

Traumatization of Ethnic Minorities in Afghanistan: A Critical Study of Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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Abstract

Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan-born American novelist who is author of *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and *And the Mountains Echoed*. *The Kite Runner* is a harrowing story of protagonist Amir's personal trauma, and successfully presents the ethnic and state conflicts as the collective trauma of the Afghans. With a focus on Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, this paper aims to explore the fourth world literature and to extend fourth world identity to non-recognised and excluded ethnic minorities in Afghanistan with special reference to Hazaras. The present paper showcases the important issue of different types and contexts of trauma, especially the physical and psychological wounding of ethnic minorities in Afghanistan. The present paper investigates how ethnicity positions ethnic minorities as dupes of the social set-up and victims of trauma. Through close reading of the novel, the paper examines how the text uncovers different traumatic experiences, how trauma is narrated in the novel, thus help readers to have a better understanding about traumatization of ethnic minorities in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Fourth World literature, Ethnic minorities, Hazaras, Trauma, Collective trauma.

The term 'Fourth World' embodies the poorest and under-developed parts of the world. In a broader sense, Fourth world can be designated to non-recognised and excluded communities; minority groups whether ethnic, linguistic, cultural or religious; even socio-political and economic marginal. Any literature which represents the life and struggles of the oppressed and as well as Tribal people for the dignity, justice and equality is called Fourth World Literature. It is also a protest against the established unjust social order. Ethnic tribes of Afghanistan are to be considered people of Fourth World.

Afghanistan is a landlocked country located within South Asia and Central Asia. Afghanistan's population is divided into several ethnic groups: Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Gujjar, Arab, Brahui, Pamiri and few others. Fredrik Barth defines ethnic groups “as social groups that meet four criteria: they are biologically replicating, share fundamental cultural values, constitute a field of a communication and interaction, and are defined through self-definition and definition by others.” Thus, ethnic groups are set apart or bound together by common ties of race language, nationality, or culture. Pashtuns have been the dominant ethno-linguistic group for over 300 years in Afghanistan. Pashtuns make up an estimated 42% of the population of Afghanistan. They are also known as Afghans and the name ‘Afghanistan’ translates to ‘land of the Afghans’, equally meaning ‘land of the Pashtuns’. Whereas, Hazaras are non-recognized, oppressed, socially and religiously excluded ethnic minority group in Afghanistan. Hazaras reside in Hazarajat, the land of Hazaras, the rugged central highland regions in Afghanistan. They make up close to 8% of the Afghanistan population. Hazaras are said to be descendants of Genghis Khan, the founder of the Mongol Empire, who invaded Afghanistan during the 12th century. Proponents of this view hold that many of the Mongol soldiers and their family members settled in the area and remained there after the Mongol empire dissolved in the 13th century. Hazaras belong to the Shia sect of Islam in a country that is mostly Sunni Muslim. As a result, they are viewed as outsiders. Hazaras work in the least desirable jobs due to their low ranking in the caste system. “As an ethnic group, the Hazaras have always lived on the edge of economic survival in Afghanistan. . .the Hazaras were driven out of their lands, sold as slaves and had a lack of access to services available to majority of the population. . .From the 1880s onwards, and especially during the reign of Amir Abdul Rahman (1880-1901), they suffered severe political, social and economic repression, as Jihad was declared by Sunnis on all Shi'as of Afghanistan. . .Thousands of Hazara men were killed, their women and children taken as slaves, and their land occupied” (World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples). In August 1998, Taliban killed more than ten thousand Hazaras in the Northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif. The great dishonour is that Hazaras are double minorities. First, they belong to the Shia sect of Islam which is religious minority in a country that is mostly Sunni Muslim. Secondly, they also belong to the ethnic minority in the country which is predominated by majority Pashtuns.

