

## Voicing the Voiceless: Hosseini's Advocacy in *The Kite Runner*

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### Abstract

*In the novel The Kite Runner, Khaled Hosseini explores the contemporary history in the background of Afghanistan. The text paints an eye-opening picture of what Afghanistan was and what it has become, and vividly describes how the combination of war can devastate a country and people. In this light, this paper, using a New Historicist gaze, demonstrates that Hosseini's purpose in the novel is to account for how the decadence of war has rendered people powerless amidst of violence. Specifically, I argue that Hosseini by showing the predicament of the people of minority and the innocent advocates for their voice. The paper concludes that the wars of any forms become more damaging to the people of margin.*

**Keywords:** history, new historicism, margin, power, hegemony, minority

In the recent history, the world noticed Afghanistan once the Soviet army overthrew Hafizullah Amin, who had pronounced himself as the leader of the Communist party “khalq” (people) and as the president of Afghanistan after eliminating his predecessor Noor Mohammad Tarakee, who had come to power throughout Soviet-backed coup more than a year earlier in 1977 (Barfield 97). Amin’s horrifying reign in the last months of 1978 was short-lived. It took the Soviets only five months to replace him with the exiled Babrak Karmal, who was the leader of the other Communist party “parcham” (the flag). There is a widespread belief that Karmal’s presidential speech was not delivered from Radio Kabul, the only official broadcasting station in Afghanistan, but from somewhere in the former Soviet Union preceding his arrival in the capital city (Arnold 81).

Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* is a meditation on this recent history of Afghanistan and its people. The temporal framework of the novel goes back to the time of the constitutional monarchy in Afghanistan in the 1960s. The story is mediated through the perspective of an Afghan and who was born and lived until adolescence in Kabul. Amir, the narrator and the protagonist, however, is certainly no longer an Afghan but an Afghan–American because he leaves the country of his birth after the Soviet invasion as an adolescent and is fortunate enough to be granted asylum in the United States where he has been living since his departure from Afghanistan. Transcending the discriminatory boundaries of ethnic affiliations is the main constituent of the plot development.

However, the concern the novel shows toward Afghanistan and its people is worth concentrating.

Hosseini's this novel has invited a hoard of critical analyses from different perspectives. To begin with, Chun argues that the novel underscores both personal and collective trauma (963). Amir, a well-to-do boy from the Wazir Akbar Khan district of Kabul, is tormented by the guilt of abandoning his friend Hassan, the son of his father's Hazara servant who actually is Amir's half-brother when Hassan is beaten and raped by the brutal Assef and other two local bullies in an empty street. His personal trauma sprouts from the collective trauma of Afghanistan (965). Similarly, approaching the text from Critical Discourse Analysis, Malik and Murtaza argue that the writer has deliberately used different style of language to swerve the attention of the readers toward the powerful. Hosseini used the text as a tool of propaganda in favor of the Western Agenda in Afghanistan. He employed linguistic manipulation as a powerful instrument for the construction of his version of reality (74-75). Last but not the least, Ruzmatova observes that the novel is a strong example of how human relations are formed "to be good again" (33). However, critical analysis of this novel remains incomplete if it is not seen with New Historicist's eyes.

First, the novel presents the existing social evils and shocking inhuman behavior by human on the basis of religious and ethnic discourse. The discourse is a material condition through which relations are created in order to practice power thus domination (McHoul and Grace 34). The religious tussle, a discursive practice puts religious power at the top, between Shi'a and Sunni has become the historical reality for the Afghans. It is so engrained that, Amir contemplates, "(H)istory isn't easy to overcome. Neither is religion. In the end, I was Pashtun and he was a Hazara. I was Sunni and he was Shi'a and nothing ever going to change that" (Hosseini 22). This claim of Amir shows how deep-rooted is the religious and racial difference in Afghanistan. People make and break relations not on the basis of belief or nationality but according to their religions and racial background. As explained in the quote showing marginalized Hazara and the devastating thinking of the so-called upper-class Pashtuns which has been prevailing in Afghanistan for ages.

The Pashtuns's ethnic discourse upon the Hazara is explicit and it is dominating. Historically, Pashtuns have dominated all areas of the state affairs at the cost of non-Pashtuns (Schetter 3). Although the Hazaras had tried to rebel against Pashtun domination, they were violently silenced by the majority and ruling Pashtuns (Ahwar 65). This is explicitly seen in the novel. Amir recounts a new version of history, one he had not learned about in Pashtun accounts of history:

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 homes, 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 Shi'a. 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 those names to Hassan. (Hosseini 9)

Such plight of Hazaras in the novel has given rise to the establishing the interest of dominant groups. Such activities are ethical "ethical in as much as one of its most important functions is to raise the great mass of the population to a particular cultural and moral level...which corresponds to...the interests of the ruling classes" (Gramsci 78). The historical structural advantage the Pashtuns hold has rendered the other group as historically dominated groups.

