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**Demystifying Pashtun-Hazara and Shi'a-Sunni Conflict in Khaled  
Hosseini's *The Kite Runner***

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**Article Received:** 16/09/2024

**Article Accepted:** 18/10/2024

**Published Online:** 19/10/2024

**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2024.6.10.64

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**Abstract**

*The Kite Runner* (2003) is an illuminating read of a nation called Afghanistan torn apart by ethnic and political strife. This paper throws concentrated reflective light on how Khaled Hosseini uses literary space to enumerate Afghanistan's internal strife between the Shi'a and Sunni and Pashtun and Hazara besides dwelling upon Afghanistan's transition from monarchy to a republic and then to the Taliban regime, underlining the steady decline of humanism and gross violation of human rights, a total debacle of secularism and aggressive augmentation of elitist control over the ethnic minority. A close textual analysis backed by critical and erudite views of scholars adopted as methodology helped in gauging the novelist's brilliant handling of the history and politics of Afghanistan through the depiction of themes such as betrayal, atonement, guilt, and redemption.

The paper suggests global intervention in Afghanistan for lasting peace, prompting an end to a humanitarian crisis and outlandish internal conflict in the form of the Shia-Sunni and Pashtun-Hazara divide.

**Keywords:** Geo-politics, Hazara, Shi'a, Talibanization and aggressive Islamization, socio-political zeitgeist.

**Introduction**

***The Kite Runner* and Shi'a-Sunni Conflict**

Historically, the Shi'a-Sunni divide in Islam created a chasm between the people of the same community based on principles of who among the Khulafaye Rashidun (the first four rightly guided caliphs who furthered the cause of Islam from 632 A.D. to 661 A.D.) should have succeeded as the first Caliph after the demise of prophet Mohammad (pbuh). This divide surfaced in Islam by the fag end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, precisely after Mohammad's (pbuh) demise (Abdullah 307). Hazrat Ali (656 A.D. to 661 A.D), the son-in-law and cousin of prophet Mohammad (pbuh) by virtue of being closely related by blood, Shi'as argue, deserved to be the first caliph of Islam. Shi'a further alludes to certain events in Islam, such as the 'Feast of Dhul Asheera,' 'Event of Ghadir Khaum,' 'Incident of Pen and Paper,' and so on and so forth to justify

their claim in support of Hazrat Ali. (Maududi, 217) The Sunnis deny the legitimacy of a succession of Ali to the caliphate after Mohammad (pbuh) and advocate for Hazrat Abu Bakr's (632-634 A.D) legitimacy to the Caliphate of Islam, followed by Hazrat Omar Farooq (634-644 A.D) and Hazrat Uthman (644-661 A.D) respectively as justified and God-ordained. Those who protested and questioned the legitimacy of these three caliphs sidelining Hazrat Ali came to be called Shi'a. This self-dividing principle continues to this day, and Shi'a accounts for about 10-13% of the Muslim population across the world, inhabiting mostly Iran, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, and Iraq (PEW, 2010).

*The Kite Runner* demonstrates a Sunni-dominated Afghanistan with strict Sharia law in force and a clear tendency to marginalize the minority Shi'a. Ali and Hassan are assumed to be a "servant class" despite their close propinquity with Baba and Amir. Hashim Kidwai observes that Hazara characters Ali and Hassan in the novel evoke Shi'a imagery since the fourth caliph of Islam was Ali, and his first son was Hassan. They are considered the most venerable in Shi'a discourses. (Kidwai,17) Though "fed from the same breasts" (Hosseini 54), Amir and Hassan fall prey to the age-old conflict between the two Islamic denominations. Hosseini strategically shifts the plot to 1933 to intertwine the personal lives of the characters with the political history of the country when Zaheer Shah became the king of Afghanistan. Baba was born in the same year, and the accidental death of a Hazara couple brought Ali to Baba's house. Thus, Baba and Ali grew up together, although Baba was clear about his status and social standing. Baba and Ali grew up in a situation similar to Amir and Hassan. Amir unequivocally acknowledges the insurmountable Shia-Sunni and Pashtun-Hazara divide in Afghanistan, even by close companionship and love.

