

The Hazaras in Life and Literature: The Representation of the Hazaras in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

Anirban Bhattacharya

Abstract : *The paper aims to focus on the representation of the marginalised Hazara community in Afghanistan through Khaled Hosseini's seminal work, The Kite Runner. The Hazaras have been brutally persecuted, discriminated and enslaved for over a century since the late 19th century. The paper shows the importance of Hosseini's work to explore terrains in culture studies which have not been treaded earlier. The Kite Runner is the first English novel depicting the experience of the Afghans before America's entry into Afghanistan after 9/11. Hosseini being a Pashtun and writing about the Hazara community promises an atmosphere of change and hope for the ethnic minority communities in Afghanistan.*

Keywords : Hazara, Taliban, ethnic minority, post 9/11 novel, multidisciplinary, social science, literature.

Afghanistan witnessed the emergence and the downfall of almost half a dozen regimes from the 1970s to the disastrous incident of 9/11; the government shifted from monarchy to democracy to dictatorship within a span of thirty years but the condition of the ethnic minorities in Afghanistan, especially the Hazaras did not change. The last king of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah, was overthrown in a military coup by Daoud

Khan, the leader of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan in 1973. He rose to power with the help of the Soviets. However, the dream to create a democratic Afghanistan was cut-short with the Soviet invasion in 1979. The Mujahideens formed a strong opposition against the communist rule of the USSR with the help of the secret intelligence agencies of the United States of America. The Soviets had to leave Afghanistan after the signing of the peace accord in 'Geneva guaranteeing Afghan independence and the withdrawal of 100,000 Soviet troops' (PBS 2011).¹ Talat Farooq writes:

The CIA, with Saudi financial contribution, funnelled \$3.5 billion and weapons, including Stingers, into Afghanistan between 1980 and 1992. Using the ISI as a conduit the CIA provided technical and strategic advice on training, intelligence and sophisticated technology. Pakistan's tribal areas bordering Afghanistan were subsequently used for the Afghan resistance to regroup among a sympathetic tribal population (Farooq 2016: 25).²

However, problems started to arise as soon as the Americans wiped their hands off the Afghanistan matter after the Soviet withdrawal. The mujahideens who had been fighting against a common enemy started to fight amongst themselves to claim their supremacy over Afghanistan. Burhanuddin Rabbani, Ahmad Shah Massoud and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar contested amongst themselves. This resulted in a period of unrest and civil wars till the emergence of the Taliban in 1996. In this time of crisis, the emergence of the Taliban with their unifying ideals and a belief to unite the nation under Islamic laws came as a relief. 'In successive campaigns the Taliban had brought 80 percent of Afghanistan under their nominal rule (Burke 2011: 5).³ The movement was the brainchild of a lower order cleric of the Afghan society, a mullah, near Kandahar in September 1994. Under the leadership of Mullah Mohammad Omar and his second-in-command Mullah Mohammad Hassan Rehmani, the main aim of the Taliban was to put an end to the anarchy and civil war that followed after the withdrawal of the Soviets in 1989. However, they started a puritanical regime with the idea of ethnic cleansing in their mind. They wanted to construct a utopian Afghan state based on the Pashtun culture. Although with their sudden emergence they brought peace and security, they also implemented 'an extreme interpretation of the Sharia or Islamic law' (Rashid 2001: 2).⁴

According to United Nation's Report on World Social Situation 2018, the term 'ethnic minority' refers to the 'ethnic or racial groups in a given country in which they are in a non-dominant position'. The report also states:

The term refers to a group of people in a nation-state that meets one or more of the following criteria: it is numerically smaller than the rest of the population; it is not in a dominant position; it has a culture,

language, religion or race that is distinct from that of the majority; and its members have a will to preserve those characteristics (Policy 2018).⁵

