



Vol. 3 No. 5 (May) (2025)

Exploring Colonial Dehumanization And Oppression: A study of Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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Abstract

This study is all about a postcolonial framework to analyse the themes of dehumanization and oppression in the novel “Kite Runner” by the Afghan American novelist Khaled Hosseini. From end to end of the critical analysis of the novel, this research focuses on how the dominant Pashtun class continues inequality, unjust and violence against the marginalized Hazara people. The novel’s representation of the complex relationships between the characters like Amir, Hassan and Assef contribute to descriptive analysis of the techniques of oppression and the oppressed voice Subaltern. Moreover, this study discusses how the dominant Pashtun class dehumanizes lower classes and silences their voices through the subaltern perspective. This study focuses on textual analysis, applying Gayatri Spivak’s theory of subalternity to dispute that the novel provides a significant investigation of the convergence between colonialism, power and identity. Eventually, this research displays how the novel Kite Runner provides a critical approach to the ongoing heritages of colonialism and oppression in Afghan society.

Keywords: Dehumanization, Oppression, Postcolonialism, Subalternity, Marginalization

Introduction

About the Novel

The trendiest novel of the contemporary period by Khaled Hosseini is *The Kite Runner* published in 2003 winner of the Quill Award in 2005 and the Richard & Judy Book Club Award in 2006. The book is based on the explosive backdrop of Afghanistan’s history, mixed emotions of guilt, joy, class difference, salvation, redemption, forgiveness and human relationships. As researchers, we are attracted to this novel due to the key components of colonialism which are dehumanization and oppression, both are frequently portrayed by the author within the novel, because of its insightful account of the two situations as the characters of the novel have been suppressed and oppressed through dominant groups of Afghanistan Landmark.



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The story is about two boys who belong to different ethnic groups one is Amir a Pashtun boy physically fit, powerful, and educated who wants to make himself valued in the eyes of his Baba but due to life-changing incidents, he finds himself in the stage of guilt and seeks to forgiveness as he has committed a sin by dehumanizing his friend Hassan a Hazara boy intelligent but uneducated physically unfit as Hassan's cleft lip. Amir dehumanizes Hassan by not helping him when Hassan is assaulted by Assef he is also a Pashtun guy through this character Khalid Hosseini explores the oppression faced by Hazara groups. Due to their historical, racial, cultural, and religious differences from the dominant Pashtun group, the Hazara people face challenges and oppression in Afghanistan. People of Hazara who have exclusive Mongoloid features and who are mostly Shia Muslims have faced numerous problems, violence, inhuman treatment, and brutality and mistreatment by Pashtuns.

About the Author

Khaled Hosseini's own personal life experiences inspired him to write the novel *The Kite Runner* in which he beautifully describes the many critical aspects of life. He was born in 1965 in Kabul but his family had to flee to Paris because of his father's diplomatic job, and then to the United States as refugees following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. In essence, the novel mirrors Afghan culture and politics, the country has some beautiful features as it has untamed internal conflict. Elements of friendship and treachery, guilt and forgiveness are primary, based upon Hosseini's conclusions of the primary human interactions and trustworthiness. His suffering in exile and his homesickness played a part in determining the emotional aspect of the novel. Some functions are more important than others, most importantly, the relationship between fathers and sons, which stems from his own relationship with his father. What we can get from kites is childhood and betrayal – two things that remind Hosseini of Kabul. Penning the novel while practising as a medical practitioner, Hosseini wrote the novel to give vent to his grief and revisit the Afghan pre-war society.

Research Objectives

- To examine the power dynamics of Pashtun class over Hazara class under colonial legacy.
- To investigate how dehumanization and oppression are resisted in the novel by using Gayatri Spivak's theory "Can the Subaltern Speak".
- Research Questions

This study explores the following research questions;

1. How does the dominant Pashtun class dehumanize the lower classes and silence their voices through a subaltern perspective?
2. How do the relationships between Amir and Hassan embody the dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression in post-colonial Afghanistan?

