

DECIPHERING RACIAL BIGOTRY THROUGH CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE IN DIASPORA HOSSEINI'S THE KITE RUNNER

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ABSTRACT

As history is a witness of racial and ethnical discrimination which has led to massacres and persecution from the hands of powerful elements from superior groups, a need arises to analyse its journey and effects. Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner shows one such example of ethnic discrimination which also shows the way this division influences young minds and their actions. Afghanistan has always been a country with numerous ethnicities mainly consisting of Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks. With these divisions, there have been many instances in history of Afghanistan when Pashtuns have established their superiority and discriminated Hazaras. The Kite Runner may have fictional elements in it but it shows that hierarchical division still exists and continues to do so because of the acceptance by certain group of people with prejudiced mindset. This affects construct of society in a child's mind and consequently their own identity when faced discrimination at a young age. The formation of child's psyche is highly affected when faced with undue discrimination in developing age. This paper will analyse the origins of ethnic divisions through Conflict theory and the concept of Culture of Prejudice. The researcher will also analyse the impact on a child's development because of these ethnic divisions that have existed through centuries and impacted change in society and its structure.

Keywords: Ethnic Discrimination, The Kite Runner, Khaled Hosseini, Child unconsciousness, Psychoanalysis.

Introduction

From stone ages to the present advanced technological times, human civilisation has developed and advanced in ways no other species has. But with advancement came several setbacks, one of which is stratification of human beings on the basis of race and ethnicity. This stratification helped in categorising humans in order to form a system. Race and Ethnicity have been an integral part of hierarchical division of human beings. It has seeped itself so deeply into psyche of people that it has been the basis of identity formation as well. This categorization may have been important for easy distinction between people, but it soon became a tool for discrimination since hierarchical division formed two groups as superiors and inferiors. This system could help in distinguishing between people from different land, culture and ethnic backgrounds. It started in Ancient Greece when Greek scholars differentiated people from outside Greece and termed them inferior. This started a long history of discrimination and emphasis on physical traits and their assumed connection with one's personality and talents. Benjamin Henri Isaac, in his "The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity" in 2004, traces origin of

social prejudice and stereotypes in Ancient Greece where Greek and Roman writers were hostile towards outsiders. This created hierarchical system of defining people into groups of superior and inferior, superior being the European people and inferior being the people from foreign countries. This discrimination is not only because of difference in race, skin colour or physical traits; they also painted their personality in the same way collectively as a group. This also helped them to portray themselves as the 'pure race' with pure lineage and other races as being inferior, feeble and passive.

This pre-supposed projection of different races continued through history and created a culture of prejudice because it became inherent in culture and social system of prejudice with fear and ignorance as the basic tools used by those who feel they are superior. History is witness to this kind of politics which formed culture of prejudice for their own personal profit in order to gain power even if it is at the cost of a whole community being discriminated. Later part of 18th century, in the age of enlightenment also saw continuation of the same prejudice of culture and division which resulted in the same systematic discrimination. Charles Darwin's

theory of “survival of the fittest” also states difference among human beings on the basis of evolutionary superiority as well as natural selection through nature. This put forth the same notion of race and ethnicities divided into two groups of superior and inferior ones. This also gave birth to ‘Social Darwinism’ which refers to the study of race and ethnicity where white supremacy was assumed as the evolutionary superior beings over other race.

Ethnicity is a similar kind of categorization which originated as an offshoot from racial division of human kind. Stuart Hall defines cultural identity as being historical as well as in constant transformation. This identity also includes ethnic background which constitutes common heritage, shared cultural origins and bloodlines. There are many elements which define ethnicity of a person which include ancestry, culture, religion, race and language. Many sociologists contributed different aspects to the theory of Ethnicity but Stefen Wolff particularly characterised ethnicity, in his work “Ethnic Conflict: A Global Perspective” (2006), into two approaches namely ‘Primordialism’ and ‘Instrumentalism’.

Primordial school projects ethnicity as an integral part of social history that human kind cannot exist without their ethnic identity. It is established as a fact of life in order to identify people through different groups. While Instrumentalism states that ethnicity is a tool for leaders to distinguish between people and use this as a tool to organise followers in order to manipulate them. Both the schools gave different face of the way society uses ethnic differences to treat people from the inferior section of society. This kind of stratification has led to inequality and disturbance in society because with distinction forms a difference which leads to conflict. This conflict led to many atrocities that humans have carried out in history by taking into account their ethnic differences. Karl Marx postulated Conflict Theory in order to explain this state of conflict in a society where it is in a perpetual state of conflict. This conflict could arise because of many reasons, whether it is political, religious or ethnic. By focusing on conflict due to ethnic differences, it forms a society of two groups. First group forms at the position of wealth and power while second in suppression. A state of

inequality exists even in division of resources and economic status.