‘The *raison d’être* of the Taliban was to end the anarchy. But when they took on powerful non-Pashtun warlords and militias, some Afghan and international observers tended to describe them as Pashtun nationalists who wanted to revive a centralised Pashtun-dominated state in Afghanistan’ (Siddique 2012: 1).⁶ The creation of the ‘Pashtunistan’ has been a major driving point of almost all the governments formed in Afghanistan and not just for the Taliban. Unfortunately, every time an initiative was taken for such an endeavour, the ethnic minorities of Afghanistan paid the price for it. They were subjugated, displaced, marginalised, discriminated, humiliated and executed. Presently, ‘Afghanistan’s national anthem recognises 14 ethnic groups among the country’s 27 million people: Pashtun, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Balochis, Turkmens, Nooristanis, Pamiris, Arabs, Gujars, Brahuis, Qizibash, Aimaq and Pashai’ (2012: 4).⁷ And, the ethnic group among the 14 that is worst affected and has undergone prolonged period of subjugation and discrimination is the Hazaras. Wilfred Thesiger published one of the first detailed reports about the Hazara community in 1955. He writes about their origin:

The Hazaras are Mongols and inhabit a large area in Central Afghanistan. They were settled in this country in the thirteenth century either by Jagatai, Jhinghis Khan's son, or by Mangu, his grandson, on the lands of the Ghoris, who had been largely exterminated during the Mongol invasion... It is more probable that they were the followers of chiefs, selected loyalty and that they represented many of the tribes and races incorporated Mongol army. Even today most of the Hazaras have unmistakably Mongol appearance but they have abandoned the Mongol language... The Hazaras inhabit the Hazarajat which includes the western extremity of the Hindu Kush range and the broken country round the headwaters of Helmand River (Thesiger 1955: 313).⁸

The persecution of the Hazara community started as early as the nineteenth century when the Afghan king, Abdur Rahman wanted to unite all the tribes of Afghanistan under one banner. The Hazaras revolted but failed and they were ‘brutally punished for their uprising’ (Farr 2007: 161).⁹ Rahman partitioned the Hazarajat, ‘making it part of three provinces- Kabul, Bamiyan and Kandahar’ to breach the unity of the Hazara people (161).¹⁰ The Hazaras generally belonged to the Shi’a sect of Islam from Iran and several efforts were taken to convert them to Sunni Islam. They were further persecuted, punished and enslaved. They are seen as ‘outcast, despised and to be avoided’ and they are labelled as a pariah group. ‘They are publicly humiliated with taunts of Hazara-e mushkhur (mice eating Hazara), binipuchuq (flat-nose), and khar-e barkash (load carrying donkeys)’ (161).¹¹ They have traditionally been ‘marginalised, politically and economically, and have normally undertaken the most menial tasks

within the economy' (Marsden 2001: 9).¹²

Khaled Hosseini became the spokesperson of the Afghans as soon as he published *The Kite Runner* in 2003. It was the first Afghan novel written in English. He represented the angst, the loss, the sensibilities, the cultural values and also the follies of the Afghans and presented them in a more humane way before a western audience that had already stereotyped them as terrorists. David Jefferes notes that the novel was 'publicised initially through word of mouth, the novel was picked up by community reading programs across North America in 2005, and eventually spent more than five years on the New York Times bestseller list, currently with millions of copies in print in 42 different languages' (Jefferes 2009: 389).¹³ Although it is a tale of redemption, it is also a tale of revelation. Hosseini constantly exposes the hypocrisy of the Afghan society. Amir's redemption also exposes the unjustified discrimination faced by his half-brother Hassan from his birth till death only because of the fact that he was a Hazara boy.

