

MULTICULTURALISM AND PAROCHIALISM IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S THE KITE RUNNER

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ABSTRACT

The present paper makes an attempt to study the issue of intolerance in a multicultural society which tries to find ways to counter the fear of proximity of the Other. This paper explores the theme of guilt in detail. The paper further expands on the prevailed intolerance in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) within its Afghan context. How does multiculturalism naturalize and neutralize the political differences into cultural differences? The answer can be found in the cause of this this culturalization. When a political system deliberately does not intervene in stabilizing the society's various factions then the concept of living in co-existence in the prevalent situation of inequality takes the backstage. The narrative of how to survive and retain your cultural identity emerges as a big problem.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Fundamentalism, Ethnicity.

AFGHANISTAN – A MULTIETHNIC COUNTRY:

“Multiculturalism is a theory, philosophy and ideological field that is grounded on the fundamental tenet of “inclusivity”, especially of minority groups” (Garcia 175). As a descriptive term, “multiculturalism simply refers to the existence of a plurality of ethnic or cultural groups with in a society”; and as an evaluating term, it expresses an ideal, that is, to value all groups equally. In the first case, Multiculturalism is often used to describe “the problem of accommodating diverse and sometimes conflicting groups within a single society”; and in the latter, it is, consciously and deliberately, used “to break down the distinctiveness of cultural groups within what is sometimes thought of as ‘a melting pot’ conception of society” (Horton 2).

Though Afghanistan has been a home to more than half a dozen, big and small, different ethnicities, namely Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, Turkmen, Nuristani, Baluchi, Kyrgyz among few others; only Pashtuns, who are the majority and are around forty percent of the total population, claim the country for “their chief area of habitation” (Naby 239). As a landlocked country Afghanistan's mountain ranges not only enclose it from other nations but also restrict the interactions between its numerous ethnicities (Agnello et al. 101). These ethnicities are, more or less, found in particular parts of the country but no one inhabits it exclusively, for example: in the north, Turkic speaking Kyrgyz, Uzbeks and Turkmen live along with Persian speaking Tajiks and others; in the west Persian speakers, with ethnic differences, are in majority; likewise in the South and East, most of the Pashtuns live along with Baluchs and Brahuis (Naby 239); and in the center, Hazara, a Shi'a group, reside – as majority – with their own Persian dialect called Hazaragi (244). With such diversities – both, within the country, and their sympathetic relations with their respective neighboring countries – Afghanistan has always been a place of constant conflicts ever since it emerged as a free state (Zain 80). These conflicts have always been influenced by a number of players, both national and international, who had their own respective motives and interests.

The chaotic situation in Afghanistan provided an opportunity for Pashtuns residing in the

countryside and Pakistan to re-unite, take back the power from non-Pashtuns and bring peace to the region. Thus came forth a new movement led by the Taliban during 1994 which succeeded rapidly in securing approval from numerous influential Pashtuns and won land without much fighting. Taliban captured Kabul in 1996 – pushed Northern Alliance to the north – with the help of Al-Qaeda which not only strengthened the military but also influenced Taliban's religious inclination and advanced its own "agenda of pan-Islamism" (Ahmed 99) and Jihad. This redefinition of belief divided the population "on the basis of faith, rather than that of ethnicity" (100). As a result, Taliban's attitude towards Hazaras – which were considered apostates or kafirs – deteriorated, resulting in many killing: Hazara leader Mazari killed in 1996; massacres at Mazar-i-sharif, Bamiyan and Yakaolong in 1998 (96); and ethnic cleansing in Bamiyan in 2001. As Pashtuns, Taliban's attitude towards other non-Pashtuns also was never good enough. They had a "harboured hatred for all minorities" (97) which could be traced back to their troubled history. They had always seen as foreign intruders, even though they had been living side by side for centuries, who did not belong in Afghanistan; whose mere presence was an intrusion into their safe space: whose different life choices were disturbing the norms, thus causing a panic of sorts; and whose proximity was threatening because of the notion – of fear – attached to it, and which was to be dealt with aggression.

THE KITE RUNNER (2003) – AN ANALYSIS:

The conflict between Pashtun and Hazara communities is depicted in detail in *The Kite Runner* (2003), the first novel of Hosseini. The novel and the movie based on the novel were banned in Afghanistan. Hosseini was blamed for showing the different ethnic groups of the country in a very bad light which has humiliated particularly one group. The movie was under cloud as it was blamed for showing a homosexual rape scene. The child actors of the movie have to flee the country to save their lives.

The Kite Runner shows the story of the protagonist Amir in the bildungsroman manner. Amir is established as a successful writer in the United States. He narrates the story about his childhood during the 1970s in Kabul. Hassan is his childhood friend. He belongs to Hazara community. He along with his father Ali was servant in the house of Amir's father in Kabul. Amir tells about his betrayal of Hassan and subsequently Hassan departs from their house. He tells about the invasion of the Soviets into Afghanistan and their own departure from Afghanistan to the United States. He tries to atone for his betrayal of Hassan by rescuing Hassan's son Sohrab, after his death, from the Taliban occupied Kabul.