This paper will further analyse the way conflict between Pashtun and Hazaras formed integral part of Afghanistan’s ethnic history.

Ethnic Rift in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has always been comprised of rich culture but being in a consistent state of war diminished its culture. However, its social structure has remained the same. It is comprised of mainly 40 ethnic groups, majorly Pashtuns 44%, Tajiks 25%, Hazara 10% , Uzbek 8%, and minor ethnic groups (Pashai, Baloch, Turk and others) 13%. Despite being highly ethnically diverse country, it has always faced conflict between Pashtuns and other minor ethnic groups. People from radical Pashtun groups have tried to create a Pashtun centred government and social structure in Afghanistan. It has nearly always been successful although massacres towards Hazaras have been clearer than any other ethnic groups. There is a section of history of Afghanistan, mainly of persecution of Hazaras, which has been suppressed in order to create further dominance. The beginning of persecution of Hazaras dates to 16th century when thousands of Hazaras were killed during the reign of Emir Abdur Rahman (1880-1901). Remaining people of the community were displaced away from their home which majorly centred in Hazarajat. This also gave opportunity to other ethnic groups to occupy the places which originally belonged to Hazaras. Although they were once one of the largest ethnic groups in Afghan society comprising 67% of the total population before 19th century but centuries of persecution brought them to the margin of Afghanistan’s societal structure.

Their persecution rose again in prominence after the Second Anglo-Afghan war when Hazaras, being Shias, sided with British Raj against the Sunni Ethnic groups of Afghanistan. Consequently, they faced repression from Shah Abdur’s administration. He was successful in defeating Hazara’s revolt against him by implementing autonomy on Hazarajat. He also garrisoned numerous Pashtun soldiers and government officials to ensure their suppression in a Pashtun-run state. This made life of common people difficult,

especially of Hazara community and increased animosity between Hazaras and Pashtuns. This led to revolt from Hazara community and they were able to oust the garrisons but Shah Abdur brought around 150,000 troops. Mass destruction of life and property followed this conflict and Shah Abdur was responsible for wiping out more than half of Hazara population. This genocide pushed them to the minority status which continues even today.

The mass genocide by Shah Abdur was not the only one which Hazaras suffered. The Chindawol uprising in 1970 also resulted in arrest of people from Shia communities which mainly included Hazaras and Qizilbashs by the Khaliq- PDPA government. Although with the Soviet Union's intervention in Afghanistan, Parsham government improved conditions of common people which also included improving ethnic differences and prejudice.

In the post-communist era, this stability between ethnic communities was broken by the Mujahideen government. This became clear because of Afshar massacre in 1993 and killings in Mazar-i-sharif by Taliban in 1998 in response to the 1997 massacre of Taliban prisoners. This created an atmosphere of fear and apprehension among the common people and made it easy for the Taliban rulers to create division in the social system. In Taliban rule, there were repeated incidents where Hazaras were killed in large numbers. This oppression continued till Taliban was ousted from power in 2001 and a new democratic government was formed.

This history of Afghanistan centred on Hazaras shows repeated oppression and atrocities on them due to their ethnic background.

The Kite Runner starts with stories of a friendship between two boys, Amir and Hassan. Initially it seems to be like every other childhood friendship where friends team up to win in their childhood games. In between the narration of these games, one could see the difference of power between both friends. Amir being son of rich Pashtun businessman and Hassan being their servant's son placed Amir at a higher position. Even if one puts aside their economic difference, their ethnic identity placed Amir at a superior position and Hassan at the inferior position. Amir and Hassan were never taught to mind these

differences in their friendship. Baba, Amir's father always cared about Hassan like his own son. Baba always treated Hassan's father as his own brother. But gradually as Amir sees Baba's affection for Hassan growing, he craves the same for himself. The economical and ethnic difference becomes visible to him. He justifies his actions on the basis of these differences and treats Hassan unfairly just because he could never accept his father's love for Hassan. But being a 12 year old boy and often misunderstood by his own father makes it difficult for a child to see the bigger picture and lasting effects Hassan could have because of ethnic discrimination.

