitions that are said to be based on the scientific observations are not true and real and they are actually far from close scientific observation. These artifact definitions are considered by Feagin to be based on the popular beliefs that gradually formed in the sixteenth till nineteenth century. The following explanations and analyses are provided to give an obvious picture of ethnicity in Afghanistan.

In the small country of Afghanistan where its population till 2009 was approximately 28 million people, there are many ethnic groups like Tajiks, Pashtuns, Uzbeks, Hazaras, Baluchi, and Turkoman. Accordingly, Afghanistan is defined as “a country comprised of various groups with differing cultural traits, including language, religious practices, physical appearance and attire, and customs...” The plot and events of the novel *The Kite Runner*, written by Khaled Hosseini, is set in Afghanistan and America and is around the two groups of Pashtuns and Hazara that are respectively the majority and minority ethnic groups in Afghanistan, who respectively include 46% and 9% of population of Afghanistan. Besides, the term “majority” refers to the extensive number of Pashtuns in Afghanistan, it also implies their power, influence, and wealth in this society. In contrast, while the term “minority” discloses the low number of Hazaras, it also reveals lack of the economic, political, and social power and influence faced by certain groups (Hazaras) and as a result exclusion from a positive participation from social, political and generally full participation in community. It is said by Amir in the novel that Hazaras were deeply oppressed by Pashtuns. They were killed by Pashtuns and forced to get out of their lands and homes and were considered as Pashtuns’ slaves. “The book said that my people had killed the Hazaras, driven them from their lands, burned their homes, and sold their women.”

Pashtuns had many reasons for their violent behavior. One of their justifications was that Afghanistan was ruled by Pashtuns since the establishment of the Durrani Empire in 1747. In the past, Afghanistan was a region of the Persian Empire. When in the eighteenth century the king of Persia announced that all people must convert to Shism, Pashtuns who lived in the south of Afghanistan, opposed this edict and eventually attacked Kabul and soon the Durrani gained control over Afghanistan. Hazaras were a small group in the central territory of Afghan state that were thought to be from the Mongolian race and as Amir says: “they were Mongol and that they looked a little like Chinese people.”

In the novel, Amir and Hassan are represented as the two opposite pillars of the same society; the wealthy and the poor, Sunni and Shi’a, Pashtun and Hazara, powerful and the feeble. One significant point about the novel is that from the very beginning of the story the theme of ethnicity and racism is announced by the protagonist of the novel. I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975. I remember the precise moment, crouching behind a crumbling mud wall, peeking into the alley near the frozen creek.

Amir and Hassan grew up together and no one was so much closer to them, Amir never displayed his feelings toward Hassan since his unconscious mind was filled with the words that were based on the human differences and superiority of Pashtuns over Hazaras. Similarly, Amir's father in spite of his flexibility toward Hazara people showed a different manner of himself toward Hazaras:

... The curious thing was, I never thought of Hassan and me as friends either. Not in the usual sense, anyhow. Never mind that we taught each other to ride a bicycle with no hands Because history isn't easy to overcome. Neither is religion. In the end, I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara, I was Sunni and he was Shi'a, and nothing was ever going to change.

Assef is also a character that strongly desires the elimination of the Hazara from Afghanistan. He is a German-Afghan guy that is exactly what John Arthur says about racist people. Assef with blue eyes and blonde hair holds "attitudes [that] include unjustified hostility toward a racial group" [18]. He strongly dislikes Hazaras and some sort of sense of violence could be seen in his behavior toward them. His hate toward Hazaras is derived from the past when some Germans were sent to Afghanistan by Hitler and especially to Nuristan where its people had blue eyes and blond hair [19] since these Germans due to their facial appearance did not approve to be from Aryan origin, the matter that was important for Hitler. In *The Kite Runner*, Assef is determined to remove all the Hazaras from the region of Afghanistan and actually it is as a mission for him since Afghanistan was the ground of the Pashtun people and Pashtuns were the real Afghans and the true heirs of it. Assef also blames Amir and his father, Baba, and calls them "a disgrace to Afghanistan" for their support of Hassan and his father because they are Hazaras. In adulthood, Assef joins Taliban, who were mostly Pashtuns, in order to fulfill his mission. He tells Amir that "Afghanistan is like a beautiful big house that was filled with garbage and it is his duty to remove the garbage. All these lead him to kill many Hazaras in Hazarajat, the hometown of Hazara ethnic group, in a massacre that was arranged against the Hazaras. For Assef this massacre is an honor and Amir to him is a traitor who escaped from his country and left it for Hazaras.

In spite of the harsh presence of ethnicity and conflicts of some ethnic groups like Pashtun and Hazara and of violent acts of some persons like Assef toward Hazara, there are several signs in the novel *The Kite Runner* that that these quarrels can be solved in the Afghan society and Afghanistan can be changed to a united country. One big example of it is the friendship of Amir and Hassan, one from Pashtun and the other from Hazara ethnic group and their reciprocal sacrificing Hassan in his childhood helps Amir over and over at the expense of being raped by Assef and his friends and Amir in his adulthood proves his sacrifice spirit when he goes back to Afghanistan and rescues Sohrab, Hassan's son, at the cost of having a mortal and fatal quarrel with Assef and going to the death edge. Thus, it cannot be judged that the conflicts struggles between ethnic groups in Afghanistan are the outcomes of racism and ethnicity, though they have roles in this course, they are not the main reasons.

Conclusion

Racism is more a social construct than a biological difference. Racism has negative outcomes and is the most destructive element which excludes people from social participation and at last excludes them from enjoying human rights and leads to oppression, discrimination, resulting in cruelties. Majority ethnic groups having money and power in their hands provoke wrong attitudes toward the minority ethnic groups in order to take of society, fix their position in society, and destroy whoever they dislike. They use the misconception of human difference that was created between 16th and 19th centuries to prove that they are superior to other people. In *The Kite Runner*, the novel written by Khaled Hosseini, the subject of racism and ethnicity is thoroughly conspicuous and perceptible in the early part of the book when Amir and Baba are in Afghanistan and in the chapters that are related to the dominance of Taliban in Afghanistan. The unfair behavior of Pashtuns including Baba and Amir is detailed by Amir himself throughout the novel. The narrative explains the severe and terrible actions of Taliban toward Hazaras who are immediately killed whenever they encounter a Taliban.

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