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Research Article



Ethnic Dehumanization in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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“Dehumanization, although a concrete historical fact, is not a given destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed.” **Paulo Freire**

Abstract

Ethnic dehumanization occurs when an ethnic group thinks that the other ethnic group is not equal to it and can be treated as less than human. The debut novel of Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* manifests intangible situation between the Pashtuns and Hazaras who are two different ethnic groups in Afghanistan. The purpose of my paper is to deal with the concept of

dehumanization, the reason for dehumanizing ethnicity and to analyses the effect of dehumanization depicted in Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*. Theories of sociological and psychological approaches are used in this paper. Apart from Shia and Sunni sects, few Hindu, Sikh and Jew communities inhabit Afghanistan, but in this fragmented nation major issues of the conflict between Hazaras and Pashtuns have resulted in dehumanizing ethnicity. Hazaras are dehumanized by Pashtuns as they consider them as the poorest and weakest ethnic group in Afghan. Pashtuns consider themselves superior than Hazaras because of physical appearance, religious' beliefs and cultural practices. Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, highlights the issues of dehumanization and dehumanizing ethnicity which is the main reason of the bad effect on psychological health of oppressed ethnic people in Afghanistan. In this novel, Hosseini not only highlights the psychological and social health of Hassan but through Hassan he tries to give the glimpse of all Hazara's psychological and social status. Dehumanization of ethnicity creates hate in one group of people by their fellow group of people and it divides the people into two groups in which one tries to repress others and sometimes it results in genocide, slavery and molestation. That's why dehumanizing ethnicity is curse for the society because it creates discrimination at every level of humanity.

Keywords: Dehumanization, Hazaras, Pashtuns, Ethnicity, Prejudice, Racism, Stigmatization

Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan-American novelist. He was born on March 4, 1965 in Kabul, Afghanistan. He is also a physician and worked as a doctor in California. He earned Bachelor's Degree in Biology in 1988 from Santa Clara University and M.D from the University of California's San Diego School of Medicine in 1993. He practiced as a physician for over ten years. He was awarded Exclusive Books Boeke Prize in 2004 for *The Kite Runner*, California Books Award Silver Medal in 2007 for fiction and Good Reads Choice Award in 2013. His contribution in the field of fiction is remarkable. His debut novel *The Kite Runner* was published in 2003 and became a bestseller in the USA. His other novels are *A Thousand of Splendid Suns*, published in 2007 and *The Mountains Echoed*, published in 2013.

The Kite Runner mainly talks about ethnic tensions between the Hazaras and the Pashtuns in Afghanistan. The molesting and blustering occur of Ali and Hassan because of their ethnicity. As Hosseini reveals:

Ali's face and his walk frightened some of the younger children in the neighborhood. But the real trouble was with the older kid. They chased him on the street, and mocked him when he hobbled by. Some had taken to calling him Babalu, or Boogeyman. "Hey, Babalu, who did you eat today?" they barked to a chorus of laughter. "Who did you eat, you flat-nosed Babalu?"

They called him "flat-nosed" because of Ali and Hassan's characteristic Hazaras Mongoloid features. For years, that was all I knew about the Hazaras, that they were Mogul descendants, and that they looked a little like Chinese people." (TKR p.8)

Humanization without healthy ethnic groups is impossible. Humanization brings love, compassion and unity in society but dehumanization scatters the characteristics of humanism

and creates discrimination in society and it raises issues like marginalization, racism, upper groups and lower groups. According to Webster's Third New International Dictionary, "To dehumanization... (is) to divest of human qualities or personality...make impersonal or unconcerned with human values" (p.595). In society, dehumanization happens when one group of people thinks that another group is not morally and socially equal to them. Inhumanity towards humanity is dehumanization.

Dehumanization is the conflict in the humanity. After extensive social and psychological examination, it comes under the field of literature by answering of various questions. Dehumanization contains phenomena of Prejudice, Racism and Stigmatization:

Prejudice

It refers to any form of judgment and beliefs which are allied with attitudes. Thus, prejudice may be appeared as manifestation of dynamic of dehumanization.

