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**Marginalizing Hazaras: A Study of Khaled Hosseini's
*The Kite Runner***

Dhoop Singh Chahal

Research Scholar,
Dept. of English
Maharishi Dayanand University
Rohtak
&

Dr. Randeep Rana

Professor
Dept. of English
Maharishi Dayanand University
Rohtak

Afghanistan, a fragmented nation of multiple identities and web of ethnic groups embraces Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, Aimak, Turkmen, Baluch, Nuristani and Pashyas. Akin to other Muslim countries, Afghanistan is principally inhabited by Shia and Sunni sects except a few Hindu, Sikh, and Jew communities. Being an amalgam of such diverse groups, it has a long history of racial discrimination. Minorities have been discriminated against for quite long by major ethnic groups. Hazaras in particular have been persecuted brutally by Pashtuns. Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* is an extremely powerful narrative highlighting the horrors of ethnic discrimination in Afghanistan. The story deals with various trials and tribulations endured by a young Hazara boy Hassan, his family, and other Hazaras of Afghanistan. Hosseini unfolds the layers of manifold oppressions, voices the hidden cries, exposes the invisible wounds of common Afghans, and truthfully depicts the socio-ethnic discrimination.

Khaled Hosseini an Afghan born American Novelist has three novels to his name; *The Kite Runner* (2003), *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), and the latest *And the Mountain Echoed* (2013). Since the publication of *The Kite Runner* (2003), Hosseini has ceaselessly and prominently represented and given voice to the common, war-weary Afghan people through his novels. Basically, all his novels are set in Afghanistan and his protagonists are common Afghan people. His distinction as a novelist lies in his depiction of universal human problems under religious fundamentalism and terrorism which showcases never-ending predicament for the affected. His concern for his homeland is not just verbal but he is determined to bring about transformation.

At present Hosseini is a Goodwill Envoy for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. He has a genuine concern for his nation, which is conspicuous in his working tirelessly to provide humanitarian assistance to his native country through the Khaled Hosseini Foundation. He founded it in 2007 with UNHCR.

One reason that made this novel popular was its appearance in 2003, after 9/11 attacks. The world was still in shock and Afghanistan focus of attention. Another reason for its popularity was its reliability as a first hand source as it was by an Afghan novelist. Through this novel Hosseini certainly became the first Afghan novelist to fictionalize the social and cultural aspects of his country for readers worldwide. The struggle of common Afghans and horror of war-torn and devastated nation are woven in a web in a highly eloquent and soul searching fictional narrative which media fails to represent. It unveils various social and domestic

problems of Afghanistan and invisible wounds of ethnic minorities, women, children and the helpless are exposed. Rather depicting the stories of Afghan war and warlords. Some other factors like language, texture and writer's narrative skills also contribute to make this novel popular as over 21 million copies sold worldwide.

The Kite Runner is an extremely powerful fictional narrative which highlights the horrors of ethnic discrimination in Afghanistan. It focuses on the ethnic issues in a typically Islamic country under the reign of terrible war. The story is told from the perspective of a young Pashtun boy Amir yet it deals with various trials and tribulations endured by three generations of a family representing thousands of Hazaras in Afghanistan.

Difference is the basis of our intelligence. We understand the world through differences. Difference gives meaning to things or difference is meaning. In other words, our identity is the result of our difference from other beings and things, hence it leads to discrimination. So to say, difference is inherent in us it is natural, perpetual and universal. Where do we not find it? Down the ages history (His-story) has been a tale of discrimination against one group by the other. Be it man/woman, black/white, poor/rich, Aryan/Non-Aryan, occident/orient or ruler/ruled. Identity is the construct of discrimination. We rise by pushing the others down. Hence discrimination is a natural phenomenon. We find discrimination throughout the world but discrimination between frequently interacting communities is more complex and hazardous. And it becomes highly intricate in case of a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-lingual nation, like Afghanistan where one tribe or community leaves no stone unturned to dominate over the other. But what we call human is not the construct of discrimination or difference or nature. Human is the construct of socialization. Socialization teaches us tolerance and harmony. It teaches us to curb our selfish nature and give space to other individuals and communities. Hence being human means against nature.

