



**The Subalterns' voice –A case Study of Khalid Hosseini's The Kite Runner and A
Thousand Splendid Suns**

Dr Priyanka Lamba

Associate Prof in Dept of English

Dronacharya Govt College, Gurugram

Today the definition of subaltern has changed from what it used to be in the past. Originally it simply meant “having a subordinate position”. In the present global scenario subaltern can refer to a variety of people who stand aloof from the rest by certain yardsticks for example there are people segregated on the basis of colour ,ethnic roots, minorities and women in patriarchal set up. Khaleed Hosseini as an Afghani Diaspora in the US is giving voice to the subaltern in and as the terror stricken Afghanistan. Through his novels *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* he makes audible all those who have been confined in muted zones of public as well as private spheres for long under the politics of terror which is political, ethnic ,patriarchal, external and domestic. The Kite Runner is a novel brimming with the details of traditional Afghan culture, ethnic and religious schism of the Afghan society, tumultuous history of civil war and foreign invasions and the travails of immigrant Afghans in the US. All these issues form the backdrop of the story of Amir, the narrator, who seeks redemption for the betrayal of his friend Hassan. Amir and Hassan belong to two opposite ends of the ethnic hierarchy within Afghanistan. Amir being a Pashtun enjoys every social advantage whereas Hassan being a Hazara is merely a servant and is regarded inferior.

It becomes pertinent to discuss in brief some aspects of ethnic hierarchy in Afghanistan from historical perspective. Afghanistan is an ethnically diverse country. The Pashtuns are the largest ethnic group making up around 40% of Afghanistan's population. They are Sunnis and speak Pashto. They are the members of the upper class and dominate the politics, society and economy of the country. They are often accused of persecuting minorities – especially Hazaras. The Hazaras are the third largest ethnic group of Afghanistan. They are mostly Shi'a muslims and speak Farsi. The Sunni prejudices against

the Shi'a drove the Hazaras to barren dry mountains of Central Afghanistan (the Hazarajat). In 1891 Amir Dost Mohammad, the king of Afghanistan, started attacking Hazarajat which resulted in the destruction of Hazara tribal system and the enslavement of Hazaras to be sold in the Kabul bazaar. The kings kept Hazaras as "Kaniz", "Gulam Bacha" and "Gulam". Shah Amanullah in 1929 outlawed slavery but the slave like old practices of Hazaras still persisted. In Afghanistan socio political status is correlated with ethnicity. So being on the lowest rung of social hierarchy the Hazaras are on the lowest economic rung too. In towns like Kabul they labour as servants (nokhar or muzdur), cooks, drivers maids, gardeners in high society households.

In the novel the narrator Amir is the son of a wealthy, well respected philanthropist Pastun businessman known to the reader as "baba". He lives in a palatial house in Wazir Akbar Khan district of Kabul. He grows up with Hassan, son of Ali, his father's servant. Ali and Hassan are Hazaras. The two boys had lost their mothers and were breastfed by the same nursemaid and therefore, "A brotherhood between people who had fed from the same breast, a kinship that not even time could break"¹ (P.10) existed between Amir and Hassan. The boys grew up together and Amir says, "we were kids who had learned to crawl together ... my entire childhood seems like one long lazy summer day with Hassan ..." (P.22). Despite this kinship, the class divisions and ethnic divide existed in Baba's house. Amir lived in a "mansion" and Hassan in a "mud shack where he had been born, where he'd lived his entire life". (P.5) Ali is a servant in the house and does cooking, cleaning and other mundane things, whereas Amir has all the opportunities like education, comfort etc. Ali raises his son Hassan to be a personal servant to Amir because, "Hassan would grow up illiterate like Ali and most Hazaras, had been decided the minute he had been born, perhaps even the moment he had been conceived ... what use did a servant have for the written word." (P.24) Commenting further on this discrimination Amir says, "... Ali prepared my breakfast ... while I ate and complained about homework; Hassan made my bed, polished my shoes, ironed my outfit, and packed my books and pencils..." (P.23) This discrimination existed because it had the religious and historical sanction – "Because history isn't easy to overcome. Neither is religion. In the end I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara, I was Sunni and he was Shi'a and nothing was ever going to change that, nothing." (P.22) Probably, this is why even Hassan didn't question Amir's superiority and didn't mind, why Amir played with him only when no one else was around and why he was not included in the games Amir played with the kids of his father's friends? In fact Hassan so strongly identifies himself as a servant those years after when he relocates to Baba's house he stays in the hut