The plight of Hazaras is further worsened by Talibs' creation of religious hegemony and domination. A public punishment is declared not on the basis of legal procedure and statutes but the name of *Shari'a*. In the name of carrying out justice and the wheel of Allah, a cleric announces death penalty to a so-called adulterer and he was not given an opportunity to defend him (Hosseini 236). Khaled Hosseini exposes the brutal regime of Taliban through the novel. They kill mainly the minority Hazara people without any reason and leave them in the streets. When a Taliban very fondly describes his involvement in Mazar-i- Sharif massacre:

We only rested for food and prayer, "the Talib said. He said it fondly, like a man telling of a great party he'd attended. "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 dogs. Dog meat for dogs. (Hosseini 243)

In incorporating the stoning at Ghazi Stadium into his story, Hosseini brings to life something about which most non-Afghans have only heard. The event is all the more significant because we experience it through Amir's eyes-American eyes—eyes that are unaccustomed to this type of unchecked violence and injustice. Beyond their sheer violence, the deaths of the accused adulterers in Ghazi Stadium embody what is

happening to the Afghan people under the Taliban. The victims are accused of being adulterers, but from what we know about the Taliban from Rahim Khan, Hassan, and Farid's accounts, they may just have looked at a Talib the wrong way. They are killed in public, supposedly to make an example for others; in truth, their public murders are meant to intimidate the masses and bring them under even closer control. Not just the two victims in Ghazi Stadium, but the Afghan people as a whole, are being dragged into a pit of hopelessness, degraded, and killed cruelly and unjustly. Amir narrates:

The tall Talib with the black sunglasses walked to the pile of stones they had unloaded from the third truck. He picked up a rock and showed it to the crowd. The noise fell . . . The Talib, looking absurdly like a baseball pitcher on the mound, hurled the stone at the blindfolded man in the hole. It struck the side of his head. The women screamed again. The crowd made a startled "OH!" rhymed with each flinging of the stone, and that went on for a while. When they stopped, I asked Farid if it was over. He said no. I guessed the people's throats had tired. I don't know how much longer I sat with my face in my hands. I know that I reopened my eyes when I heard people around me asking. "*mord? Mord? Is he dead?*" (Hosseini 236-37)

Khaled Hosseini describes how the Taliban are terrorizing Afghanistan and creating a discourse of hegemony through the help of his fictional character Rahim Khan who describes these things to the protagonist Amir. Once, at a soccer game, a man next to him cheered too loudly. A Talib struck Rahim Khan on the forehead with the butt of his Kalashnikov, thinking he had made the noise. Pointing to a scar above his right eye Raheem Khan remembers a day in 1998 in Gazi Stadium where they were watching a football match and a man next to him cheered loudly and suddenly a young Taliban Rahim Khan and threatened to take his life thinking that he had made the noise. That Taliban officer did not even care about Rahim Khan's age (173). It gives the real pictures of the Afghanistan at time of the Taliban's. They even prohibited clapping and whistling in the sport events. Rahim Khan further describes about the Taliban. People in Kabul are afraid of leaving their houses because of frequent shootings and bombings. Moreover, the following extract details the reality of Afghanistan during the period of 1992 to 1996:

[ . . . ] When the Northern Alliance took over Kabul between 1992 and 1996, different factions claimed different parts of Kabul. "If you went from the Shar-e-Nau section to Kertech-Parwan to buy a carpet, you risked getting shot by a sniper or getting blown up by a rocket- if you got past all the checkpoints, that was. You practically needed a visa to go from one neighborhood to other. So, people just stayed put, prayed the next rocket wouldn't hit their home ...people

knocked holes in the walls of their homes so they could bypass the dangerous streets and would move down the block from hole to hole. In other parts, people moved about in underground tunnels. (Hosseini 174)