Afghanistan like other Muslim countries mainly consists of Shi'a and Sunni communities, except a few Hindu, Sikh, and Jew families. A demographic survey of Afghanistan under a program *Countries and their Culture* proclaims that there have been no reliable or official census figures available, but according to an estimate in 1997 the population was more than twenty millions. The population in rural area was estimated to be 80 percent of the total. Pashtuns chiefly occupy southeast, south, and west of Afghanistan. The Tajiks principally live in northeast, northwest and urban areas and Hazaras reside in Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif. Uzbeks occupy the north of Afghanistan. Aymaks live in northwest, Turkmen (along Turkmenistan's border), Baluchis (southwest), and Nuristanis and Pashays occupy Kabul. Sunnis comprise 84 percent and Shi'as 15 percent of the total population. Shi'as are mostly Hazara and mainly live in Hazarajat and Badkhsan. Such diverse and sparse population never allowed Afghanistan to be a strong and unified nation and war led to further fragmentation.

According to *A Brief History of Afghanistan* (2007) the statistics of population was; Pashtun 42 percent, Tajik 27 percent, Hazara 9 percent, Uzbek 9 percent, Aimak 4 percent, Turkmen 3 percent, Baluchis 2 percent, and others 4 percent.

As per Wikipedia the ethnic groups in Afghanistan (according to a survey in 2004) are as follows;

Pashtun- 36%

Tajik- 27%

Hazara- 09%

Uzbek- 15%

Aimak- 04%
 Turkmen- 03%
 Baluchis- 02%
 Others- 04%

From the above mentioned sources it is clear that the Pashtun community is the major ethnic group followed by Tajiks and others are minorities. These minorities have always been discriminated against by the dominating communities in Afghanistan. Chiefly, Hazaras have been brutally persecuted by the Pashtuns. According to *World Directory of Minorities*, Shi'as have faced a long-term oppression from Sunnis. Since 1880 Sunnis have repressed Shi'as politically, socially, and economically in the name of *jihad*. Pashtun Abdul Rahman (1880-1901) targeted Hazaras, killed thousands of men, and grabbed their land. He imposed taxes, molested women and looted their homes. As per an estimate till 1893, about 60 percent of the Hazara populations were wiped out. The persecution of Hazaras continued throughout the nineteenth century and during Monarchy i.e. 1929 onwards, they were forced to conceal their identity. In 1996, Taliban declared *jihad* against Hazaras. They faced rapes, molestation and mass executions.

According to *Wikipedia*, the origins of Hazara people have not been fully reconstructed. It is widely believed that Hazara people have Mongolian ancestry but another popular theory proposes that they are the descendants of Kushans, who are believed to have built Bhuddhas of Bamiyan. Later theory is supported by the semblance of their facial features with statues of Buddha but their Mongolian origin is genetically proven. Whatever be the origin of Hazaras, their Turko-Mongolian features distinguish them from other ethnic groups of Afghanistan. They can be differentiated easily on the basis of their features, language, culture, and religion from other people and this is the reason that they are discriminated against and have been persecuted for a long time by the majority groups.

Ethnic discrimination is one of the burning issues in Afghanistan for quite long. But on television or magazines or newspapers Afghans are shown to be bearded-gunmen. It creates the impression that Afghanistan is all about war and terrorism. Sometimes the social issues are raised by media, but not dealt with in detail. Just statistics are discussed devoid of any human feelings. But through fiction, especially of the native or exiled writers like Hosseini these problems are vividly and sympathetically expressed.

Hosseini, through Hassan, unlocks one of the common problems which lies buried under the prominent issues discussed in media i.e. war and terrorism. In *The Kite Runner*, we can clearly observe the intensity of socio-ethnic discrimination. Hazaras and other Shia are humiliated at every level be it domestic or social. This is quite conspicuous through the comments of the main characters and through the victimization of Hassan.