Aggressive Islamization, as introduced by the Taliban, was a rarity in Afghanistan all through the opening few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Amir remembers, "In those days (before the advent of the Taliban), drinking was fairly common in Kabul. No one gave you a public lashing for it, but those Afghans who did drink did so in private, out of respect." (14) As one scrutinizes through and looks deeper into the gradual transition in religious mood of Afghanistan it becomes vividly clear that by late 20<sup>th</sup> century Islamization became an aggressive pursuit and a cult for Taliban to cling to power which in turn led to the emergence of a distinctly opposing camp of the liberal Muslims including Muslim women who advocated for space for self-expression and liberty. Savage restrictions on women's movements, education, and behavior in public sparked dissent from different quarters of the country.

The heroic and chivalrous nature of the Afghans, which had nothing to do with their religious background whatsoever, and all other Afghan qualities came to be sacrificed/ purposely forgotten to promote religious sentiment among the Afghans. Hosseini shows Baba's adherence to the typical Afghan traits of bravery and courage as he criticizes his son Amir for not fighting back when the situation demands. Referring to Amir's cowardice, Baba comments, "A boy who will not stand up for

himself becomes a man who cannot stand up to anything." (20) The inbuilt Afghan pride and the country's glory are no longer to be seen in Afghanistan as the country plunged into the idea of saving Islam through strict Islamic laws. Baba was aghast at Amir's lack of courage to such a degree that he confided in Rahim Khan, "If I had not seen the doctor pull him out of my wife with my own eyes, I would never believe he is my son" (20) Baba's statement has a clear bearing on the sense of pride Afghans take in bravery and display of courage. Thompson points out, "Baba observes that Amir's behavior betrays the true Afghan behavior. Wanting in valor Amir displays is not a true Afghan trait." (Thompson 79)

Somewhere deep in the psychology, it was etched in both Amir and Baba that Ali and Hassan could not be their equals or friends. The very zeitgeist of the state was such that knowingly or unknowingly, Pashtuns were in an irretrievable state of refusal to accept the Hazaras in the social echelon. This is reflected in Amir's statement, "But in none of his stories did Baba ever refer to Ali as his friend." (Hosseini 22) Moreover, Amir straightaway admits, "I never thought of Hassan and me as friends either." (ibid) Hence, Amir's conclusion, " Because history is not easy to overcome. Neither is religion. In the end, I was a Pashtun, and he was a Hazara, I was Sunni, and he was a Shi'a, and nothing was ever going to change that" (ibid) was right. Their prejudice against the Hazaras shaped the very thought process of the elitists, and therefore, in Pashtun-dominated Afghanistan, Hazaras were viewed as aliens and unwanted. Their education was largely ignored, "That Hassan would grow up illiterate like Ali and Hazaras had been decided the minute he had been born, perhaps even the moment he had been conceived in Sanaubar's womb—after all, what use did a servant have for the written word?" (22) Such preconditioned Hazara status in the Afghan social hierarchy impedes holistic development in the country. Ananya Mishra, in this context, traces Amir's psychological stresses caused by a nagging sense of guilt both for his personal betrayal as well as his community's betrayal of Hazaras. Hassan, thus, becomes a representative of his community as a whole. (Mishra, 39)

Hosseini brilliantly explores Amir's feeling of alienation, which leads to the development of an intense sense of insecurity that contributes to his loss of filial bonding. Hosseini pins down Amir's pathetic withdrawal of trust in Baba, "Amir would often think, after all, didn't all fathers in their secret hearts harbor a desire to kill their sons?" (26) Amir's most disturbing distance from Baba comes to light when the later showed lack of interest in Amir's story, "I wished I could open my veins and drain his cursed blood from my body" (27) and at the same time "wished Rahim Khan had been my father." (28) Interestingly, the novel depicts father-son relationship on two planes—a troubled relationship between Baba and Amir and a wholesome relationship exemplified by Ali and Hassan. Themes of Shi'a- Sunni and Pashtun-Hazara divide, though core to the novel, microcosmic personal relationships contrasted through two ethnically and sectorally different sets of people sharing the same nationality and community also present a major concern in *The Kite Runner*.