and does the household chores. He has no entitlement to the house. He dies defending the house because he is a loyal servant of Amir and Baba. Hassan's staying out of the house is similar to the physical positioning of the bastard child Miriam outside the human society of Herat in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. This staying out of the society is symbolical of the isolation and, alienation of Hazara community and Women in the patriarchal Pashtun dominated Afghanistan. Hosseini himself said, "I would like the readers to walk away the sense of empathy for Afghans and more specifically for Afghan women on whom the effects of war and extremism have been devastating." Mariam's life is a saga of pain, suffering and humiliation and her life reflects the life of thousands of Afghani women who have endured despite the odds. She is "a harami who is like an insect, a scurrying cockroach" lives out of the boundaries of the city 'removed, detached' (8) all alone with her mother Nana. Like any bastard girl child she "never had legitimate claim to things other people had things such as love family, home, acceptance". Her father's legitimate children had ice creams while harami Mariam would have "stories of ice cream" (6) once she made an attempt to be in the society, visited her father Jalal house but was not allowed to enter the house and ended up "sleeping on the street like a stray dog" (35). This one attempt to get recognized, to get accepted lands her in a brutal world of marriage. Her mother Nana could not bear the shock of Mariam's going to her father and commits suicide. Jalal made a great show of caring about her and marries off 15 years old Mariam to a Kabul based much older shoe maker, Rasheed. He is a piggy brute of a man who says it embarrasses him, "to see a man who has lost control of his wife." (ATSS 63) Through Mariam's married life the writer shows what life is like for women in Afghani society. There "a woman's face is her husband's business only . . ." (ATSS 63) and they are valued only for reproduction. Mariam is forced to wear a burqa and she is not allowed to go out anywhere without Rasheed. Once she has suffered a series of miscarriages, Mariam's marriage becomes a prison, "she was afraid, she lived in fear of his shifting moods . . . his insistence on resolving mundane things . . . with punches, slaps and kicks . . ." Her life had become a "systematic business of being beaten." (ATSS 89) this marginalization of women symbolizes the exclusion of the underprivileged by the powerful and their use of violence is a tool to gag their voice for a respectable life. In The Kite Runner Assef's rape of Hassan after the kite flying tournament has no lust involved but an act to show his ethnic superiority and dominance. Justifying himself he tells his friends, "It's just a Hazara . . . there's nothing sinful about teaching a lesson to a disrespectful donkey." (P.66) Amir too tries to console himself and play down his act of betrayal by telling his conscience that, "He was just a Hazara, wasn't he?" This event of kite flying is

central to the novel as the title suggests. The social status of Amir and Hassan decides the role played by them in kite flying. Amir being the Pashtun has the control over the kite where as Hassan being the Hazara can only assist Amir. Amir claims the victory and Hassan runs to catch the rival kite but only to bring it back to Amir as a trophy of his achievement saying, "For you, a thousand times over". Unfortunately he runs into an alley where Amir she is surrounded by Assef and his friends. Since the blue kite represents Hassan's loyalty towards Amir, he refuses to give up the kite. Assef exacts his revenge by raping Hassan. Amir witnesses this but doesn't stand up for his friend Hassan. He saw, "the look of the sacrificial lamb" on Hassan's face. He fled from the scene but this scar of betrayal and sin got engraved on his soul and haunted him till the end of the novel. This mutilation of the subalterns 'selfhood is conflated with the external devastation of Afghanistan under militancy. The kite flying becomes a symbolic manifestation of Afghanistan's turbulent history which is marked with bloodshed and carnage. In this scene young Afghan boys challenge and encounter their rivals in the way as their elder counterparts meet their rivals on the warfronts. Kite flyers's desperate attempts to capture his adversary's kite almost resemble the fighting between the afghan government and mujahedeen guerrilla factions. Their young hands are cut and stained with blood when ground glass coating of the kite string sears through their flesh. The blood stains in their hands symbolically hint at the history of the nation tainted by blood and violence; the brutality and horror of the domestic life of Mariam parallels the disturbance in Afghanistan:

On April 17, 1978 the year Mariam turned nineteen a man named Mir Akhbar Khyber was found murdered . . . and his supporters were blaming the murder on President Daoud Khan's Government . . . On April 27 Air Force Colonel Abdul Qader reported that . . . Rebel MIGs had attacked the Presidential Palace . . . Daoud Khan had been killed . . . and now our watan will be known as the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan . . . a glorious era in the history of our country is afoot. A new Afghanistan is born." (ATSS 88-92)

The second protagonist of the novel Laila is born on the night of April coup of 1978:

