

# Negotiating Ethnic Differences: A Study of Changing Hazara Pashtun Relationships in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Afghanistan's multiethnic population consists of the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazara, Uzbek, Aimak, Turkmen, Baloch and others. Due to conflicting ethnic and religious practices, general discords and even violent clashes between these groups are common. Especially the Pashtun and Hazara communities have had many bloody encounters, the most notable being the massacre at Mazar-e-Sharif. The present study deals with the novel *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini which delineates different aspects of Hazara-Pashtun relations through the interactions between Amir, Hassan, Sohrab, Assef and other characters belonging to different ethnic groups. The study bears out that war affects a nation deeply and brings to the fore dormant conflicts arising from strained relations between the nations belonging to different ethnic groups. The paper looks at the novel as an insider's account which is rooted in Hosseini's own past. His characters act as his mouthpieces making an attempt to bring to the world, the real picture of his people and nation. His adoption of Sohrab may be seen as the first step towards the bridging of the ethnic divide. The study argues that ethnic and racial conflicts destroy the peace and harmony of a nation and cause immense trauma to the innocent citizens who have been subjected to violence and discrimination for the major part of the chequered history of Afghanistan.*

**Keywords:** *Hazara-Pashtun relations, Civil war, ethnic differences, Racial hatred, Conflicts, Trauma*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Afghanistan's multi-ethnic population consists of the Pashtuns and the Tajiks followed by the Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Aimak, Turkmen, Baloch and others. Diverse ethnic composition of the country's population leads to discords and even violent clashes among various groups on several occasions. Pashtun and the Hazara have especially had many bloody encounters in the past few decades. These differences have a long history but they have never been so crucial for the safety of the general populace and the overall peace situation of the country as they have become now.

## **II. HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF THE HAZARA PASHTUN CONFLICT**

With numerous political upheavals resulting from ethnic differences and involvement of other nations in direct as well as indirect forms, the civil war in Afghanistan has deteriorated the situation to such a level that people

are dying every day because of war and poverty. The long stretched civil war and the war on terrorism have made normal existence almost impossible in the country. Also, because of the traditional conservatism in all walks of life, the level of poverty has gone up to such an extent that few employment opportunities remain available to the people. The women are almost under house arrest in most of the tribal parts of the country. Because of various racial, religious and political issues, the country and its people are struggling to lead a normal and peaceful life.

The novel *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini portrays the suffering of people because of the civil war in the country. On Amir's return to Kabul in search of Sohrab, the most heinous form of racial intolerance is brought to the fore when Assef talks about the Hazara massacre in Mazar-i-Sharif. The incident refers to an actual incident in Mazar-i-Sharif, a city in northern Afghanistan. At least 8000 Hazaras were singled out and massacred by the Taliban in August, 1998. According to an eyewitness, "most of the victims had been shot in the head, the chest and the testicles. Others had been slaughtered in what he called "the halal way"- by having their throats slit" [1]. The reason for this massacre by the Taliban was nothing except that the victims were the Hazara, while the Taliban were the Pashtun. The civil war going on in the country gave the Taliban an opportunity to settle age old scores with the Hazara on account of their racial enmity. Joseph J. Collins in his book *Understanding War in Afghanistan* writes how the Taliban along with other reactionary forces took to the destruction of historical relics and monuments. He says that in addition to human rights violations, the Taliban declared war on art, no doubt aided by their ascetic brethren in al Qaeda, who had similar puritanical beliefs [2]. The situation is very well explained in Encyclopaedia of Human Rights, which says that except for human rights mechanisms, Afghanistan was largely ignored by the international community after the Soviet withdrawal [3]. At that time the fate of the people in Afghanistan was decided by the Taliban. The Hazara, who were in minority, suffered interminably when the Taliban rose to power. The hatred between the Pashtun and the Hazara is not new; it is just an extension of the hatred that has continually plagued Afghanistan for centuries. Incidents like Mazar-i-sharif have created a permanent divide between the two groups, an enmity that resurfaces time and again. Even after centuries of having remained in the same country, the relations between the two factions remain strained.

### III. AMIR AND HASSAN AS REPRESENTATIVES OF THE LATENT HATRED

*The Kite Runner* studies the Hazara-Pashtun relations in Afghanistan through the characters of Hassan and Amir. As children, they share an unusual bond despite belonging to different ethnic communities. The different faces of the Hazara-Pashtun interaction are seen in their encounters amongst themselves. Through Amir's indifferent treatment of Hassan, it is revealed how irreconcilable the racial divide is. Although the novel starts before the civil war, still the division between the Hazara and the Pashtun is distinctly brought out. Even after Hassan is raped by his Pashtun friend Assef, Amir does not react against it. He gets so perturbed about doing or not doing something about it that he ends up behaving in the most unusual manner. His guilt at his inaction makes him frame Hassan for the crime of theft which never took place so that his father will turn him out of the house and he will not have to face him every day. Reaction of Hassan at his friends' indifference/inaction hints at the racial mechanics that is at work in the society very clearly. After the incident, he does not show any resentment openly and behaves in a normal way. His reaction was in accordance with the status and the freedom

that a Hazara is granted in the Pashtun dominated societies. Though both Hassan and Amir played with each other and spent a lot of time together but a Hazara in traditional Afghan society cannot think of a place equal to Pashtun or protest against any injustice.