Amir has always enjoyed the privileges he gained because of the family he was born in. Being son of a wealthy businessman and belonging to Pashtun community gave him the right to attend school and learn his own potential through poetry and writing. Amir's upbringing gives a safe and prosperous life of an Afghan boy who had the luck to be born a Pashto as well as in distinguished household. Whereas Hassan belonged to the Hazara community and also born in a servant's family. With long history of persecution and massacres, Hazaras were always the lowest class of Afghan society. They usually belonged to servant's family and Hassan was same as was his father before him. Amir and Hassan were never treated as different from each other by Amir's father which was the wise way to improve brotherhood between them despite the social position they had outside their homes.

Amir's acquiescence of Ethnic discrimination

With the narration of their childhood games, it seemed that Amir used to take advantage of Hassan's loyalty to him. He always used Hassan's devotion towards him as a way to push him to perform morally incorrect actions like hitting someone just for the fun of it. This started to lay the foundation of Amir's awareness of the difference their backgrounds had despite being childhood friends. He knows that he is in a superior position and Hassan has always been a servant's son for him who he gave the privilege to play with him. One cannot say that Amir is wrong in feeling this superiority but the social difference between

him and his servants has always been clear to him. This difference created a division in Amir's mind which systematically gave him permission to behave differently towards Hassan and his family. He made fun of Hassan's lack of education since Hazaras were not allowed to go to school. Instead of teaching him what he studied in school, Amir laughed on Hassan's gullible nature of believing him.

Amir treated Hassan this way because of specific reasons which are also highlighted by the author. Being a child, his observation is more heightened and he observes his father's neglect and ignorance towards him. He senses his father's disappointment even at the age of 12. This lays the foundation of his jealousy towards Hassan who seemed to get Baba's affection in an honest manner. Amir sees Baba truly cares for Hassan and believes this honesty and care lacking for him. He also sees the way outside world treats Hassan and forms his own social schema in the same way. He knows he can't mistreat Hassan in his house because of Baba's affection for him. This may also be because he knows he would get punishment from his father who never taught him to mistreat anyone because of their economic or ethnic background. His father expected from him the same kind of bravery, honesty and morality that Baba exercised in his life. But Amir could never flourish when compared to Hassan. Hassan was brave and honest, the same qualities that his own father was proud to have.

The culture of prejudice that Amir observes in Afghan society towards Hazaras makes him more inconsiderate towards Hassan. His jealousy, prejudiced mind and cowardice stop him to save his childhood friend from getting raped. Hassan, being a loyal friend, chose his friend over his freedom but Amir could not save Hassan from the trauma of sexual abuse which was result of the same culture of prejudice that Amir was getting tainted from. Even when Amir tries to justify by thinking that Hassan is just a Hazara, his mind could never make him forget the guilt and shame he felt when he let that happen to Hassan. His victory of winning the kite running tournament seemed bland in front of his friend's innocence. This incident became a turning point for Amir who was haunted by his own

cowardice which is why he found a way to make Hassan and his father leave. Being a boy of just 12 years, his first instinct was to hide his mistake which he did. Initially he stopped playing or interacting with Hassan but soon that wasn't enough. Hassan became a living symbol of his cowardice and his father's analysis of his developing personality more real which is why he made them leave their house in a way his father could never know his actions.

This incident made him realised his own shortcomings and overcome them when he needed to be brave for Sohrab, Hassan's son. He didn't want to fail Sohrab the same way he failed Hassan. Even though his childhood actions were immoral, adulthood did not let him make the same mistake.

Hassan's Agony

Life for Hassan was simple. He did his chores, respected his elders and treated Amir like his own brother and believed that Amir did the same. He accepted Baba's affection gracefully and found it fortunate to receive it. He always found contentment in his small family which constituted his father; Ali, Amir's father and Amir. He also realised his Hazara status was lower than other ethnic communities but he never let that discourage him. Being a servant's son never bothered him. He found happiness in his life from the little he could get which Amir never realised even when he was more fortunate of the two. Hassan was brave as well when it came to fighting for his friend. He could do anything for Amir because he valued his friendship more than anything. He understood Amir in a way Amir could never understand Hassan. He knew it was important for Amir to win the tournament which is why he ran for him. He was the best kite runner in their locality and he made full use of it for Amir. His bravery made him stand up to Assef who viewed Hassan as less than any human because of him being a Hazara. Assef represented those groups of people who took advantage of their privileged position and tormented other people. Initially he couldn't bully Hassan because of his bravery and threat of slingshot but he soon found the opportunity during the tournament. Assef knew Amir's

friendship was more important for Hassan and he took advantage of it.