Hassan belongs to the Hazara community, a minority ethnic group in Afghanistan. He is a typical Shia Muslim with Mongolian features. He is Amir's servant and Ali's son. He lives in a corner of Amir's house. It is a mud-hut like quarter. He is very gentle, kind and selfless person. Though the story seems to be about the friendship between Amir and Hassan yet the reality is different. Hassan is actually the victim of socio-ethnic discrimination, he is known as Amir's 'Hazara'.

Catch them young as they say! If we train a child to be a slave, it becomes impossible for him/her to break the shackles of slavery later on. So trained he accepts his situation as ordained by fate. Similar is the case with the oppressor. Amir in his nostalgia claims Hassan

to be his friend and half-brother but throughout the childhood period he seemed biased on ethnic ground. It is evident from the very beginning of the novel. In chapter two, Amir describes Hassan as;

I can still see Hassan up on that tree, sunlight flickering through the leaves on his almost perfectly round face, a face like a Chinese doll chiseled from hardwood: his flat, broad nose and slanting narrow eyes like bamboo leaves ... his tiny low-set ears, ... the cleft lip, just left of midlines where the Chinese doll marker's instrument may have slipped (Hosseini 3).

It is fairly conspicuous that Amir describes Hassan mainly through his Hazara look; he appears to set himself apart from Hassan, to prove his own superiority. Also he maintains his status of a superior by not visiting Hassan's quarter often. He asserts;

In the eighteen years that I lived in that house, I stepped into Hassan and Ali's quarter only a handful of times, when the sun dropped low behind the hills and we were done playing for the day, Hassan and I parted ways. I went past the rosebushes to Baba's mansion, Hassan to the mud shack where he had been born, where he'd lived his entire life (5).

Burden of maintaining social relations is always on the oppressed rather than the oppressor. Amir breaks the bond of friendship, the very core of this story; he appears to have no regard for social institutions like friendship. He openly and in a very callous manner denies Hassan as his friend, as he puts;

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 or to build a fully functional homemade camera out of a cardboard box. Never mind that we spent entire winters flying kites, running kites. Never mind that to me, the face of Afghanistan is that of a boy with a thin-boned frame, a shaved head and low-set ears, boy with a Chinese doll face perpetually lit by a hare-lipped smile. Never mind any of these things. 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 Shia, and nothing was ever going to change that. Nothing (22).

Hierarchy in social relation and history play a significant role in strengthening discrimination. To the oppressed hierarchy seems natural. It is easier to follow it rather than revolt. For sustenance, any prevailing system of oppression seeks fillip from history. Opinions and beliefs infuse discrimination in a society. Once instilled discriminating propaganda is passed on from generation to generation impossible to stop.

Amir goes to a reputed school in Kabul, but Hassan helps his father in household activities. Baba and Ali never talk about the possibility of Hassan's education. It indicates that Hazaras are supposed to be illiterate, to be kept as servants only. But Hassan is a natural genius, he is good at poetry and riddles. Amir is jealous of his intelligence and in a rage of anger he makes ethnic comments on Hassan as, "What does he know, that illiterate Hazara? He'll never be

anything but a cook. How dare he criticize you (Amir)"(30)? Hassan is just like a toy in Amir's life. Amir does not include Hassan in games when others (Pashtun) are around. In fact Hassan is not his friend but just a servant, who plays the role of a friend, as directed, for a while. As Amir says, "But he is not my friend! He's my servant!" (36).