DOWN THE STREET, as the night lit up in sudden flashes of red and yellow, an exhausted Fariba had propped herself up on her elbows . . . At her bedside, the elderly midwife, Wajima, watched as Fariba's husband and sons passed around the infant. (ATSS 92-93).thus hosseini has paralleled the life history of his protagonists with the national history. And nowhere in the world has been the condition of women and minorities so much dependent on that of nations as has been in Afghanistan. The ups and downs in the political identity of Afghanistan have manifested in the empowerment and disempowerment of women and

minority communities. In *The Thousand Splendid Suns* The Soviet occupation rules Laila's childhood and the writer has depicted the optimism of the people of Kabul under the communists in the chapter titled 'Kabul, Spring, 1987'. Under the Soviets, "it's good time to be a woman in Afghanistan . . . the government had sponsored literacy classes for all women . . . women were studying law, medicine and engineering." (ATSS 121) Along with this is strengthening of the Mujahideen because the pastuns saw the communist's decrees to liberate women as an insult to their centuries old tradition. And as Laila turns fourteen the nation's history also took a turn-the Russians were ousted by Mujahideens mujahideen turned from idealized freedom fighters to oppressors "it was dizzy how quickly everything unraveled. The leadership council was formed prematurely. It elected Rabbani president. The other factions cried nepotism . . . Hekmatyar, who had been excluded, was incensed. The Mujahideen, armed to the teeth but lacking a common enemy, had found the enemy in each other." (ATSS 154-155) the romance between Laila and Tariq is overshadowed by this brutal reality when like thousands of Afghans Tariq and his family flees to Peshawar. A devastating tragedy happens to Laila - her parents die, her house is destroyed and she is pregnant with Tariq's child. This tragedy brings Laila to the home of Rasheed and Mariam, where she is made to make a horrific choice of marrying Rasheed to escape the fate of hundreds of orphan Afghan women who have "no food, no water ... bullets and rockets flying everywhere . . . she'd be abducted, raped or tossed into some roadside ditch with her throat slit." (ATSS 192) After her marriage Laila gives birth to Tariq's daughter Aziza. Rasheed is unhappy and suspicious and more abusive towards his wives. The common people of Afghanistan had to bear the brunt of the civil war among the warlords with the old age enmity between Pastuns and Hazaras took an ugly turn and again the women become the worst targets of this ethnic violence.

In June of that year, 1992, there was heavy fighting in West Kabul between the Pashtun forces of the warlord Sayyaf and the Hazaras of the Wahdat faction. . . . Laila heard that Pashtun militiamen were attacking Hazara households, breaking in and shooting entire families, execution style, and that Hazaras were retaliating by abducting Pashtu civilians, raping Pashtun girls, shelling Pashtun neighborhoods, and killing indiscriminately. Every day, bodies were found tied to trees, sometimes burned beyond recognition. Often, they'd been shot in the head, had had their eyes gouged out, their tongues cut out. (ATSS 159)

Same kind of ethnic intolerance is echoed by Asseff in the *Kite Runner* when he talks of sharing his vision with President Daoud Khan to vanish the Hazaras from the land of Pashtuns i.e. Afghanistan like Hitler did in Germany. He says, "Afghanistan is the land of

Pashtuns ... We are the true Afghans, the pure Afghans, not this Flat Nose here. His people pollute our homeland, our watan. They dirty our blood ... Too late for Hitler But not for us ... I'll ask the President ... to rid Afghanistan of all the dirty kasseef Hazaras" (P.35-36).so Hosseini by weaving the historical events within the fabric of his fictional narrative uncovers the social truths of Afghani society and talks at length about the fate of the marginalized who have to "endure the hardships of life, the slight of men, the disdain of society." (ATSS 4)

As Afghanistan's history took another worse turn in September 1996 with the coming of the Taliban, there were great upheavals in the life of Mariam and Laila. The descriptions of the ensuing violence (some physical, but most often mental), that visited upon Laila and Mariam as women Hassan, his wife Farzana, his son Sohrab as Hazaras and the people of Afghanistan in general, are presented in a straightforward manner. The attitude of the Taliban toward women, as Mariam says, "Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman, always"(ATSS 9)

Hosseini has an unerring ear for just the right phrase, the exact descriptive words to evoke both the reality and the deeper meaning of a particular scene. One example of this is the description of how Laila endures a cesarean section in a Taliban hospital without anesthesia. (The female doctor) bent over Laila. Laila's eyes snapped open. Then her mouth opened. She held like this, held, shivering. The cords in her neck stretched, sweat dripping from her face her fingers crushing Mariam's. Mariam would always admire Laila for how much time passed before she screamed. (ATSS 260)