Harold Bloom notes that several of the characters and incidents in the novel are influenced by real events from Hosseini's own life. The character of Hassan is based on Hosseini's own playmate, a Hazara boy, who was sexually abused by a man who worked for his father. Hosseini and his brother were too scared to report the crime when they were kids just like Amir in the novel who was too scared to report Assef's assault on Hassan to his father or to anyone. Hosseini and his family migrated to the United States at the time of Soviet invasion just like Amir and his father. Bloom further writes:

Hosseini has explained that while he was inspired to create the central character of Hassan, the boy could not be the novel's protagonist. It is Amir whom Hosseini cast in that key role, since he is stricken with guilt, a conflicted figure who grows and changes. In this way, Hosseini added depth and complexity to his portrayal, addressing regret and the need for redemption and showing troubled relationships between brothers because of domineering fathers (Bloom 2009: 13).¹⁴

The Kite Runner is a bildungsroman based on the life of the protagonist, Amir. The story revolves around his choices, his friendship with Hassan, his cowardice, guilt and redemption. The story starts in the December of 2001 in San Francisco, California and then takes the readers back to 1970s Afghanistan. There is a continuous interplay of the past and the present. Amir gets a phone call from his father's long-time business partner, Rahim Khan from Peshawar, Pakistan asking him to visit Pakistan and meet him face to face one last time before his death. However, the real intention was to give Amir a last chance to redeem himself. "There is way to be good again", noted Rahim Khan before putting down the receiver (Hosseini 2003: 2).¹⁵ Likewise, to understand the wrongs, Hosseini takes us back in time to Kabul, Afghanistan during the rule

of Zahir Shah where we find a ten-year old Amir, son of one of the richest Pashtun businessmen in Kabul, and Hassan, a Hazara boy and son of the handicapped servant Ali. From the very beginning Hosseini sets Hassan apart from the rest of the boys. His Mongolian appearance becomes the first point of contrast. Hosseini writes:

...sunlight flickering through the leaves on his almost perfectly round face, a face like a Chinese doll chiselled from hardwood: his flat, broad nose and slanting, narrow eyes like bamboo leaves, eyes that looked, depending on the light, gold, green, even sapphire. I can still see his tiny low-set ears and that pointed stub of a chin, a meaty appendage that looked like it was added as a mere afterthought. And the cleft lip, just left of midline, where the Chinese doll maker's instrument may have slipped, or perhaps he had simply grown tired and careless (2003: 3).¹⁶

Wilfred Thesiger notes in his documentary that he 'had supposed that the Hazarajat was a desperately poor country and [his] first view from the slopes of Kuh-i-Baba confirmed this impression... Hazara houses are built of mud and stones, and most of them are very primitive' (1955: 314).¹⁷ Although Ali and Hassan were far from Hazarajat and were serving one of the wealthiest men in Kabul, their condition did not change. Amir lived in his mansion and Hassan in his 'mud shack where he had been born and where he'd lived his entire life' (2003: 6).¹⁸ Unlike the mansion where Amir lived, the mud shack was dimly lit by a pair of kerosene lamps and there was hardly any furniture in the room except for a couple of mattresses where Hassan and Ali slept, 'a Herati rug' and 'a three-legged stool, and a wooden table in the corner where Hassan did his drawings' (2003: 6).¹⁹

The common prejudice and hatred for the Hazaras could also be seen through the treatment of the soldiers towards Hassan when the boys accidentally crossed their path. The distinct physical appearance of a Hazara made Hassan a prominent target. Although the Pashtun soldiers did not physically assault Hassan, they passed lewd remarks about his mother and 'tears were sliding down his cheeks' (2003: 10).²⁰ In comparison to Wilfred Thesiger's discovery of only thirteen pages in the Gazetteer of Afghanistan (1882) dedicated to the Hazara history, Amir finds an entire chapter in a history book that belonged to his deceased mother. He finds out in the book:

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... 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 (2003: 9).²¹

However, when he tried to verify the facts of the book by his teacher, he received nothing but a sneer and a prejudiced vague answer that didn't justify the question at all. 'He wrinkled his nose and when he said the word Shi'a, like it was some kind of disease' (2003: 9).²² The prejudice against the Hazaras could also be seen in the Afghan judiciary system as well. Hosseini narrates the story of Ali's childhood at the beginning of chapter four. Ali's parents were killed in a road accident by two brothers who were driving under the influence of hashish and wine. Amir's grandfather who was a reputed judge only gave them a year's service in the military as punishment and adopted Ali to grow as a servant and a playmate for his son. The leniency in the punishment was only because of the fact that Ali and his parents were Hazaras. Their lives did not matter as much as that of a Pashtun.