As the first Afghan novel written in English by Afghan American writer Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* provides a glimpse into the Afghan history as well as the ethnic discrimination in the Afghanistan. It exposes the sufferings, frustration and torture imposed on Hazaras by the Pashtun-dominated society. *The Kite Runner* is a traumatic story of two friends: Amir, a rich Pashtun boy who is Sunni Muslim and Hassan, an ethnic Hazara boy who follows Shia Islam. They spend most of their childhood together in the streets. Hassan protects Amir in any situation even if it puts him in any danger. Hassan is beaten and raped by the local bully Assef in an empty street. Amir is too scared to intervene and does not help the loyal Hassan. On the day after his birthday party, Amir hides his new watch in Hassan's bed to frame the boy as a thief and force his father to drive Hassan and his father Ali away. After the Russians invade Afghanistan in 1979, Baba and Amir are forced to escape to Pakistan. In 1988, they have a simple life in California, where Amir graduates from a public college. Later Amir meets his countrywoman Soraya and they get married. In 2000, after the death of Baba, Amir is a famous novelist and receives a phone call from his father's friend Rahim Khan, who discloses the secret that Hassan is his half-brother, asking Amir to return to Peshawar, in Pakistan, to find and rescue Hassan's son, Sohrab, who is forced into prostitution under the reign of Taliban. *The Kite Runner* presents the personal trauma of characters, and successfully presents the ethnic conflicts as the collective trauma of the Afghans.

Trauma studies seeks to understand the effect of experiences such as neglect, sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse and their impression on development and relationships. A broad definition of psychic trauma was provided by Lenore Terr, he put it as "psychic trauma occurs when a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming intense emotional blow or a series of blows assaults the person from outside. Traumatic events are external, but they quickly get incorporated into the mind" (Terr 8). Traumatic responses occur in the face of an event or environment so intense and frightening that it overwhelms familiar coping mechanisms. *The Kite Runner* is a collective narrative of Hazaras who are traumatized through series of vicious and aggressive events that bring about tragic consequences and the impression of these violent events is so devastating that it leaves tremendous trauma on the Hazaras in the novel. Hosseini exposed artistically the collective trauma suffered by Hazaras in the novel.

A collective trauma is traumatic psychological effect shared by a social group that damages the bonds between people and impairs the sense of a cohesive community. Traumatic events witnessed by an entire society can stir up collective sentiment, often resulting in a shift in that society's culture and mass actions. Besides the collective trauma brought by war, what impresses the reader most is the collective trauma suffered by Hazaras in the novel. Kai Erikson (1976) defines "collective trauma" in *Everything in Its Path* and states that

By *collective trauma*, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with "trauma". But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared.... "I" continue to exist, though damaged and maybe even permanently changed. "You" continue to exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But "we" no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body. (Erikson 153-154)

The trauma is shared by Hazaras as a collective, rather than an individually experienced; the trauma spans multiple generations. There are many occurrences of collective trauma of Hazaras in *The Kite Runner*, such as the history of persecution and slavery, the ethnic cleansing by Talibans, violence against women, and sexual exploitation of children. Hazaras are discriminated and oppressed for many generations and they are denied any position in social set-up. "School text books barely mentioned them and referred to their ancestry only in passing" (Hosseini 8). They have been erased from the school textbooks to totally uproot them from the society. Hazaras don't get much space in the history of Afghan; if they are mentioned in the history they are shown in bad light. As is depicted in the novel, one day Amir found history book with a chapter on Hazara history, from Amir's narration, the history of Hazaras can be traced:

[I] 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 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. (Hosseini 8)

Powerless people are oppressed and mocked by powerful people. In this novel, Hazaras are insulted and mocked by Pashtuns for their physical appearance to make them feel inferior. One of the most common of insults that are heaped upon the ethnic Hazara minority is that their facial features are flat as compared to the features of the majority Pashtuns which are more like their fellow Persian brothers.

“They called him "flat-nosed" because of Ali and Hassan's characteristic Hazara Mongoloid features. For years, that was all I knew about the Hazaras, that they were Mogul descendants, and that they looked a little like Chinese people. . . 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 8-9).

Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* highlights the conflict between the ethnic groups. Pashtuns don't treat Hazaras as their equal; Hosseini is showing a divide between the elite Pashtuns and the deeply oppressed Hazaras. Amir and Hassan were raised together and grew with each other, but Amir and Hassan are opposite in terms of socio-economic positions. Amir, being superior, is unable to consider Hassan as his friend. No matter how many years they spent together, but the fact of their ethnic positions cannot be changed.