Assef, a sociopath, is an evil incarnation in the novel. He is born of Pashtun-Afghan father and a German mother. On ethnic issues he is more radical than any of the 'pure' Pashtuns. He seems to be impressed with Hitler and compares Hitler's hatred towards Jews to his own hatred towards Hazaras. Amir's discrimination against Hassan is just limited to his ideas and comments as he likes him but Assef reacts horribly towards Hazaras. Whenever we meet Assef, we find him anti-Hazara in words as well as in deeds. His first appearance in the novel introduces him as a radical anti-Hazara as;

Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns. It always has been, always will be. We are the true Afghans, the pure Afghans, not this flat-nosed here; His people pollute our homeland, our *watan*. They dirty our blood ... Afghanistan for Pashtuns, I say. That's my vision.... Too late for Hitler ... But not for us.... I'll ask the President to do what the king didn't have the *quwat* to do. To rid Afghanistan of all the dirty, *Kasseef Hazaras* (35).

Here it is interesting to note that Hassan is equally Pashtun and more Afghan than Assef. Hassan is born of a Pashtun father (Baba) and Afghan mother while Assef's mother is German; the only difference is that Assef is recognized as Pashtun while Hassan is not, because he is illegitimate.

Perfection in good or evil is rare. We all live somewhere in these extremes. In the same manner not all people of the dominant class are oppressors. Baba and Amir have some sympathy for the oppressed but they feel helpless before the dominant current of hatred. Assef rebukes Baba and Amir for their friendliness and love towards Ali and Hassan. He shows his anger as, "If idiots like you and your father didn't take these people in, we'd be rid of them by now. They'd all just go rot in Hazarajat where they belong" (36). Assef also rebukes Amir and tries to enforce his own vision on him as, "You bother me more than this Hazara here, How can you talk to him, play with him, let him touch you? ... How can you call him your friend? ... You're a disgrace to Afghanistan" (36). Assef rarely calls Hassan by his name and usually humiliates him by calling 'Hazara' or, "A loyal Hazara, loyal as a dog." (63) But Assef also warns Hassan which seems quite true about the relation of Pashtun (Amir) and Hazara (Hassan) in Afghanistan as;

But before you (Hassan) sacrifice yourself for him (Amir), think about this: Would he do the same for you? Have you wondered why he never includes you in games when he has guests? Why he only plays with you when no one else is around? I'll tell you why, Hazara. Because to him, you're nothing but an ugly pet. Something he can play with when he's bored. Something he can kick when he is angry. Don't ever fool yourself and think you're something more (64).

Sex is a basic desire which requires fulfillment. The sexual vacuum created in Afghanistan because of war and seclusion of women leads to perversion. Assef rapes Hassan because he is

a Hazara and justifies himself as, “And there is nothing sinful about teaching a lesson to a disrespectful donkey ... It’s just a Hazara” (66).

Ideas acquired in childhood grow stronger with time. Prejudices become beliefs. Man carries his ideas more forcefully, and its results are quite drastic. Assef’s hatred intensifies as he grows up. He plays a leading role in Hazara massacre, as he explains;

Door to door we went, calling for the men and the boys. We’d shoot them right there in front of their families. Let them see. Let them remember who they were, where they belonged ... Sometimes, we broke down their doors and went inside their homes. And ... I’d ... I’d sweep the barrel of my machine-gun around the room and fire, and fire until the smoke blinded me. Door-to-door. We only rested for food and prayer ... We left the bodies in the streets, and if their families tried to sneak out to drag them back into their homes, we’d shoot them too. We left them in the streets for days. We left them for the dogs. Dog meat for dogs (242-243).

Later Assef turns a pedophile and these pedophilic tendencies are also directed against the Hazaras. He picks up Sohrab to play with, especially for his Hazara look.

Oppression and discrimination is a routine affair in Afghanistan. The suppressor and the suppressed both consider it natural. One instance prove that the relevance of socio-ethnic discrimination on a large scale in Afghanistan. A stranger when asked about Hassan by Amir makes sarcastic remarks on their relationship i.e. a Pashtun and a Hazara boy as, “What is a boy like you (Amir) doing here at this time of the day looking for a Hazara?” ... Lucky Hazara (Hassan), having such a concerned master. His father would get on his knees; sweep the dust at your feet with his eyelashes” (66).

