

The Distressing Ethnic Dissection of the Hazaras in *The Kite Runner*

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Abstract

In *The Kite Runner* (2003), Khaled Hosseini draws a very distressing enquiry of ethnic and sectarian divisions in Afghanistan, focusing particularly on the age-long systematic marginalization of the Hazara ethnic minority in Afghan society. Hosseini's representation of the Hazara community in the novel exposes the betrayal and the silence that embody both personal and structural state injustice which are internalized as the social and political stratification in Afghanistan. By analyzing the characters from the Hazara community, as depicted in the novel, this paper aims to expose the deeply implanted social hierarchies and ethno-religious injustices that prevent the Hazaras from being true nationals of Afghanistan. With the qualitative analysis from the broader themes of social stratification, ethnicity, religion, and the legacy of silence in the face of oppression, this paper also analyzes the relationships of characters to interpret the age-long structural and hegemonic discriminations the Hazaras face in Afghanistan.

Keywords

Hazara, ethnic minority, marginalization, oppression, socio-political stratification, ethnic dissection, religious persecution

1. Introduction

The Hazaras have historically faced systemic exclusion, dispossession, and even genocide in Afghanistan as they are often regarded as an ethnically Mongoloid, Shi'a Muslim minority. The roots of Hazara marginalization can be traced back to the late 19th century during the reign of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan (1880–1901), who sought to consolidate power and establish a centralized Afghan state. Mousabi (1997) comments that in the late 19th century, the Hazaras faced state-sanctioned massacres, enslavement, and dispossession of their lands (Mousabi, 1997, p. 73). Amir Abdur Rahman Khan's campaign to subjugate the Hazarajat region, the central highlands primarily inhabited by the Hazaras, was marked by mass killings, forced displacements, and enslavement. It was estimated that between 60% and 70% of the Hazara population was either killed or displaced during that period. Land confiscation and forced migration resulted in the loss of socio-economic autonomy and entrenched patterns of discrimination. Famous historian on Afghan history, Meredith L. Runion (2007), rightly comments,

Throughout his reign, Abdur Rahman's goal was to break down the tribal alliances and institute one nation under one rule, and during his reign, he endured and crushed more than 40 tribal revolts. [...] Furthermore, he restricted the movement of migrating tribes so that the tribes could not relocate without the approval of the Afghan government, and in doing so he further suppressed the Hazara tribes from revolt. (Runion, 2007, p. 82)

Amir Abdur Rahman Khan started the campaign of the marginalization of the tribal communities, and later, throughout the 20th century, successive Afghan regimes continued to marginalize various ethnic minority communities, especially the Hazaras. The Hazaras were systematically

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excluded from the various positions in administration, military, and bureaucracy, and they were denied access to education and public services. Even in the Hazara regions, their access to the social hierarchical positions remained limited for centuries. The monarchy and the later regimes often treated the Hazaras as second-class citizens by reinforcing ethnic hierarchies through both policies and practices.

The rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan in the 1990s marked a new and violent phase of the Hazara persecution. The Taliban, a predominantly Sunni Pashtun movement, carried out targeted massacres of the Hazaras in cities like Mazar-i-Sharif, Bamiyan, and Yakawlang. Human Rights Watch (1999) and Minority Rights Group International (2023) documented almost all the foremost atrocities against the Hazaras. Minority Rights Group International (2023) stated these atrocities as “acts of ethnic cleansing and war crimes”. The Taliban viewed the Hazara community not only as political opponents but also as religious heretics for their religious beliefs. Systemic discrimination and violence persisted, particularly in rural areas, especially in the Hazarajat, the main land of the Hazara people. The re-emergence of the Taliban and the rise of the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP), which has explicitly targeted the Hazaras in terrorist attacks, for their Shi'a belief. In recent years, targeted attacks on the Hazaras' schools, mosques, and community centers have increased dramatically, and those terrorist attacks have renewed fears of persecution among the Hazaras.

In the novel, *The Kite Runner*, the presence of the Hazaras serves as a mirror to these real-world inequities, amplifying voices often silenced by mainstream discourses. Khaled Hosseini's narrative is both central to the novel's emotional setting and the true reflection of real-world Afghan socio-political and historical dynamics. So, the historical lens is essential to understand Hosseini's depiction of the entrenched socio-political marginalization and persecution of the Hazaras. Through the characters, mainly Ali, Sanubar, Hassan, and Sohrab, Hosseini illustrates the enduring impact of social, ethnic, religious, and historical injustices. The echoes of these socio-historical and ethno-religious injustices resonate throughout *The Kite Runner* as Hosseini situates these characters of the Hazara community in a deeply unequal power dynamic with the privileged Pashtun community of Afghanistan. Hosseini deepens this portrayal by depicting how discrimination against the Hazaras becomes violent and systemic during the periods of political upheaval. The radicalization of ethno-religious hate is not fictionally exaggerated; rather, it mirrors real-world atrocities such as the massacres of the Hazaras in Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998. Thus, the novel transcends fiction and acts as a historical reminder and ethical call for the recognition of the Hazara minority, and the novel also interprets the age-long state endorsed and systematic discriminations that the Hazaras face in Afghanistan.