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. . . 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 that. Nothing. (Hosseini 24)

Pashtuns have many reasons for such violent behaviour. One of them is that Pashtuns consider themselves as the true citizens of Afghanistan, whereas Hazaras are socially and ethnically excluded from their own society. Assef, a Pashtun boy, refuses to identify Hazaras as people of Afghan:

"Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns. It always has been, always will be. We are the true Afghans, the pure Afghans, not this Flat-Nose here. His people pollute our homeland, our *watan*. They dirty our blood." He made a sweeping, grandiose gesture with his hands. "Afghanistan for Pashtuns, I say. That's my vision." (Hosseini 38)

As is depicted in the novel, Hosseini gives the glimpses of 'collective victimhood' of Hazaras. Talibani Sunni Islamic Pashtun supremacists systematically ethnically cleansed Afghanistan of its minorities, massacring the minority Shia Hazaras in big numbers for no crime at all, to make the capital completely purely Pashtun. Assef thinks that the minorities and people he deems unclean should not be able to live; that they do not even have the right to breathe under his new Talibani regime. They should all be rounded and killed off, for no other crime than being born in the 'wrong' community.

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." Assef's brow twitched. "Like pride in your people, your customs, your language. Afghanistan is like a beautiful mansion littered with garbage, and someone has to take out the garbage. . . "In the west, they have an expression for that," I said. "They call it ethnic cleansing." (Hosseini 86-89)

Hassan and his wife are killed for protecting the property of Amir and his father, it is a hate crime against the ethnic minority of the country. Those who helped minorities were also

killed. "Hassan's and Farzana's murders were dismissed as a case of self-defense. No one said a word about it. Most of it was fear of the Taliban, I think. But no one was going to risk anything for a pair of Hazara servants" (Hosseini 203). He was the member of the ethnic minority of Afghanistan and the fact that he is killed with impunity for no crime at all and his killers go unpunished shows to the extent that ethnic majority has a hold over the lives of ethnic minority in Afghanistan.

Assef rapes Hassan in public, humiliating him forever in that locality. "Traumatic events have primary effects not only on the psychological structures of the self but also on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community" (Herman 37). Hassan is affected emotionally just as much physically. Hassan didn't say anything to anyone about the rape and avoided Amir as much Amir avoided him. It is not just the rape of one individual; it is the rape of the entire ethnic minority of the Hazara community by the ethnic majority of the Pashtuns. Assef's homosexual urges are also met while being in the Taliban as he picks up young boys and girls from the orphanages and then rapes them.

"There is a Talib official," he muttered. He visits once every month or two. He brings cash with him, not a lot, but better than nothing at all." His shifty eyes fell on me, rolled away. "Usually he'll take a girl. But not always." . . . "If I deny him one child, he takes ten. So let him take one and leave the judging to Allah. I swallow my pride and take his goddamn filthy. . . dirty money. Then I go the bazaar and buy food for the children." (Hosseini 235-237)

Hassan's son Sohrab also undergoes physical and psychological trauma as he is victimised and sexually abused by Assef. This sexual trauma haunts him even after leaving Afghanistan. He washes himself properly before sleeping and considers himself dirty as he is sexually abused. The assaults leave Sohrab so deeply depressed that he stops speaking entirely. Here, Sohrab represents the 'collective angst' as he finds it difficult to trust other groups and does not believe in a positive vision or a brighter future. After undergoing continuous trauma, he attempts suicide.

Conclusion

In *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (2003), Jenny Edkins states: “What we call trauma takes place when the very powers that we are convinced will protect us and give us security become our tormentors; when the community of which we considered ourselves members turns against us or when our family is no longer a source of refuge but a site of danger” (5). As an example of trauma fiction, *The Kite Runner* exposes trauma inflicted upon Hazaras who are betrayed and tormented by the people of the same society in which they live. The fact that makes *The Kite Runner* unique is its representation of a community's most horrible traumatic experiences, on the other side, the novel gives us the ray of hope that defines the very essence of humanity.

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