Amir and Hassan shared a very intimate bond of friendship. Hassan stood by Amir through thick and thin. Hassan protected Amir from Assef's assault at the corner of the street when they were cornered by Assef and his friends by threatening them with his pinpoint accuracy on his slingshot. Even when Amir tried to mock Hassan because of his inability to read and pronounce difficult words from his books or when Amir made up stories to tell Hassan, he only saw the brighter side of things. It was through Hassan's appreciation of Amir's cock and bull stories that Amir gained confidence to become a story teller. Amir and Hassan were very close. Hassan ran kites for Amir, they took strolls through the bazaars, talked about films, shared Coca-Cola and rose water ice cream topped with crushed pistachios. However, the difference in their lifestyle reflected their social status. Likewise, Hosseini tells his readers through Amir's persona:

By the time I dragged myself out of bed and lumbered to the bathroom, Hassan had already washed up, prayed the morning namaz with Ali, and prepared my breakfast: hot black tea with three sugar cubes and a slice of toasted naan topped with my favorite sour cherry marmalade, all neatly placed on the dining table. While I ate and complained about homework, Hassan made my bed, polished my shoes, ironed my outfit for the day, packed my books and pencils... Hassan stayed home and helped Ali with the day's chores: hand-washing dirty clothes and hanging them to dry in the yard, sweeping the floors, buying fresh naan from the bazaar, marinating meat for dinner, watering the lawn... Hassan would grow up illiterate like Ali and most Hazaras had been decided the minute he had been born, perhaps even the moment he had been conceived in Sanaubar's unwelcoming womb—after all, what use did a servant have for the written word? (2003: 25-26)²³

Although Hassan stood guard for Amir, Amir did not do the same for Hassan. Hassan fell victim to Assef's wrath and prejudice. Assef, by birth a Pashtun, wanted Afghanistan only for the Pashtun. He wanted to drive the Hazaras back to Hazarajat.

He worshipped Adolf Hitler and his policy of ethnic cleansing. He declared that 'Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns. It always has been, always will be. [They] are the true Afghans, the pure Afghans' (2003: 38).²⁴ Assef wanted to teach Hassan a lesson that he would never forget. The moment he found Hassan alone, cornered in a blind alley, he pinned him down with the help of his friends on the street and raped him. Although the aggression meted out to Hassan was unjust and sacrilegious, it was the cowardice of Amir that Hosseini tries to highlight in the following scene. Amir stood his ground and did not intervene to stop the onslaught on Hassan fearing brutal repercussion. However, the worst form of betrayal against Hassan came from Amir's sense of guilt. Amir suffered from guilt for not standing up against Assef's atrocity and in order to get rid of this suffering he wanted to get rid of Hassan for good from his family. He framed Hassan for theft of his watch and gift money which he got as present on his birthday. The Hazaras were known for their loyalty and the insult was too much for Ali to stay in the household any longer. Although Hassan accepted that he was guilty of stealing the watch, Amir's father forgave him. But it wasn't enough to stop Ali from leaving. Amir's father was heartbroken after the incident.