Theoretical Framework

Khaled Hosseini's "*The Kite Runner*" is very suitable for analysis using a critical framework called "Can the Subaltern Speak" by Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak (1988). This theory specifically focuses on the voices of marginalized and oppressed groups in Afghanistan. This theory helps to understand how the Taliban regime's policies and practices have served to oppress and marginalize lower groups, such as the Hazara, in Afghan society, dehumanizing them by the Pashtun people. This framework highlights the silent voices of the Hazara community and the way the upper class oppressed them physically, mentally, and sexually.



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Literature Review

The novel *Kite Runner* carries heart-wrenching incidents of Hassan's life then follows the lifelong guilt of Amir's life and also the sufferings of lower class people the way Pashtun Afghan people traumatize and oppress the Hazara community (Chun, 2014). Exploration of Trauma Narrative in *The Kite Runner*. The most dominant group of Afghanistan is the Pashtun and the ideology of the Pashtun people about the Hazara group is like garbage and their aim is to throw garbage out from their country as Pashtun states that Hazara people are not pure like Pashtun people are.

The novel *Kite Runner* carries also criticism due to its representation of three different settings (Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the United States of America California) and intergenerational trauma, the Soviet Invasion, father-son relationship, friendship, guilt and redemption, masculinity and the historical background of the Afghan ethnicity. Hosseini's critics have mostly focused on these aspects and themes of the novel but we are reviewing the two most important elements of colonialism are oppression and dehumanization with the Lens of Gayatri Spivak Subaltern's theory of how the Hazara characters are oppressed and dehumanized by Pashtun characters generation to generation.

The Silent Voices of the Oppressed; Subaltern Theory

In order to fully digest the mechanisms of oppression in *The Kite Runner*, utilizing a bit of subaltern theory as put forth by post-colonial scholars such as Gayatri Spivak is useful. As a discipline, subaltern theory presents the ways in which social and historical forces send those considered of the periphery to the margins of the dominant discourse, and their respective silencing through dispossessing them of their voices and agency (Danish et al., 2020).

Hassan symbolises the quintessential subaltern figure a voiceless, and powerless. Hassan is doubly marginalized: once by his ethnic background, once again being lower on the social scale. Throughout the novel, he's used as the idealized notion of loyalty, a man who puts his personal desires and needs behind Amir's whims. In that moment he remains silent during his assault, literally and symbolically reflecting his position within an oppressive system. This silence however is not only an individual act but a culmination of larger social and historical silences that have been placed upon the Hazara community.

Using the idea laid out by Spivak that the subaltern cannot speak, one realizes that Hassan is silenced in the novel mainly due to the mechanisms of power and oppression in which he is involved. Amir betrays him, and he has no right to protest it because neither can he defy the societal structures that curse him to a life of servitude. In some ways, Hassan's suffering is the suffering of thousands of Hazaras, a terribly personal tragedy that is also an illustration of the very ways in which the Hazara are subjugated as a society.

The absence of voice provided to Hassan and other marginalised characters in the novel corresponds to the subaltern's silence in post-colonial societies. Yet, while the subaltern is 'silenced' in *The Kite Runner*, there are ways in which these silenced voices can be heard or at least partially 'heard' through acts of redemption and restitution—the most marked of which are Amir's coming back to Afghanistan to rescue Hassan's son, Sohrab. Along with being an act of personal redemption, it is an act to give voice to the voiceless and speak about the injustices of the past and the ongoing cycle of oppression.

Post-Colonial Analysis



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The Kite Runner offers an important post-colonial story of Afghanistan in terms of its struggle to find an identity that has been both intrinsically colonized and plagued with internal power politics. The Soviet invasion has left scars on Afghanistan's national identity. These scars are further evident in an era between the 1970s to the post-Taliban period.

Post-colonial theory sometimes emphasizes its impact on shaping cultural values, the state of national identity and power structures. In particular, the rise of the Taliban is shown as the continuation of the violent struggles within the country which started after the political chaos following the Soviet withdrawal.