Amir on the other hand wanted Hassan to hate him or at least ask him something about that day because he knew that Hassan had seen Amir watching him when he was being raped. Hassan's passivity and acceptance of his fate makes Amir despise himself to such an extent that he makes arrangement not to see Hassan ever in his life again. Talking about the Shia-Sunni conflict in Islam, Lesley Hazleton says, that told in vivid and intimate detail in the earliest Islamic histories, it is known to all Sunnis throughout the Middle East and all but engraved on the heart of every Shia [4].

Subsequent events in the novel reveal that Hassan is half -brother of Amir. Despite having the same Pashtun blood in their veins, their destinies are completely at odds with each other. When the civil war starts in the country, Amir escapes to America for a better life, while Hassan is killed by Talibs for the crime of being born a Hazara. They falsely charge him for occupying Baba's house illegally where he had spent his childhood with Amir. They kill him and his wife in front of their son. The stigma now dogs his son Sohrab who is held captive by the Pashtun fundamentalist Assef for his sexual pleasure. The atrocities committed on the Hazara by the Pashtun before and after the war in varying degrees of inhumanity dot the landscape of the novel.

In Afghanistan, the Hazara-Pashtun conflict has been in existence since late 1800. Hostilities between the two groups started with Amir Abdur Rahman's mission to take Hazarajat (Hazara homeland) under his control. But in Afghan society, the history of the Hazara Pashtun conflict is always swept under the rugs and people do not talk about this openly. Consequently, most of the Pashtun are not aware of this aspect of history in their childhood. By the time they come to know the truth, it is too late for them to accept the mistakes of their forefathers and accord a dignified existence to the Hazara. They get so embedded in the societal structure that they cannot go back and start all over again. Moreover, the beginning of the civil war in Afghanistan created such conditions that the hatred between the Hazara and the Pashtun became obvious in the form of clashes and mass killings of the Hazara in various parts of the county. The hatred which was buried for long in the old history books resurfaced.

In *The Kite Runner* also, a slice of history of Hazara subjugation is presented. One gets to notice a similar pattern in the life of Amir and Hassan, who with every passing day rediscover their relationship with respect to their social and ethnic differences. The first link about Hazara-Pashtun conflict that Hosseini provides to us in the novel is through Amir. He comes to know about the history of the Hazara subjugation in his Baba's library. Amir's perception and knowledge about the Hazara people is put to question by this history book on the Hazara. The facts in the book are at variance with whatever Amir had read or heard of. He is quite surprised when he finds an entire chapter on the Hazara in the book. The reaction of Amir in the form of words like 'stunned' and 'an entire chapter on Hazara', highlights how Afghan children are kept away from reality. He lives in a society where Hazara had never seemed historically important to a degree as to be given a place in books. Through the book, Amir discovers the unjust treatment that had been meted out to the Hazara by his own people. He also comes to know about the violent massacre of the Hazara by his people. Amir cannot reconcile himself to this murky aspect of the Pashtun legacy. Nobody had ever told him all these things, that is why while talking about the book, he keeps on repeating "the book said." He had always seen the Hazara working for the Pashtun as

servants and cooks. But he did not know about the subjugation or massacre that had permanently rendered the Hazara inferior and suppressed. On reading the book, Amir says:

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. [5]

Thus we see that the hatred which gives rise to the Hazara massacre during the civil war is the result of the clashes the traces of which have existed for decades. In the places where the Hazara are in minority, the Pashtun elitist attitude is enforced which keeps the young generation ignorant of the truths about the minorities. This attitude towards the minority thus creates an atmosphere of constant tension which finds outlet during the war. Baba, who always talks about justice and equality, does not ever tell Amir anything controversial. Even in schools, the questions regarding the Hazaras are avoided and the mention of the Hazaras is rarely there. A negative image of the Hazaras is projected which further initiates the divide into the young minds from the very beginning. This becomes clear when Amir talks about his teacher’s reaction on being asked about the book and the Hazara. Amir says:

The following week, after class, I showed the book to my teacher and pointed to the chapter on the Hazaras. He skimmed through a couple of pages, snickered, handed the book back. “That’s the one thing Shi’a people do well,” he said, picking up his papers, “passing themselves as martyrs.” He wrinkled his nose when he said the word Shi’a, like it was some kind of disease. [5]