2. Literature Review

Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* has enjoyed huge popularity and a reputation since its publication in 2003 and has attracted many scholars around the globe. This novel has changed the wide range of readers' stereotyped version of the image of Afghanistan. Scholars studied the novel from various perspectives. A few researchers explore the portrayal of the Hazaras in the novel through the characters of Hassan, Ali, Sanubar, and Sohrab, emphasizing the historical, religious, and racial dimensions of their subjugation. Drawing from literary analysis and scholarly perspectives, those researchers demonstrate how the novel critiques ethnic hierarchies and how it uses personal narratives to highlight broader societal fractures in Afghanistan to subjugate the Hazaras. Hosseini & Zohdi (2016), in their research titled “*The Kite Runner* and the Problem of Racism and Ethnicity,” discussed the problems of race and ethnicity in the Afghan society. Vishwa

Bhushan (2022), in his research paper titled “Ethnic Dehumanization in Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*,” shows that dehumanizing ethnicity is a curse for the Afghan society because it creates discrimination at every level of humanity. Sangita Gajmer (2023), in her research titled “Homelessness within Homeland: Oppression of Hazara in Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*” shows that the concept of citizen is not applicable since the Hazaras are discriminated against and excluded by the majority Pashtun extremists in Afghanistan. Pashtuns are privileged, and this position has created a situation of discrimination and inequality towards the underprivileged Hazaras, and they are denied to have equal rights. Rahman, Sheguf & Alfaruque (2024) investigate the treatment of humanity in Afghan society in their paper titled “Exploring Humans, Humanity, and Humanization: A Case Study in *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini”. Ghafoor & Farooq (2020) explore the disregarded voice of the Hazaras as a marginal and subaltern ethnic community of Afghanistan in their article titled “Can Subaltern Be Heard: An Analysis of *The Kite Runner* and *The Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khalid Hosseini: Can Subaltern Be Heard.” Chen Kai-fu (2019) examines how the changed attitude and mindset of the protagonist of the novel Amir helps to rescue Sohrab as a symbol of the rescue of the Hazaras from the Taliban in his paper titled “A Study of Amir’s Psychological Change in *The Kite Runner*.” Malik & Murtaza (2013) show how the power relation in Afghan society plays a pivotal role in the sectarian state marginalization of the Hazaras in their research titled “The Levels of Power Relationship in *The Kite Runner*.” Afzal Farooq (2024) in his paper titled “Demystifying Pashtun-Hazara and Shi'a-Sunni Conflict in Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*” explores Afghanistan’s internal strife between the Shi'a and Sunni and Pashtun and Hazara besides dwelling upon Afghanistan’s transition from monarchy to a republic and then to the Taliban regime.

As it has already been mentioned, though there is a good number of research studies on *The Kite Runner* from the various perspectives, those studies neglected the specific issue of the social hierarchy and the historical injustice that induced the discrimination and marginalization of the Hazaras in Afghan society. The above-mentioned researchers did not properly address the issues of power relations between the ethnic minority Hazaras and the majority Pashtun. So this paper aims to analyze class, ethnicity, religion, and the legacy of silence in the face of oppression to interpret the age-long structural and hegemonic discriminations the Hazara have faced in Afghanistan.

3. Method and Theoretical Framework

This paper incorporates a qualitative research method based on library research by using close reading to analyze *The Kite Runner*. So, the study is basically oriented in the analysis of literary research on *The Kite Runner*, various reports, and historical texts on Afghan history. George (2008, p. 22-23) describes library research as “an investigation involving accepted facts, speculation, logical procedures rigorously applied, verification, evaluation, repetition, and ultimately an interpretation of findings that extends understanding.” It also applies a sociological approach to analyze how cultural, religious, and ethnic discriminations are represented in the novel. Sociological approach is used to analyze the literary work as a social reflection, focusing on the account of complicated interactions between text, society, and history, as Kennedy & Gioia (2015, p. 1801) state, “Sociological approach examines literature in the cultural, economic, and political context in which it is written or received.” The sociological approach is used to analyze a literary work as a depiction of the historical context and socio-cultural conditions in which the literary work is written. It concerns the social problem experienced by the character in the novel. As in *The Kite Runner*, the discrimination and marginalization the Hazaras faced is not merely a matter

of cultural difference or political rivalry; it is deeply rooted in the socio-political and socio-cultural setting of the Afghan society. The Hazaras are often racially stereotyped in public discourse and social life as foreign, unclean, or inferior, not as the “true” Afghans. This ethno-social narrative has justified historic exclusions, marginalization, and contemporary violence against the Hazaras.