Even the Taliban destroy the orphanage, with many children inside it. These lines further clarify the destruction of the Afghanistan. The fictional character Rahim Khan narrates the story of Afghanistan by describing the daily activities and fighting which had happened in the street of Kabul and other cities. He describes accordingly: "Our ears became accustomed to the whistle of falling shells, to the rumble of gunfire, our eyes familiar with the sight of men digging bodies out of piles of rubble. Kabul in those days... was as close as you could get to that proverbial hell on earth" (185-186). He again describes about the prohibited culture of Afghanistan that is kite-flying rituals. Every winter the people of Afghanistan enjoy flying kite but when the Taliban ruled upon Afghanistan, they prohibited kite flying and massacred the Hazara ethnic groups in Mazar-i-Sharif. He said "the Taliban banned kite fighting. And two years later, in 1998, they massacred the Hazaras in Mazar-i-Sharif" (Hosseini 187). It gives the real picture of Afghanistan during that time. Khaled Hosseini furthermore describes the situation of Afghanistan with the help of Hassan. Hassan describes the details about the condition of the women and men in streets of Afghanistan in his letter to Amir. He writes that Afghanistan is changed; its kindness is replaced by killings. There is nothing but killings and the Taliban know nothing about human decency and the streets are full of hungry orphans (189-90). The worst victims of war are the women and children because they can neither carry the gun nor be of any help to the warlords.

Khaled Hosseini again describes the painful situation of the ethnic group, the Hazaras, how the Taliban create discourse by destroying the Hazara ethnicity that Hazaras are not the true Afghan. Rahim Khan retold the episode in which Hassan was wrongly accused and killed simply because he was a poor Hazara. The Taliban accused Hassan of occupying others house illegally although Rahim Khan and other witness supported Hassan. They threatened him to evacuate Amir's house and when Hassan protested they took him and his wife to the street and shot them. Hassan and Farzana's murders were dismissed as a case of self-defense and no one dared to speak against this because they were Hazaras (Hosseini 191-193). This cold-blooded murder is only an example of how simple layman suffered in the hands of Taliban's. In the name of God and religion, Taliban murdered, mutilated and tortured thousands of poor Afghans mostly minority Hazaras.

Similarly, how the Taliban physically and mentally brutalize the people is clear through a nightmare in which Amir finds himself on the street where a so-called criminal is

blindfolded and tied ready to be murdered. He is bleeding as he is badly beaten and suddenly he is shot on the head with a rifle. (209-210). People are not only physically tortured but also mentally and psychologically harassed that even in the dream they see nothing good but punishment and brutality.

Second, this novel explores the activities of the Russian coup in Afghanistan and how they patrol the street of Afghanistan. The Russian soldiers exploit the Afghan people psychologically and sexually. During the war, people in power especially soldiers and leaders take advantage of people's weaknesses. Majority of the people accept the misery and exploitation as fate. But there are few people who dare to stand for their rights. For example, when the Russian soldier tried to misbehave with a woman, even her husband remained silent but Baba, Amir's father, challenged the Russian soldiers not only physically but also in the name of shame, decency and righteousness (Hosseini 100). Furthermore, it clarifies the exploitation of Afghan women sexually by the Russian soldiers at the time of war.

Due to the Russian invasion many Afghan people were compelled to leave their homeland were compelled to seek for help in other country as refugees. Whenever a country is on a civil war, the general people suffer the most. Either they are killed or enslaved or exploited by the superior power or forced to leave the country. Amir graphically describes the scene of their house when he and his father finally decided to leave Afghanistan to Pakistan and from there to the US. Likewise, Amir and his father are also destined to leave their country. The dishes in the sink were unwashed, the cloths were scattered in the room, books were lying on the shelf, and paintings and photographs were hanging on the living room walls. Except a few items of clothing everything was intact but it felt like a deserted house recently looted or bombarded (Hosseini 97-98). The refugees are compelled to do hard labor in the other countries for their bread. Here Khaled Hosseini presents the reality of the refugees in the other country and what sort of job they do for survival.

How war destroys life, humanity and property in a moment? A person of wealth and dignity is changed into a wage-earning laborer. When the Russians entered Afghanistan, they burned school, killed children but also planted the mines all around the Kabul city, making it a "hair-lipped city of Ghosts" (119). Both the foreign forces and the internal forces do the destruction and dehumanization of the country. The foreign forces did it in the name of maintaining peace in the reason and the internal forces like Taliban did it in the name of maintaining unity and identity of the state. Another example is heart-rending. Due to poverty a man is selling his artificial leg, no doubt to buy food for his children. At least, he can feed his children for couple of weeks. It is the proof of poverty

of country and its people due to the long wars and destruction of the public property. These two examples demonstrate how people are surviving during the war. This war creates the difficulties in the daily life of the people and they are compelled to live under poverty. He further describes the reality of Afghanistan in the post war era.

Due to the war many children are compelled to leave their house and live in the street as beggars. They are grim-faced and thin due to the lack of food. They sat in the lap of their burqa-clad mothers alongside the busy street and chanted for money.