The situation of Laila and Mariam became worse as Rasheed's shop was burnt down and he had to do odd jobs not suited to his temperament. Aziza had to be sent to an orphanage to save the family from starvation. When no longer able to bear the torture of Rasheed and to save Laila's life Mariam kills him. This killing of the oppressor gives her a brutal public execution by the Taliban. The Hazaras suffered greatly under the Taliban which was dominated by the ethnic Pashtuns. The Taliban had Hazarajat totally isolated from the rest of the world going so far as not allowing the United Nations to deliver food to the province. There was a large scale human right abuse particularly after the capture of Hazara Sharif in 1998. Where after a massive ethnic killing of some 8000 civilians, the Taliban openly declared that Hazaras will be targeted because they are not Muslims, "they are Shi'a, they are Kaffir." Similar persecution is echoed in the novel also. After Rahim Khan left for Peshawar, the Taliban came to claim the house from the Hazaras and shot dead Hassan and his wife. No one in neighbour came to their rescue because nobody "was going to risk

anything for a pair of Hazara servants.” (P.193) Combining his guilt and grief Amir describes Hassan’s death as “Hassan slumps to the asphalt, his life of unrequited loyalty drifting from him like the wind blown kites he used to chase.” (P.192) Assef the Talib takes pride in describing what he calls, “ethnic cleansing.” (P.249) He tells that Afghanistan is like “a beautiful mansion littered with garbage and someone has to take out this garbage.” (P.249) and in 1998 in Mazar-e-Sharif they cleared the garbage by going “Door to door we went, calling for the men and the boys. We’d shoot them right there in front of their families, let them see ... who they were, where they belonged ... I’d sweep the barrel of my machine gun around the room and fire and fire until the smoke blinded me and ... let the bullets fly, free of guilt and remorse, knowing you are virtuous, good and decent, knowing you’re doing God’s work, it’s breath taking. (P.242) This genocide of Hazaras can very well be compared with what happened with Jews in Germany during World War-II, in Rwanda in 1992 (Tutsi and Hutu).

Thus through these two novels Hosseini draws attention to the deprivation, injustice and alienation that the subalterns in a society has to put up with. The alert eye of the artist in him perceives inequities with anguish and questions the imbalances in the society with courage. He strongly urges for standing against age old prejudices of the mighty and rich who takes pride in their superiority. And it is this urge that makes Amir comes back from America to the Taliban ruled Afghanistan to pay the retribution for the betrayal of Ali and Hassan by saving Sohrab from the Taliban. In order to atone for his sins and his father’s betrayal Amir has to rescue Sohrab, the living embodiment of Hassan. Assef agrees to relinquish him but only for a price – cruelly beating Amir. He is badly hurt in his fight with Assef but he feels he is purged of his sin and felt “healed”. But this healing is not complete redemption. However, Amir is saved when Sohrab uses his sling shot to shoot out Assef’s left eye – fulfilling the threat Hassan had made many years before. To redeem himself completely Amir must break the old shackles of discrimination by giving Sohrab an equal opportunity at success and happiness. A transformed Amir takes Sohrab to US and tries to restore his dignity as a human being. He tells his father-in-law, “You will never again refer to him as ‘Hazara Boy’. He has a name and it’s Sohrab.” (P.315) The story comes to a full circle and Amir forgives himself and runs the kite for Sohrab just as Hassan ran his last kite for Amir half a century before. Like Hassan he truthfully repeats his words, “for you, a thousand times over” and he is finally running with humanity and freedom in his heart instead of fear. Mariam’s stoic suffering initiates a better future for Laila who is finally reunited with Tariq .Once free from the domestic terrorism she goes back to Mariam native village Gul

Daman where she receives the videocopy of the movie along with a pile of money “her share of inheritance” “what was rightfully hers along” and a letter written by Jalal(a documentary proof of him being her father).All these things purged Mariam of the sin of being a harami and proves that “it is the creator of Harami who are culpable ,not the harami whose only sin is being born harami...”

So Khaleed Hosseini in his novels explores the dynamics of oppression, its manifestation in human relationships and the full sanction it enjoys in society. Through systematic exposure of false distinctions that perpetuate systems of domination he challenges the marginalization and exclusion of the underprivileged and raises the consciousness of people to have an equality oriented humanist perspective towards the Subalterns as “there is always a way to be good again”

References

1 Khaled Hosseini, The Kite Runner (London: Bloomsbury Publishing plc, 2004), P.10. All subsequent references to the text of this novel are from the same edition and page numbers in all such cases have been given with in parentheses immediately after the quotation.

2 Hosseini, Khaled. A Thousand Splendid Suns. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2007.

All other references from this book are abbreviated as ATSS and are given in parenthesis