Racism

Reardon describes racism as "the belief that racial difference with them superior and inferior capacities. It leads to discriminatory social customs and cultural separation of groups according to race, physical characteristics and ethnic identity. Social benefits are then denied to the separated people" (p.11). It is a complicated social phenomenon involving social and psychological institutions. Therefore, there is a dynamic relation between racism and dehumanization.

Stigmatization

According to Cambridge Dictionary Stigmatization is "the act of treating someone or something unfairly publicly disappointing them." In other sense, we can say that the reason for the manifestation of prejudice, racism and stigmatization in society are dehumanization. Moreover, dehumanization is a phenomenon which appears to be entangled in society and has yet, to be abundantly understood. Thus, Dehumanizing ethnicity is sociological and psychological phenomenon which is created by some people in societies while thinking others fellow of their society is less than human.

The Kite Runner is highly fictionalized narrative which intimates the horrors and sorrow of dehumanizing ethnicity in Afghanistan. Its story is narrated by a young Pashtun boy Amir. Hosseini has raised the problems of Hazaras through the character Hassan, Ali and Sohrab, are an ethnic minority in Afghanistan has been dehumanized by pashtuns. People of Pashtun ethnic group think that Afghanistan is the only land of Pashtun and consider themselves as a pure Afghani. Other ethnic groups of Afghanistan like, Hazaras are not considered as a pure Afghani because they do not look like Pashtuns. They have a "flat-nose". Therefore, people from Pashtun ethnic groups consider that Hazaras defile his land. As Hosseini states:

His blue eyes flicked to Hassan. "Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns. It always has been, always will be. We are the true Afghans, the pure Afghans, not this Flat-Nose here. His people pollute our homeland, our watan. They dirty our blood." He made a sweeping grandiose gesture with his hands. (TKR p.38)

Hazaras are not completely rejected by Pashtuns. Hazaras work as servant in the houses of Pashtuns. Like Hassan and Ali work as a servant in the house of Baba. They earn for their

livelihood from Pashtun's family but they are not well respected in the house of Pashtuns. Sometimes Hazaras are treated like animal by Pashtun. Even the best friend of Hassan, Amir is jealous with him because Amir does not get any particular attention of Baba. Amir thinks that due to Hassan of stealing he can get affection and compassion of his baba. In order to fulfill his selfish desire, Amir let Hassan to get molested by Assef. Even he knows it is something unfair but molestation of Hazara has been coming since longtime. So, it is easy, to get attention of Baba, let Hassan should scarify:

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 ally, 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. May be Hassan was the price I had to pay, the lamb I had to slay, to win Baba. Was it a far price? The answer floated to my conscious mind before I could thwart it: He was just a Hazaras. Wasn't he?" (TKR p.72-73)

Dehumanization of ethnic groups, particularly Hazaras, can be seen in the novel. People like Pashtuns who consider themselves as a superior than other communities of Afghanistan; even they are not hesitated about their brutal response to Hazaras. This reveals the psychological construction and the marginalized mindset of the people of Pashtuns against Hazaras in the novel.

Thus, there is a deep-rooted racist idea imbedded in the mind of Afghans people in concerning to superiority and inferiority complex. Structure of society knitted in such a way that any marginalized group of ethnic people can't think about, their freedom and live a life like Pashtuns. It creates shallow understanding among Hazaras and Pashtuns. Hazaras don't think about their freedom and they silently bear the brutality of Pashtuns. Because ancestors of Hazaras follow the path of slavery so their children are not able to come out from the mindset of slavery. Since past time, People of Hazaras are bound to live in the cage of slavery and ethnic discrimination so they are not mentally strong that they can oppose any kind of cruelty against themselves. As Hassan silently bear the non-sense behavior of Assef:

Assef knelt behind Hassan, put his hands on Hassan's hips and lifted his bare buttocks. He kept one hand on Hassan's back and undid his own belt buckle with his free hand. He unzipped his jeans. Dropped his underwear. He positioned himself behind Hassan. Hassan didn't struggle. Didn't even, whimper. He moved head slightly and I caught a glimpse of his face. Saw this resignation in it. It was a look of the lamb. (TKR p.71)

Through Assef, Hosseini highlights the prejudice of Pashtuns against Hazaras. It is used to say that 'mind of child is tabularasa and what we want to paint in that mind we can fill the same colour'. In novel, we can see that the mental effect of children of Pashtuns and Hazaras which constructed by their parents are carried out by generation to generation. Pashtuns have been considered themselves superior for long time so the mind of Pashtun's children became like their parents and Hazaras have been considered themselves weak, marginalized and oppressed so the mind of Hazara's children set like their parents.