Years later in 2001 when Amir visits Rahim Khan in Pakistan, he comes to know about his father's secret that Hassan was his half-brother and hence his father was so sympathetic towards Hassan. It was easy for a Pashtun to show his benevolence towards a Hazara boy but unacceptable in the Afghan society to father one. Amir notes:

How could I have been so blind? The signs had been there for me to see all along; they came flying back at me now: Baba hiring Dr. Kumar to fix Hassan's harelip. Baba never missing Hassan's birthday. I remembered the day we were planting tulips, when I had asked Baba if he'd ever consider getting new servants. Hassan's not going anywhere, he'd barked. He's staying right here with us, where he belongs. This is his home and we're his family. He had wept, wept, when Ali announced he and Hassan were leaving us (2003: 208).²⁵

Hosseini also notes that the condition of the Hazaras worsened after the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan in 1996. They openly persecuted the Hazaras in the name of ethnic cleansing. The Hazaras had to pay the price for siding with the Northern Alliance in the post-Soviet era prior to the Taliban rule. In the August of 1998, the Taliban militia openly executed between 2000 and 5000 Hazaras at Mazār-e Sharīf (Ghohari 2000: 102).²⁶ Hassan too had to pay the price for his loyalty. He and his wife were killed by the Taliban in front of their son Sohrab on the streets for living in Amir's house after they left. Sohrab was sent to an orphanage and fell victim to Assef's lust for small boys.

Therefore, Rahim Khan's indication- 'There is a way to be good again' for Amir was to atone for his past sins by retrieving Sohrab and provide for him a better future (2003:

2).²⁷ Although Amir heroically tries to save Sohrab from Assef, it was Sohrab who saved Amir with his slingshot just like his father once did. Amir brought Sohrab to the United States of America. America becomes the place of refuge for the ethnic minorities of Afghanistan who had been brutally persecuted by their own people. Likewise, through Amir's atonement of his past sins, we are brought face to face with the atrocities and discriminations the Hazaras were subjected to in real life. The Kite Runner was adapted into a motion picture in 2007 and it served a very important purpose. It was screened before George W. Bush and his defence team and Hosseini was among one of the invited guests. 'Ostensibly the film serves the strategic and propaganda interests of this small audience, given the war on terror raging in Afghanistan' (Raza 2016: 84).²⁸ However, the more sympathetic critics of The Kite Runner are of the opinion that the novel is about hope, redemption and about the 'way to be good again' (2003: 2).²⁹ 'The Kite Runner bears a typical theme of growth... the glory and darkness of human nature is two sides inside a person... A personal growth may represent all of ours' (Du 2017: 93).³⁰ Hosseini brought us face to face with the atrocities meted out to the Hazaras by the Pashtuns of Afghanistan. However, he is also certain of the fact that no one is deprived of redemption and it's never too late to atone for one's sins.

Notes:

- 1) PBS, News Desk. 2011. "A Historical Timeline of Afghanistan." *PBS News Hour*. May 4. Accessed December 25, 2019. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/asia-jan-june11-timeline-afghanistan>.
- 2) Farooq, Talat. 2016. *US–Pakistan Relations: Pakistan's strategic choices in the 1990s*. London and New York: Routledge.
- 3) Burke, Jason. 2011. *The 9/11 Wars*. London and New York: Allen Lane.
- 4) Rashid, Ahmed. 2001. *Taliban: The Story of the Afghan Warlords*. London: Pan Macmillan.
- 5) Policy, Division of Social. 2018. "Promoting Inclusion through Social Protection." Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, 97.
- 6) Siddique, Abubakar. 2012. *Afghanistan's Ethnic Divides*. Research Project, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, Barcelona: CIDOB Policy Research Project, 1-4.
- 7) Siddique 2012: 4
- 8) Thesiger, Wilfred. 1955. "The Hazaras of Central Afghanistan." *The Geographical Journal* (The Royal Geographical Society) 121 (3): 313
- 9) Farr, Grant. 2007. "The Hazara of Central Afghanistan." In *Disappearing People? Indigenous Groups and Ethnic Minorities in South and Central Asia*, edited by Barbara A. Brower and Barbara Rose Johnston, 161. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- 10) Farr 2007: 161
- 11) Farr 2007: 161
- 12) Marsden, Peter. 2001. *Afghanistan: Minorities, Conflicts and the Search for Peace*. An MRG International Report, Minority Rights Group International, 9.