They squatted at every street corner, dressed in shredded burlap rags, mud-caked hands held out for a coin. And the beggars were mostly children now, thin and grim-faced, some no older than five or six. They sat in the laps of their burqa-clad mothers 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 wars had made fathers a rare commodity in Afghanistan. (214-15)

Khaled Hosseini gives the reason why the children are compelled to go to orphanage and how the Taliban neglect the children by giving nothing to them. Zaman describes about the reality of the orphanage, he explains that they had no heat or hot water and very little food or supplies. The Taliban’s refuse to pay for renovation or improvement:

How many orphans live here? Farid asked. “More than we have room for. About two hundred and fifty . . .” Zaman said over his shoulder.” But they’re not all *yateem*. Many of them have lost their fathers in the war, and their mother can’t feed them because the Taliban don’t allow them to work. So, they bring their children here.” ... this place is better than the street but not that much better. This building was never meant to be lived in-it used to be a storage warehouse for a carpet manufacturer . . .” I’ve asked the Taliban for money to dig a new well more times than I remember but they just twirl their rosaries and tell me there is no money. (222)

The novel further showcases the condition of the orphanage, shortage of food, bed, mattress, blanket for the winter in the orphanage. It is the reality of Afghanistan during the period of the Taliban era.

Finally, Hosseini displays how conservative Afghan society views women as being innately inferior to their male counterparts throughout the novel. Hosseini uses the character of Sanabur; Hassan’s mom, Khanum; General Taheri’s wife and Soraya; Amir’s wife to represent the many different ways sexism is carried out in the Afghan society as well as the injustices in which women in Afghanistan are subjected to on the

daily basis. Specifically, the novel shows two ways how the women are treated in Afghan society: women dictated men from the inside, be it male relatives or husbands and women objectified from the men from outside. The latter trend is more engaging from New Historicist perspective.

The male gaze in the novel is dehumanizing. The first act of dehumanizing takes place when Hassan and Amir are walking along a Soviet military barrack on their way back from the movie theaters and that is when suddenly a group of soldiers throws obscene words at Hassan's mother, Sanaubar: "I knew your mother, did you know that? I knew her real good. I took her from behind by that creek over there. [...] What a tight little sugary cunt she had!" (Hosseini 7). This explicit language use exemplifies that the soldiers do not treat women as human but as a sex object, an object that embodies sexual pleasure. Women's condition throughout the historical development was depressing; the war-torn period is making the condition worse (Shaalani 368). Not only do the soldiers objectify Hassan and Sanaubar, they use their social position as males and their structural advantage to degrade women and taunt individuals. Moreover, the taunted women belong to Hazara ethnicity, the targeted minority in Afghanistan.

Similarly, women have also been rendered as monetary objects. For example, Baba and Amir were fleeing, and when they passed an Afghan-Russian checkpoint a Russian soldier dehumanizes and humiliates a woman as a form of payment or tax to let them pass the checkpoint: "The soldier wanted a half hour with the lady in the back of the truck. [...] It's his price for letting us pass, [...] he says every price has a tax" (Hosseini 115). The truck with the smuggled refugees should have no trouble crossing through the Soviet Union-Afghani checkpoint due to the connections driver Karim had. But at one checkpoint a Soviet Union soldier dictates that he must have a woman for half an hour as a payment to get the truck through. The soldier uses his gender and authority as an advantage to oppress and dominate the women, knowing very well that she cannot reject him without any serious consequences. Women in the novel have been fetishized not only as an object but as a monetary value and a puppet of male's sexual fantasy.

Without Baba's (a dominant male) interference, there would have been no doubt that women would have been sexually assaulted by the corrupt soldier. Overall in the novel, it is evident that males are dominant over females. Males abuse their authority and power in order to oppress females, which leads males to see females as the inferior sex and thus treat them as subhuman.

In conclusion, the multi-ethnic texture of the Afghan population is not only a consequence of Afghanistan being at the crossroads of so many conquerors throughout the last fifteen centuries, including the Arabs, the Turks, and the Moguls; kings and



rulers in Afghanistan have fostered the custom to engage in (forced or voluntary) marital relations with various ethnic groups throughout the land in order to win their loyalty. If not the majority, at least a considerable portion of the population has always known about it. *The Kite Runner* is an inevitable cultural production that concerns with the tough situation Afghanistan under the tyranny of Taliban. The hegemonic forces in many forms over Afghan people gave rise to the destruction of culture, natural resources and old heritage of Afghanistan. More importantly, domination upon the minority ethnicity as an anti-humanitarian condition was most horrifying consequences of the wars in Afghanistan and it is critically reflected in the novel. Hosseini delivers an authentic Afghan experience, both in that period in Kabul and in the immigrant community in America. The novel the ideological misbehavior of both the invading forces and the oppressed subjects in contemporary Afghanistan.

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