The passing of colonialism only strengthens the division between the Pashtuns and the Hazaras in the novel, in Afghanistan, the novel mirrors the broader post-colonial struggles of Afghanistan in many ways, between loyalty to old traditions and loyalty to the forces of modernization and foreign influence. Amir's return to Afghanistan after a long exile in America is not just a hero's journey, but an attempt to reach out to a country which has endured repeated foreign or domestic meddling for generations.

Cultural and Social Issues

A further major characteristic of the novel is the treatment of class and ethnic cleavage in Afghan society. Social hierarchy and ethnic tensions between Pashtuns and Hazaras between the communities are deeply reflected in the relationship between Amir and Hassan. The second one, the novel focuses on showing the systematic discrimination of Hazaras especially via the character of Hassan who paradoxically stays servant simply because of being Hazara and poor (Riaz et al., 2024). As *The Kite Runner* points to the intersectionality of ethnic and class-based prejudice, not only does it affect the lives of the characters but it informs what they do and don't do (Zanganeh 2007).

Afghan history and politics influence

The novel helpfully reveals much of the complicated history of Afghanistan and the political changes that occurred during Amir's lifetime. Through the socio-political background of Afghanistan from the 1970s to the post-Taliban era, the author skilfully shows how the Soviet invasion led to the rise of the Taliban and the consequent displacement of millions of Afghans. "In *The Kite Runner* One can read the story as a personally unfolding narrative and as a politically evolving one, where the personal suffering of the characters symbolically resonates with Afghanistan's capturing political saga," suggests historian Fatima Rizvi (2013). The war and political instability decimated Kabul between Amir's pleasant childhood in the peaceful city and his return to the war-torn city nearly two decades later (Barfield, 2022).

According to Wahab's "A Brief History of Afghanistan", 'In Afghanistan, the Pashtuns' discrimination against minority ethnic groups particularly the Hazara is still practised'. 'Because of the differences in their races, beliefs, language and culture, Hazaras are often desecrated and given the cold shoulder' (Wahab 14-16). In the Afghan social context, this commentary highlights how oppression and dehumanization exist in ongoing forms in Afghanistan, then the analysis and reflection do not stop.

The novel signifies different ways in which the Pashtun class dehumanises the Hazara people. It is also an ideological base with which Pashtuns practice racism in order to prove their superiority to Hazaras in Afghanistan and suppress them on the grounds of racist words (Kumar, 267). Hassan is a good example of dehumanization because he is physically and emotionally abused. According to Kumar he states, "Racial dehumanization not only



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leads to the destruction of a certain person at physical or psychological level but also of an entire nation into disorganized crises” (Kumar, 267).

According to critic Edward Said (2005), Hosseini’s portrayal of Afghanistan offers a nuanced depiction that counters Western stereotypes. Instead of Afghanistan as one block of war and chaos, *The Kite Runner*, presents the readers with its beautiful cultural, and social fabric and different aspects of the country, highlighting how beautiful Afghanistan and its tragic history look all together.

Methodology

The research paper employs the impact of dehumanization and oppression in Khaled Hosseini’s novel “*The Kite Runner*”. The Textual Analysis method is applied with the approach of close reading based on postcolonial analysis with a theoretical framework of Gayatri Spivak’s “Can The Subaltern Speak?” It involves the detailed study of dehumanization and oppression as both are the key components of colonialism that signifies the brutality and violence of rich tribes of Afghanistan over poor groups. As Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic country there are different groups with different cultures some are superior and some are inferior like the Pashtun tribe is superior to the Hazara tribe. This research explores the power of Pashtun people and the way they target powerless Hazara people by creating systemic inequality that transfers intergenerational trauma to Hazara groups. The data has been collected through a close reading of the book *The Kite Runner*.