In this way, dehumanizing of ethnicity is embedded in the mind of Afghans from childhood to adulthood so children of high ethnic group, Pashtuns, are also so brutal that they don't miss any chance to harm the child who belongs to Hazaras group. Pashtuns children are very much aggressive that if he finds any child from Hazaras community, they shall not hesitate to molest them and use racial abusive word for them. Textbooks of school are the main sources for such types of mindset of children. Textbooks clearly states about the discrimination on the basis of caste and religion. As Hosseini says in his novel *The Kite Runner*:

School textbooks barely mentioned them and referred to their ancestry only in passing. Then one day, I was in Baba's study, looking through his stuff, when I found one of my mother's old history books. ... to find an entire chapter on Hazaras history. An entire chapter dedicated to Hassan's people! In it I read that my people, the Pashtus, has 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. The book said part of the reason Pashtuns had oppressed the Hazaras was that Pashtuns had oppressed the Hazaras was that Pashtuns were Sunni Muslims, while Hazaras were Shia's. (p p.8-9)

Afghanistan is not only the land of Hazaras and Pashtuns but also the land of Tajik, Aimak, Turkmen and Baluchis etc. There is diversity in Afghanistan but there is no unity. Community like Pashtuns stigmatizes to other community like Hazara. Apart from the conflict between Hazaras and Pashtuns, there is also a conflict between Sunni Pashtuns and Taliban Pashtuns because of differences in their religious beliefs. Taliban consider themselves Shi'a while other Pashtuns believe that they are Sunni. Due to this misconception regarding religious beliefs they fight to show that one is superior to other in religion and cultural heritage. Sunni Pashtuns belief that Taliban's ideology is not according to Islamic law so Sunni Pashtuns try to rule over Taliban Pashtuns and over all Afghanistan.

Hence, racial discrimination among people of Afghanistan is so deep rooted that even they are not able to recognize own people of their community. There is also a conflict between Hazaras and Taliban Pashtuns even both are from Shi'a community. They fight because their ideas are not matched to each-other and Taliban Pashtuns think that Hazaras are not loyal to Afghanistan and they don't follow the Islamic law which resulted in massacres at immense level of different communities in Afghanistan by Talibani. As Hosseini states:

Soon after I look my leave, a rumor spread that a Hazara family was living alone in the big house in Wazir Akbar Khan, or so the Taliban claim. A pair of Talib officials came to investigate and interrogated Hassan. They accused him of lying when Hassan told them he was living with me even though many of the neighbors, including the one who called me, supported Hassan's story. The Talibs said he was a liar and a thief like all Hazaras and ordered him to get his family out of the house by sundown. Hassan protested. But my neighbor said the Talibs were looking at the big house like- how did he say it? – Yes, like 'wolves looking at flock of sheep.' They told Hassan they would

be moving in to supposedly keep it safe until I return. Hassan protested again. So they took him to the street-”...”- and shot him in the back of the head- (TKR p.202)

It is considered that children have neither religion nor caste they are very innocent. Our religious scriptures like, *Geeta* and *Mahabharata* have suggested that in war there should be no any harmful activity for children because they are free from any kind of prejudice ideas and they have pure heart without any belief in good, bad, profit and loss. So, they should be not treated like enemy in war and they should free from any kind of brutality. In the novel, *The Kite Runner*, there is no war in America. America is considered as a highly developed country, people of America are educated and they are very much aware about scientific exploration so they live their life in very systematic and proper manner. But it is proven in the novel that scientific exploration and other luxurious things of life can't change the thought of the people. Soraya's parents have been living for long time in America but living in highly developed country can't change the idea and opinion of Soraya's parents. It doesn't break the orthodox idea of her parents.