**Pashtun- Hazara Conflict in *The Kite Runner***

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The themes of politics and the internal ethnic divide go hand in hand in *The Kite Runner*, exposing the harsh reality of Pashtun's dominance over the Hazaras in Afghanistan. Baba and Ali grew up together, but he never introduced Ali as his friend. Amir states,

Ali and Baba grew up together as childhood playmates—at least until polio crippled Ali's leg—just like Hassan and I grew up a generation later. Baba was always telling us about the mischief he and Ali used to cause, and Ali would shake his head and say, "But Agha sahib, tell them who the architect of the mischief was and who the poor laborer was." Baba would laugh and throw his arm around Ali. But in none of his stories did Baba ever refer to Ali as his friend. (Hosseini, 22)

Baba, despite being a liberal Afghan drinking wine and debunking the Taliban or their beards or beliefs, is particularly specific about drawing the line between a Pashtun and a Hazara. His reluctance to admit Ali as his friend is a painful pointer to his own extraordinary obsession with Afghanism and, more precisely, Pashtunism. This divide pervades the entire Pashtun community and has become an obsessed psychological phenomenon with every generation. Amir realizes this divide only after his return to Afghanistan, and therefore, he concedes about his relationship with Hassan, "But we were kids who had learned to crawl together and no history, ethnicity, society or religion was going to change that either." (ibid) However, in his subconscious, Amir also had the same attitude as Baba towards Hassan. When Amir went out looking for Hassan and enquired an old merchant who asked the former, "Who is he to you?" Amir's answer was, "He's our servant's son." (61) What describes more explicitly the status of the Hazaras in Afghanistan is the old merchant's envious statement, "Lucky Hazara, having such a concerned master. His father should get on his knees, sweep the dust at your feet with his eyelashes." (61) The statement pins down the social stratification in Afghanistan and the place of the Hazaras in the echelon. Lisa Winkler (2007), in *A Study Guide to the Riverhead Edition Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner*, portrays how Amir's sense of guilt is not confined only to his betrayal of Hassan but also extends to the Pashtuns as an ethnic group discriminating against the Hazaras living in the same society.

Assef's boastful, imperious assertion, "Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns. It always has been and will always be. We are the true Afghans, the pure Afghans, not this Flat-Nose here (a reference to Hassan). His people pollute our homeland, our *watan*" (Hosseini 35) is a typical reinforcement of the Pashtun zeitgeist of obliterating Hazaras (Shi'as) from Afghanistan once and for all. This ethnic conflict represents a crucial cultural and religious aspect—intolerance amongst the people of the same community, which goes against the spirit of Islam that preaches, "Do not hate each other, do not envy each other, do not run away from each other, rather be servants of Allah as brothers. It is not lawful for a Muslim to boycott his brother for more than three days." (*Sahih al Bukhari*, 5718) Assef's constant remembrance of Islam and his attachment to the religion fails to justify his hatred for Hassan or his ethnicity. Hosseini launches a scathing attack on the religious bigotry and hypocrisy of Aseef

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and his class in Afghanistan. With the inferior and debased status of Hazara, Ali, and Hassan win over the readers given the loyalty and religious belief they profess, unlike Amir or Aseef. (Flayer,23) Aseef's gift to Amir in the form of Adolf Hitler's biography is a representation of the hate Hitler had for the Jews and Aseef's for the Hazaras of Afghanistan—a disarming hate that he wanted to instill in Amir.