Textual Analysis

The way of Khaled Hosseini’s writing represents the complexities of Afghan society and their struggles, people who live in marginalized of dominance and entitlement. The tone and the characters like Hassan and Sohrab reflect extensive analysis of subalternity. The novel explores the complexities of the lives of those who are suppressed, silent and voiceless focusing on the experiences and challenges which they face within a society pointed to hierarchies and inequalities.

The way Khaled Hosseini’s developing characters like Hassan and Sohrab examine the impact of social hierarchies on people who cannot speak and are silent. Through the complex narration and rich character development, the novel “*Kite Runner*” highlights the voices and narratives of the subaltern, presenting a detailed analysis of dominance and resistance.

Amir’s Guilt and Privilege

The lead character “Amir” represents the concept of subalternity, as he deals with social inequalities, guilt. He shows as a quiet one who just watches everything but does not take any action against dehumanization and runs away. Amir’s insufficient action during Hassan’s assault oppressed him for years which caused feelings of guilt, shame and betrayal said :

“In the end, I ran.

I ran because I was a coward. I was afraid of Assef and what he would do to me. I was afraid of getting hurt. That’s what I told myself as I turned my back to the Alley, to Hassan. That’s what I made myself believe. I actually aspired to cowardice, because the alternative, the real reason I was running, was that Assef was right: Nothing was free in this World” (Amir, p.77).

Amir confesses that Yes, he prioritizes his own safety over protecting Hassan, which highlights Amir’s guilt for choosing self-protection. His action shows that he runs due to



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fear of Assef and recalls his words, “*Nothing was free in this World*”, which suggests that he is troubled by the idea that his inaction came leaving Hassan to suffer hardship.

assef's Character and Racism

Assef's character is shown as very complex and exemplifies the racist and discriminatory attitudes common in Afghan society during the setting of the novel. Assef is a Pashtun boy and hates Hazara, whom he regards as subordinate. The statement of Assef is motivated by his own preconceptions and desires to assert his superiority over Hassan. He compares Hassan's loyalty to a dog, he degrades and dehumanizes Hassan which was his aim. This statement shows Assef's superiority and Hassan's subjugation. Assef said to Hassan:

“*A loyal Hazara. Loyal as a dog*” (Assef, p.72).

This quote highlights the discrimination faced by the people of Hazara in Afghanistan, which serves as a powerful symbol of dehumanization and oppression.

Subalternity and Silence

Hassan's being a Hazara also makes him a non-leading character and puts him secondary to Amir in his friendship. Loyalty and silence are the voicelessness that is positioned on the subaltern by hegemonic structures. The dynamic is an echo of Spivak's argument in **Can the Subaltern Speak?** as she explains how marginalized groups are unable to exert agency.

Dehumanization and Oppression

Example from the text: Their dehumanization of Hazaras, for instance when Assef calls Hassan a “*flat nose*,” is the result of systemic racial slurs and abuse flung at them as they are continually referred to. Its use is consistent with this ‘othering’ and lower status within Afghan society.

An ethnic minority, Hazara people live as subalterns in the socio-political hierarchy in Afghanistan. Hosseini creates the characterization of Hassan and Ali who represent the voiceless and voiceless minority.

Amir's complicity in Hassan's suffering stems from his internalization of the dominant Pashtun ideology. The hopelessness of his failure to stop the assault shows exactly how societal norms can create immoral people. It was my last opportunity to make a decision. “*I could walk into that alley, I could stand up for Hassan... Or I could run.*”

The decision to run by Amir is a clear passivity to establish the inferior power of a Pashtun over Hazara.

Conclusion

Khaled Hosseini's *Kite Runner* provides a great number of themes within which oppression, dehumanization, and the difficulty of post-colonial identity can be examined. The post-colonial analysis of the novel shows Afghanistan's complicated relationship with its colonial past, its ethnic divisions and internal struggles with identity. *The Kite Runner* is not just about redemption—and it is not only a story about a son seeking to save a father's honor—it's also an examination of the various (often conflicting) mechanisms that perpetuate power and oppression, and humans' (for better or worse) desire to be heard in a world largely devoid of voice.



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