Soraya and Amir are wanted to adopt a child because Soraya can't be pregnant due to “Unexplained Infertility.” When Soraya asks to adopt child, her parents shall talk about blood and object that we will not know the religion and caste of child. Even Soraya who is eager to become a mother, is interested a child from her own blood. As Soraya says:

“But I can't help it. I've always dreamed that I'd hold it in my arms and know my blood had fed it for nine months, that I'd look in its eyes one day and be startled to see you or me, that the baby would group up and have your smile or mine. ... Blood is a powerful thing, *bachem*, and when you adopt, you don't know whose blood you're bringing into your house.

Now, if you were American, it wouldn't matter. People here marry for love family name and ancestry never even come into the equation. They adopt that way too, as long as the baby is healthy, everyone is happy. But we are Afghans, *bachem*.” (TKR p.171-173)

Now a day, humanity is considered as the great religion of people. People should live in harmony because it creates tolerance in society. Intolerance creates conflict and hate in society as we can see in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, people are very much conscious about their religion. They are very much aware about their ethnics group. Ethnics communities like Pashtuns consider themselves not only superior to other communities but also consider themselves as a ruler of that community. So they dehumanize other ethnic groups whom they consider that poor, unethical and born to serve high ethnics groups of people in society.

Pashtuns hate Hazaras and they consider that Hazaras polluted their religion and consider themselves as a pure Afghans. But people of Pashtun communities don't feel dirty to sleep with the Hazara's women. They don't get polluted while passing the night with Hazara women. Hassan is also the child of Baba. Baba does not accept him as his child in society because his mother is from Hazara community and she is the wife of his servant. Although Baba has love for Hassan but he does not give his name to Hassan because society will criticize Baba.

Thus, Hosseini mocks upon such type of contradictory idea of people like higher group of people use to make the rule and law for own benefit and this rule and law are only applicable for the lower and poor class of society. When it comes to apply for their own life, they will definitely forget to follow and try to escape from the rule and laws.

Although Baba is very much conscious about the society that his illegitimate activity against Hazara's woman is not going to accept by society but he sleeps with a woman who is from Hazara's community:

Your father and I were brothers, I said. It just came out. I had wanted to tell him the night we had sat by mosque, but I hadn't. But he had a right to know; I didn't want to hide anything anymore. "Half brothers, really. We had the same father. ... You know, I asked myself that same question the other day. And there's an answer, but not a good one. Let's just say they didn't tell us because your father and I ... we weren't supposed to be brothers."

"Because he was a Hazara? (TKR p.295)

We took birth as a human without any tag of caste and religion. But our society is knitted in such way manner that it gives us different name and attaches us to particular group or community in society apart from the identity of almighty. As a child Sohrab is very much innocent. His parents teach him not to commit any kind of sin because it leads to hell. So Sohrab thinks a lot and weep before shook Assef's head. Whereas Assef is so brutal that he does not think about Sohrab and abuses him. Here, Hosseini show the journey of people from birth to old age.

New born baby has pure and fresh mind and there is no discrimination in his mind and heart but when new born baby become grown up and pass to different stage of life he become rigid in his activity and egoistic in nature. As Hosseini shows in *The Kite Runner*:

"Please stop," Shorab said, fresh tears pooling in his green eyes, mixing with mascara
"Put it down, Hazara," Assef hissed. "Put it down or what I'm doing to him will be a gentle ear twisting compared to what I'll do to you."

The tears broke free. Sohrab shook his head. "Please, Agha," he said, "stop." (TKR pp.266-267)

When 'thank you' is the first thought, contentment' will be last feeling. But 'thank you' and 'contentment' are something alien for Hazara's ethnics in Afghanistan. For Hazaras, "It also said something I did know, like that people called Hazaras *mice-eating, flat-nosed, load-carrying donkeys*. I had heard some of the kids in the neighborhood yell those names to Hassan" (9). These words are not only for Hassan but these are words which are used for all Hazara's as an ethnic group.