Assef's wildness and rape of Hassan under Amir's nose is the most brutal act of betrayal one can perpetrate on another. Flayer advances the view that there could be two reasons for Amir's reluctance to stand for Hassan—first, he wanted to win over the love and attention of Baba, and second, he could not tolerate Baba being concerned about Hassan. Amir admits, "Perhaps Hassan was the price I had to pay, the lamb I had to slay, to win Baba." (68) Hassan, a Hazara, was insignificant to Amir, and this trivialization of the Hazaras is common among the elite Pashtuns. His accomplishment in the form of winning the kite flying tournament was possible only for Hassan, but Amir's disgust with Hassan was insurmountable, and he devised the ultimate diabolic mechanism to have Hassan ousted by assassinating his character and leveling him as a thief. This is the most brutal betrayal that Amir meted out to Hassan—the most loyal man in Amir's life.

Amir cannot help but admire Hassan for some of his good habits that Amir himself does not possess. Hassan is poor, but his healthy habits come to light as Amir admits, "By the time I dragged myself out of bed and lumbered to the bathroom, Hassan had already brushed up, prayed the morning *namaz* with Ali, and prepared my breakfast." (22) Just as Amir ignores everything good about Hassan, the Pashtuns in general overlook the Hazaras. Nevertheless, Hosseini's depiction of pre-revolutionary Afghanistan is rich in warmth and humor but also charged with the tension between the nation's two different ethnic groups. Amir is from among Afghanistan's privileged - the Pashtuns, who are Sunni Muslims. Hassan is of a shunned ethnic minority – the Mongoloid Hazaras, who are Shi'ite Muslims. It could be said that what makes Hassan so endearing to Amir is that Hassan never complains about his "station in life" and that he cheerfully and unconditionally accepts his second-class status. By the end of the novel, when his true relation to Amir is revealed, Hassan is rewarded by being posthumously elevated to a status of near-parity with Amir and his family, and in the U.S., Amir's finally stands up for Sohrab, Hassan's son, as an individual and not merely as an ethnic face.

### **Conclusion**

*The Kite Runner* demystifies the vexing religious, ethnic, and political issues paralyzing Afghanistan. Despite an all-pervasive somber atmosphere, there is a streak of light and hope at the end of the novel, as evidenced by Rahim Khan's optimism about the future of Afghanistan. The religio-political history of Afghanistan demonstrates the country's transition into various ruling dispensations, such as Russians, Mujahideen, and Taliban, but none of which could ensure peace and public welfare in the country. The intense Shi'a-Sunni conflict in Afghanistan and the raging hate of the Pashtun towards the Hazara are factors responsible for the erosion of human values in the country. The cruelties perpetrated by the Taliban and by the

Pashtuns on the Hazaras are completely numbing and dehumanizing. The intervention of international communities and human rights commissions could be a possible way to assuage and ameliorate the Hazara tragedy in Afghanistan. Khalid Hosseini explained a realistic political and cultural situation in Afghanistan in explicit terms. However, many 'Hassans' and 'Alis' are still becoming victims of predatory Taliban even today. Political stability is the first pre-condition for ensuring the safety of Afghan citizens irrespective of ethnic background. The article has shown adequate explanations of the reasons for ethnic clashes in Afghanistan and viable measures to address such conflicts. Amir's repentance and desire for atonement are representative of what the Pashtun in Afghanistan must do because the Hazaras, as is evident in the novel, are targeted by the elite and superior Pashtun only. An introspection on the part of the Pashtun and developing a humane approach to Hazaras would go a long way in addressing the vexing issue of the ongoing conflict between the two ethnic groups. *The Kite Runner*, as evident in this article, expounds on the collapse of civil society and the violation of fundamental human rights that commonly take place in such settings - ethnic and racial discrimination, religious intolerance, the oppression of women and children, war crimes, and the plight of refugees. Afghan refugees escaping war and Taliban rule are victims of human rights violations in the novel. Baba and Amir, living in exile in Hayward, California, are glaring examples of the exodus of opulent Afghans while the poor, especially the Hazaras, fail to make such a move due to crushing poverty and, therefore, endure the atrocities hurled at them. The findings of the research present Afghanistan as a state torn by ethnic conflicts whose resolution depends on Afghanistan's political stability as well as the framing of inclusive national policies. One could hardly be in a state of denial of the status that the ethnic minority in Afghanistan deserves since Afghanistan as a nation-state is undeniably home to the minority as much as it is to the majority.

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