Experiencing sexual abuse at such a young age can have lasting effects for years and Hassan was fully aware of the atrocity he had to suffer through. Being young, it became difficult for him to share it with anyone. He avoided people and Amir for days and only did his mandatory chores as was his duty as servant's son. He knew his ethnic background was a way for people to torment him but he could never have imagined he would suffer such cruel act at such a young age. This shows the way ethnic communities of higher status and power could abuse their status and commit crimes which they will never get punished for. Being poor and powerless, Hassan could not do anything even if he wanted to.

It became more unbearable for him when he noticed that Amir was not talking and playing with him. It broke him when he realised that Amir knew about his suffering and still chose to not stop it. But with his father's support and love, he recovered with time and was brave as ever in his adulthood. He knew his position in Afghan society but he believed in doing his duty and live life as an honest man.

Assef's Malice

Assef represents the superior and dominant elements of any society who believed in establishing their dominance by tormenting those below them in stature. He adopted this culture of prejudice which was not practised openly in those years of Afghan history. The social system was stable at this point of time but people like Assef could not bear to see contentment in the lives of those they deemed below them. He was especially irked by Hassan's bravery and loyalty towards Amir which is why he tried to influence Amir by reinforcing the difference Amir and Hassan had due to their backgrounds. He gifted Amir Biography of Adolf Hitler who was responsible for persecution of countless Jews in Germany. Assef wanted Amir to see that the way Hitler acted was right, if not moral, and the Hazaras should be treated in the same way. He wanted to show that Hazaras are not someone to be made friends of.

No one taught Assef to treat people this way, especially Hazaras even if they were

marginalised and treated badly by some people. But being a teenager, Assef was highly influenced by the systematic order of social system which he believed should be followed again. He knew the history of the animosity between Pashtuns and Hazaras and believed Pashtun to be of higher and purer status. This social schema was fixed and unyielding in his mind which is why he could perform such a cruel act towards Hassan.

Conclusion

Khaled Hosseini represents the social structure of Afghanistan on the ground level and starts the life of his characters in the times when ethnic prejudice was least. The transformation of tolerance towards each other to open hatred was never difficult. With the way Amir resented Hassan and even justified it by Hassan's ethnic identity, it became fixed in his mind that Hassan deserved to be treated in such a cruel manner just because he is a Hazara. A child usually projects what he sees, but Amir learned this unfair treatment from society. His father never treated them different. But Baba's ignorance towards Amir, Hassan's bravery and courage which Amir lacked and Assef's continuous sneers on their friendship made him inconsiderate towards his own friend. This culture of prejudice and continuous conflict between ethnicities made Hassan's life filled with abuse and suffering and the same fate came upon his son, Sohrab who lost everyone due to Taliban's radical views on ethnicities and their actions which killed uncountable people.

This systematic division of human kind into different race and ethnicities have brought many cruelties on humans. As a whole, people have to understand that these divisions are causing more harm than good. The formation of identity may become a person's introduction but it cannot result in massacres and killing of a whole community because people associated hatred with the first person they encountered of that community and act on that hatred just like Assef did. Hassan was good to the core but he suffered just because he was a Hazara. Amir was a sensitive child who could not project his jealousy in any other way. He chose not to save his friend which haunted him and also compelled him to save Sohrab. The lessons and

experiences of childhood formulate the thinking and personality a person will develop in his adulthood. Assef was always prejudiced and sadistic in a cruel way but it would be too soon to label him as such in his younger years. However, his adulthood is a different matter. There are many possibilities that could have stopped him from becoming the powerful man he was portrayed later in the novel. He may not have gotten chance to torment anyone if he had been punished in his younger years or at least apprehended for Hassan's rape.

The paper shows continuous projection of different ethnicities in childhood years makes the next generation more divided than united. It divides people from birth which becomes their unchanged identity which they didn't even have any hand in forming. It was given to them at birth but this identity became reason for their suppressed life. Ali and Hassan took it as a fact

of their life that just because they were Hazara, they were bound to experience such behaviour. Their reaction towards this discrimination was also subdued because they believed in finding happiness in their family and friends instead of latching onto this sadness and hatred. Hassan could overcome his abuse because of his love for his family but Sohrab could not do the same. He attempted suicide because there was no one in his life that he could call family and Amir had not developed that kind of trust between them.

This shows ethnic differences can destroy lives without any cause. Human kind needs to understand that a division on the basis of race and ethnicity brings hatred and cruelty with it. This is a systematic evil that needs to be removed in order to create a world where certain level of humanistic value could form and people could treat each other better.

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