#### **IV. ROLE OF POWERFUL NATIONS**

During the soviet era in Afghanistan, no significant Hazara-Pashtun clashes took place as they had a common enemy to fight against. Though there was severe guerrilla fight going on in the country which degraded the lives of the countrymen there, ethnic conflicts were more or less non-existent. But after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and the subsequent rise of the Taliban, the hatred that had lain dormant for years revived yet again. At that time, some people had started anticipating the chances of violence and bloodshed with the rise of the Taliban. The fears of people came true after sometime as they ruled the country mindlessly and killed innocents brutally. Mainly, the Hazara feared their arrival because of their strict and violent codes of conduct and their attitude towards them. Thus in the novel when Hassan hears of the Taliban rising to power in Afghanistan, he seems really concerned. “God help the Hazaras now, Rahim Khan sahib” [5]; this is all that he says. All his fears come true when the Taliban start a campaign against the Hazara. They accuse Hassan of being a thief and a usurper and, “took him out to the street... and shot him in the back of his head” [5]. When his wife, “Farzana came screaming and attacked them, they shot her too. Self defense, they claimed later” [5]. In reality also, there were many people at that time who had met the similar fate in Afghanistan when the Taliban took control of the nation. Not just the Hazara but even the Pashtun who favoured them were killed by the Taliban. According to S.A. Mousavi, thousands of Hazara men, women, and children were moved to Mountain area from their land and Kabul and Qandahar, while numerous towers of human heads were made from the defeated rebels as a warning to others who might challenge the rule of the Amir [6].

The liberties which the Afghans had enjoyed during the Soviet occupation were seen as violations of the Shari'a laws as enshrined in the Quran. The Talibs considered themselves the ultimate authority on Islamic Laws. In *The Kite Runner*, when Amir comes to Kabul during the atmosphere of war in search of Sohrab, he faces Taliban fundamentalism everywhere in the form of various restrictions, punishments and executions. Amir's search for Sohrab takes him to an orphanage and the circumstances under which Sohrab is taken away reveal a lot about the plight of orphans. The incident also reveals the double standards of the Taliban. Amir discovers that Sohrab is in custody of Assef and he is using Sohrab for his sexual pleasure not just because he is a Hazara, but also because he is Hassan's son. Assef tells Amir about the Mazar-i-Sharif incident, where he had taken part in the killings. When Amir questions the logic behind the killings, Assef tells him that he is doing "God's work." He takes great pride in his mission of 'ethnic cleansing' and tells him:

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... 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. Dogs meant for dogs. [5]

It is not only in Afghanistan that the Hazara-Pashtun relations are discouraged. The mindset with which the Taliban acted against the Hazara in Afghanistan seems to have had impact on the people living outside the country also. Though the differences do not usually take the form of the hatred that we find in war-torn Afghanistan, the discomfort seems obvious. Even in Afghan communities living in liberal countries like the US, the attitude of the people remains unchanged. The impact of social and moral conditioning holds control over Afghans even abroad. Therefore, when Amir takes Sohrab to the US along with him, his father-in-law, General Taheri reacts strongly. He feels disturbed to find a Hazara boy in his daughter's house. He expresses his concern that he will have to answer to the questions of his community members. He tells his wife:

While you're busy knitting sweaters, my dear, I have to deal with the community's perception of our family. People will ask. They will want to know why there is a Hazara boy living with our daughter. What do I tell them? [5]

Amir does not face much criticism for his act of adopting Sohrab and his confession that Hassan is his half-brother because he is physically removed from Afghanistan. General Taheri also gives his consent, despite his reservations, because he knows that everything will be forgotten in a while even in Afghan society of America. Had the incident occurred in Afghanistan, the situation would have been completely different. Even if Amir had tried, there would be a little chance of his success. The pressure of society would not have let him adopt a Hazara boy. It was the same society because of which Amir and Hassan could never come together as friends. Because of the fear of society Amir had to desert his friend Hassan. In Afghanistan, even today, the relations between the Hazara and the Pashtun factions remain strained because of the ethnic clashes dogging their past. The reactionary and conservative tribal forces like the Taliban and the Mujahidin time and again fan this hatred. Hence, the legacy of clashes continues

## **V. CONCLUSION**

After 9/11 and the so called war on terrorism, there was seen a surge in literature based on Afghan situations especially by the diaspora writers. One of the themes common in most of these works was an effort by these writers to show to the world that Afghans were not inherently a barbaric race. In spite of all the differences among various ethnic tribes, people had learnt to cohabit together and the nation was progressing in all walks of life. There definitely were strict cultural and traditional codes of conduct which people were supposed to follow but the deviations from the prescribed norms were not met with flogging and public executions. Women were allowed to study and work along with men. Interference however by powerful nations made the life of people difficult and destroyed all the progress that the nation had made till date. In the novel therefore we see that the Hazara were no doubt treated by the Pashtun in unfair manner but the executions of the minority ethnic groups started only after the war started in the country which was a direct result of external interference from the superpowers.

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