The conflict between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns, especially Hazaras can be traced from the be traced from the earlier mentioned roots of hate – as aptly depicted by Brustein, mentioning Nazi's disfiguration of Jews, in his book *Roots of Hate Anti-Semitism in Europe Before the Holocaust*. The religious cause of hate between Pashtuns and Hazaras can be attributed to Hazara being Shi'a Muslims whereas Pashtuns were Sunni Muslims. Hazaras were considered apostates or non-humans on occasions. In *The Kite Runner*, for people like Assef, who belonged to a privileged Pashtun majority, Afghanistan was "the land of Pashtuns" and they were "the true Afghans, the pure Afghans" (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 38); while Hazaras were polluting their motherland. The Hazaras were not considered as humans rather they were treated like dogs. Killing of Hazaras was like the act of cleansing the country by wiping out the trash i.e. the Hazaras. He considered it liberating, like he was "doing God's work" (255). By degrading the Other to a non-human status makes it easy to target it without much objection.

Racially the Hazaras were seen as the descendants of Mongols. Their distinct features, body

structure makes them different from the localities. The irony is that even after living in this country for centuries and sharing socio-cultural bonds with the Pashtuns; still there was a resentment of Pashtuns towards Hazaras. Hostility towards the Hazaras had always existed in Afghanistan; most of the time it was subtle, woven into the fabrics of its socio-cultural norms. For instance: Soldiers, people and neighborhood children harassing Ali and Hassan on the streets; calling them names like “mice-eating, flat-nosed, load-carrying donkeys” (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 9); making fun of their mongoloid features; and using words like Hazara and Shi’a to call upon them in a mocking and distasteful manner.

The two ethnicities were divided on the basis of economical roots also. Whenever Hazaras rise economically it was seen as a disturbance to the socio-economic norms and causes further hostility between the two groups. For instance, on finding that Hassan, a Hazara, was living in a big house, in a rich neighborhood, with his wife, Taliban took over the house and killed Hassan and his wife when they protested. And lastly, the political roots were the political affiliation of Hazaras. The uprising of Hazaras in the last decade of the 19th century against the Pashtun kingdom, which was brutally suppressed, was kept afresh in the mind of the Pashtuns.

Hazaras exercised a strong political hold in central Afghanistan – the region of Hazarajat. That is why they were in a position to negotiate for a share in the government after the fall of Najibullah’s government in 1992. The Pashtuns living in the countryside and the Pakistani neighbors were deeply hurt after the formation of a non-Pashtun government. They retaliated by joining the new front, led by Taliban, to take back the power.

The administration of Taliban, like every other society, had “a natural inclination to create boundaries (physical or arbitrary) in order to protect what” was “perceived as their core cultural values” (Agnello et al. 98). For that reason they did not even shy to punish the sympathizers of their adversaries; as Assef warned Amir for abandoning his country in the hour of need which could get him “arrested for treason” and “shot for it even” (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 256). The rise of Taliban in Afghanistan and their pan-Islamic ideology was welcomed warmly initially but the ground reality of strife between the two different ethnic groups cannot be dissolved. When the Taliban assumed power and captured the capital, then they pushed the coalition of non-Pashtun to the north. Now, the Pashtuns had the upper hand again. From their privileged position they did not consider the Hazaras as humans. Even Tajiks and other were seen with doubt. Numerous incidents of violence took place and as a result many villages were burnt; and people massacred, shot, hanged, banished and left to feed on the streets.

The political differences transformed into cultural differences and changed the narrative into the narrative of basic survival and identity politics. Afghanistan is a diversely populated country and ethnic groups are entangled in an internal strife. The concept of nationalism had to face the trouble of multiculturalism that how to unite such a diverse population. One of the easy ways to strike unity in the population is to pose a threat by an outside agency. The insurgent groups of Afghanistan were collectively known as mujahedeen, comprised of various ethnic groups, fought the same fight against Soviets and the communist government of Afghanistan. There is a need for an eternal enemy and in the absence of an outer enemy, their mutual interest also ceases to exist and they go back to be hostile to one another. There was another problem of true national identity. In Afghanistan’s case, the nationalist movement of Pashtunistan – the land of the Pashtuns – drove other ethnicities away from the movement, as it was discriminatory against them, which further distanced the remaining Pashtuns from them. In this novel Farid is a Tajik and he is a driver of Rahim Khan. He was a Mujahideen in the past and he helped Amir to go to Kabul and back to Pakistan. He becomes

a smuggler under the rule of Taliban. He and his family has made many sacrifices for the country but they now find it difficult to survive. Many persons from non-Pashtuns ethnicities find it difficult to make their both ends meet despite Taliban's ideology of pan-Islamism.

CONCLUSION

In *The Kite Runner*, two different pictures of home is presented to two different ethnic groups. Amir and Aseef as Pashtun are privileged. Farid and his brother Wahid are non-Pashtuns so they don't have that privileged status. For the former, who lived in a privileged gated communities with servants thought of Afghanistan as a beautiful place; but for the latter, the real Afghanistan, as Farid put it, was "an old man dressed in ragged clothes trudging down a dirt path" with "a large burlap pack filled with scrub grass tied to his back" (Hosseini 215), who could not even afford the meat.

In a multicultural society diverse ethnicities have to tolerate each other and co-exist. The foremost responsibility of the state is to form non-intrusive attitude in which there is respect for the personal space and the Other is allowed to live according to his religious, social and cultural values. The marginalized groups need to be protected from the racial hatred and defamation because of their ethnicity. Baba shows the way forward for peaceful co-existence in a multicultural society in *The Kite Runner*.

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