In another instance, Amir and Hassan while passan Army barrack. Two soldiers humiliate Hassan for being a Hazara as, "You! The Hazara! Look at me when I’m talking to you"(66). They make vulgar comments regarding his mother that gives him much pain. Later Amir finds him weeping in the cinema hall. It is notable that Amir in all such instances never gets hurt while Hassan feels humiliated and crushed.

Pen is mightier than the sword they say. Man being intelligent, uses his tool to propagate his ideology. Literature is used to infuse discriminatory ideas in a very surreptitious manner. The school curriculum is specially framed to infuse the dominant ideology at an early age. Once Amir read a book, which was not included in school curriculum. He was shocked to find a complete chapter on Hazara history. He found the book very disturbing as it discussed the Hazaras openly. This chapter also examined the root cause of socio-ethnic discrimination in Afghanistan as;

(Amir) was stunned to find an entire chapter on Hazara history. An entire chapter dedicated to Hassan’s people! In it I read that my people, the Pashtuns, had persecuted and oppressed the Hazaras. It said the Hazaras had tried to rise against the Pashtuns in the nineteenth century, but the Pashtuns had quelled them with unspeakable violence. The book said that my people had killed the Hazaras, driven them from their lands, burned their home,

and sold their women. The book said part of the reason Pashtuns had oppressed the Hazaras was that Pashtuns were Sunni Muslims, while Hazaras were Shia. The book said a lot of things I didn't know, things my teachers hadn't mentioned. Things Baba hadn't mentioned either. It also said some things I did know, like that people called Hazaras mice-eating, flat-nosed, load-carrying donkeys. I had heard some of the kids in the neighborhood yell these names to Hassan (8).

Later, when Amir discusses it with his teacher, he (teacher) says, "That's the one thing Shia people do well passing themselves as martyrs" (8). It is evident that teachers and schools are also divided on ethnic level in Afghanistan. The teacher "wrinkled his nose when he said the word Shia, like it was some kind of a disease" (8).

Master-Slave relations are not the things of the past as this novel describes such relations. Only what has changed is the setup which is now modern world. Problem of socio-ethnic is portrayed as a master-slave relationship. The writer clearly exposes it through Ali. In Baba's house and surroundings there are a lot of Hazara people who work day and night for their masters like Ali does for Baba. The condition of Hazaras in Afghanistan is pathetic; they are thought to be suitable only for household activities like cooking, cleaning and serving their masters. A Hazara and his family are destined to be exploited by their master just like the dirty slavery system in the past.

Baba just like a master of colonial era exploits Ali. He maintains illicit relations with his wife; dishonors him which is the worst humiliation a true Afghan could suffer. Thus Ali's wife gives birth to a son, a bastard who is kept as a servant later on. Ali and Hassan are deprived of education, honor and even basic needs for living. In fact the people living in Baba's house are not like a family but are segregated as masters and slaves.

While Hosseini has not given much importance to any of the female characters in the novel still he has shown due concern for women in the Taliban era. He shows the contrast in the characters of Amir's mother, a Pashtun and Farzana, a Hazara. He depicts the discrimination of Hazara females. He also shows how different the experience is for a Pashtun or Hazara female in Afghanistan. Hassan explains his wife's woes as;

She (Farzana) asked the vendor how much the potatoes cost, but he did not hear her, I think he had a deaf ear. So she asked louder and suddenly a young Taliban over and hit her on the thighs with his wooden stick. He struck so hard she fell down. He was screaming at her and cursing and saying the Ministry of Vice and Virtue does not allow women to speak loudly (190).

To conclude, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* is an enlightening fiction narrative that glimpses at the relationship between Hazaras and Pashtuns. It is important to note that one never seems to be reading just history from Pashtun or Hazara angle. The writer never hesitates to discuss issues concerning discrimination. Hosseini through this novel unfolds the multi-layered oppression and exposes the invisible wounds of the common people of Afghanistan. Above all he truthfully portrays the depth of socio-ethnic discrimination.

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