Even books are not free from prejudice and bias. Teachers are considered as the fate decider of any child. But in Afghanistan teachers are not free. They are also affected by the idea of racial discrimination. Even teachers don't think that Hazaras are also Afghan and they are human beings. Like other Pashtuns, they also consider Hazaras are marginalized group. It is considered that teachers play very significant role in the life of students and they shape the

life of children and prepare them for their bright future but carrying the idea of discrimination and racism by teachers are very dangerous for children and society. As Hosseini reveals:

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. (TKR p.9)

On the other side, Pashtuns are something different from Hazaras and they consider themselves as pure people of Afghanistan. Like, Rahim Khan reveals about Baba:

My father was a force of nature, a towering Pashtun specimen with a thick beard, a wayward crop of curly brown hair as unruly as the man himself, hands that looked capable of uprooting a willow tree, and a black glare that would “drop the devil to his knees begging for mercy. (TKR pp.12-13)

Good always wins over the evil. It is the main message of all scripture. But, nowadays, it seems to be wrong. There is neither end of evil activity in real life or in reel life. As in the novel, *The Kite Runner* does not give any particular end. Amir’s path becomes symbolic of Afghanistan- he has been put through difficult times but in the end redeems himself perhaps Afghanistan will also redeem itself one day.

Dehumanizing ethnicity by Pashtuns toward the Hazaras resulted in unhealthy society. People of Hazara’s ethnic groups are mentally and socially exploited by Pashtuns. Through the characters like Hassan, Shorab and Ali; Hosseini explores the real picture of current society and he shows the impact of ethnic discrimination upon the mental level of suppressed class like Hazaras.

In the novel, Hassan turns into an introvert person who lacks confidence because of sexual attack. In other hand, ethnic discrimination also leads to unhealthy society which resulted in genocide, slavery and oppression. “A few weeks later, the Taliban banned kite fighting. And two years later, in 1998, they massacred the Hazaras in Mazar-i-Sharif” (p.197). Therefore, dehumanizing ethnicity creates hate, anxiety, depression and causes of psychological damages.

Earlier, it is used to say that food, clothes and house are the basic need of human beings. Without these things human life is not possible but now the concept has been changed, Man without food clothes, house and respect can’t live in the society in proper manner. Lack of respect for one ethnic group of the people in the novel leads to dehumanization for other groups of people. Dehumanization is not only limited to ethnic discrimination but it removes humanity from the heart of people and results in brutality and abusive activity toward one particular group of people by other ethnic groups.

Thus, Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* throws light upon the relationships between Hazaras and Pashtuns people, whose relationships never change into healthy relationships because of ethnic discrimination created by Pashtun’s people against Hazara’s people in the society. There is no respect for Hazaras in the society. They are considered as impure and dirt of Islamic religion. So, Afghanistan is not for him. It is only the land of Pashtuns and Pashtuns

are real Afghan. Through this novel Hosseini unfolds the multiple layers of ethnic's orthodox idea which is embedded in the mind of the people from generation to generation and it appears that it is not going to remove easily from the society.

At last, Hosseini very artistically finished the novel without giving any particular solution to the problem of dehumanizing ethnicity which is raised by him in the novel. He also wants to convey the message that there is no fixed end of such stupid activity of people because it is deep rooted in the mind of the people which is attached to their ego. So, not only Amir and his Baba went to America to live but also Amir takes his next generation to live in America. Sohrab also went to America with Amir. Thus, in consequence dehumanizing ethnicity is the major issue of the novel as well as the current issues of the world which has no solution.

According to me there may be one solution for this problem i.e. education for the people. Education can transform to people and remove nescience from their life. As in the novel, well- educated Amir easily agree to adopt child after prediction of "Unexplained Infertility" to Soraya without any thinking of blood and caste. Amir also adopts Sohrab openly while knowing that he is the son of Hassan who belongs to Hazaras ethnic group. Amir, like people in the current world, may become the guiding light for the Hazara's people which can enlighten the people and remove illusion from the mind of people. A ray of hope is seen in the form of Amir to embrace humanism and to remove dehumanization from society.

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