- 13) Jefferes, David. 2009. "To be good (again): The Kite Runner as Allegory of Global Ethics." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* (Routledge) 45 (4): 389.
- 14) Bloom, Harold. 2009. "The Story Behind the Story." In *The Kite Runner: Bloom's Guides*, edited by Harold Bloom, 13. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism.
- 15) Hosseini, Khaled. 2003. *The Kite Runner*. London, New Delhi, New York and Sydney: Bloomsbury.
- 16) Hosseini 2003: 3
- 17) Thesiger 1955: 314
- 18) Hosseini 2003: 6
- 19) Hosseini 2003: 6
- 20) Hosseini 2003: 10
- 21) Hosseini 2003: 9
- 22) Hosseini 2003: 9
- 23) Hosseini 2003: 25-26
- 24) Hosseini 2003: 38
- 25) Hosseini 2003: 208
- 26) Ghohari, M. H. 2000. *The Taliban: Ascent to Power*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- 27) Hosseini 2003: 2
- 28) Raza, Syed Sami. 2016. "The Kite Runner: Children, Violence and the Ethnic Imaginary in Afghanistan." In *Children and Violence: Politics of Conflict in South Asia*, edited by Bina D'Costa, 84. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.
- 29) Hosseini 2003: 2
- 30) Du, Juan. 2017. "A Journey of Self-Actualization of Amir in The Kite Runner." *English Language and Literature Studies* (Canadian Center of Science and Education) 7 (3): 93.

Works Cited

- Bloom, Harold. 2009. The Story Behind the Story. In Bloom, Harold (ed.), *The Kite Runner: Bloom's Guides* 13. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism.
- Burke, Jason. 2011. *The 9/11 Wars*. London and New York: Allen Lane.
- Du, Juan. 2017. 'A Journey of Self-Actualization of Amir in The Kite Runner.' *English Language and Literature Studies* (Canadian Center of Science and Education) 7 (3): 93.
- Farooq, Talat. 2016. *US-Pakistan Relations: Pakistan's strategic choices in the 1990s*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Farr, Grant. 2007. The Hazara of Central Afghanistan. In Brower, Barbara A. and Johnston, Barbara Rose (eds.), *Disappearing People? Indigenous Groups and Ethnic Minorities in South and Central Asia* 161. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Ghohari, M. H. 2000. *The Taliban: Ascent to Power*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Hosseini, Khaled. 2003. *The Kite Runner*. London, New Delhi, New York and Sydney: Bloomsbury.
- Jefferes, David. 2009. "To be good (again): The Kite Runner as Allegory of Global Ethics." *Journal, of Postcolonial Writing* (Routledge) 45 (4): 389.
- Marsden, Peter. 2001. *Afghanistan: Minorities, Conflicts and the Search for Peace*. An MRG International

- Report, Minority Rights Group International, 9.
- PBS, News Desk. 2011. 'A Historical Timeline of Afghanistan.' *PBS News Hour*. May 4. Accessed December 25, 2019. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/asia-jan-june11-timeline-afghanistan>.
- Policy, Division of Social. 2018. 'Promoting Inclusion through Social Protection.' Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, 97.
- Rashid, Ahmed. 2001. *Taliban: The Story of the Afghan Warlords*. London: Pan Macmillan.
- Raza, Syed Sami. 2016. 'The Kite Runner: Children, Violence and the Ethnic Imaginary in Afghanistan.' In D'Costa, Bina. (ed.) *Children and Violence: Politics of Conflict in South Asia* 84. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.
- Siddique, Abubakar. 2012. *Afghanistan's Ethnic Divides*. Research Project, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, Barcelona: CIDOB Policy Research Project, 1-4.
- Thesiger, Wilfred. 1955. 'The Hazaras of Central Afghanistan.' *The Geographical Journal* (The Royal Geographical Society) 121 (3): 313.

Bio Profile of the Author:

PhD Research Participant, Department of English
Rabindra Bharati University
Email: ani007100@gmail.com