Since this paper aims to expose the deeply implanted social hierarchies and historical injustices that prevent the Hazaras from being the true national of Afghanistan, a new historicist approach seems to be appropriate for the theoretical framework of this paper. As a literary theory, new historicism emphasizes the historical and cultural context in which a text is produced and must be interpreted and analyzed according to that particular socio-historical context. Gregory Castle (2007, p.131) opines, “As a form of cultural poetics, New Historicism assumes that historical phenomena can be read like a text.”

It is already mentioned that the Hazara people, for being a distinct ethno-religious minority in Afghanistan, have faced systematic marginalization, discrimination, and violence for over a century. The Hazaras are predominantly Shi'a Muslims in a largely Sunni-majority country; at the same time, the Hazaras are also ethnically distinct, bearing Central Asian and Mongoloid features that have historically marked them as – other- in Afghan society. Hosseini in *The Kite Runner* distinctly addressed the issue from a very historical perspective. He focuses on the problems of the minority Hazaras in Afghanistan based on ethno-religious identity and its related social issues of power, hegemony, social inequality and injustices from the monarchial Afghanistan to the present extremist Taliban regime.

The narrative of *The Kite Runner* is embedded in the larger socio-historical tapestry of Afghanistan, and central to this tapestry is the systemic marginalization of the Hazara ethnic minority. The analysis of these socio-historical dynamics of dissecting the minority Hazaras in a predominantly Pashtun-majority society is the main concern of this research. The minority dissection, injustices, and historicization of violence against the Hazaras can be assumed from the new historicist position, as Pramod K. Nayar (2010) in his famous book, *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*, asserts,

New Historicism adapts a view of history where all events of the past are available to us only in the form of texts. This textuality of history is implicated in the institutional and social power relations that determine what narratives can get written and what forms the narratives must take. (Nayar, 2010, p. 203)

Moreover, New Historicists try to find out the historical relationship between the text and the society, as Goodman (2004, p. 80) claims, “New Historicists looked for a more dynamic relationship between texts and their societies”. Hosseini’s treatment of the intersection of religious, ethnic, and socio-political identity has rendered the Hazaras the most persecuted group in the history of Afghanistan. Accepting the relationship between literature and history is also very instrumental in analyzing literary texts that deal with history. In this regard, John Brannigan (1998, p.203) remarks, “The new historicism has succeeded in bringing the relationship between literature and history into the mainstream of literary studies.” Therefore, the theoretical lens of this paper is New Historicist.

4. Discussion and Analysis

Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* is a very powerful exploration of ethnic, socio-hierarchical, and religious discriminations in Afghan society, particularly focusing on the systemic marginalization of the Hazara ethnic group. The novel uses personal guilt, redemption, and historical trauma to emphasize the enduring scars of ethnic, social, and religious discriminations

against the Hazaras by the majority Pashtuns as Hosseini & Zohdi (2016, p. 36) very rightly exposed, “They were killed by Pashtuns and forced to get out of their lands and homes and were considered as Pashtuns’ slaves.” It compels readers to reflect on the cost of silence, the legacy of injustice, and the moral imperative to confront societal bias. Through the lens of personal relationships and historical context, the novel aims to expose the deep-rooted prejudices and social injustices faced by the Hazaras, primarily embodied in the characters of Hassan and Ali.

Ali, a Hazara servant in the household of the Pashtun protagonist Amir, represents the voiceless and oppressed segment of Afghan society. Despite his loyalty and affection, Ali is never truly treated as an equal. His ethnicity, marked by distinct facial features and religious differences as a Shia Muslim in a Sunni-majority country, renders him a target of both subtle and overt discrimination. The same fate is solidified for his son Hassan, too. One of the most disturbing examples occurs when Assef, a sadistic Pashtun boy, brutally assaults and raped Hassan, calling his Hazara identity “dirty, *kasseef*” (Hosseini, 2003, p.36) in Afghanistan. The brutal incident reflects that the Shi'a Muslims are marked as “dirty, *kasseef*” by the majority Pashtun and by marking them as “dirty, *kasseef*” they legitimize the marginalization and killing of those Hazaras. At the same time, the incident also shows that the ferocity against the Hazaras is implanted even among children, and the Pashtun children are growing up bearing the hatred and ferocity against the Hazaras. The novel also critiques the internalized prejudice within seemingly kind characters. Amir, though conflicted, remains silent during Hassan’s assault and later contributes to his expulsion from their household. This silence reflects the broader complicity of privileged groups in sustaining ethnic hierarchies.

Even after the Soviet and American invasions and the rise of the Taliban, these ethnic, socio-hierarchical, and religious divisions, marginalization, and persecution persist. The Taliban’s persecution of the Hazaras, including public massacres, is referenced in the latter part of the novel, highlighting how ethnic discrimination becomes institutionalized in Afghanistan from the kingship to political regimes. To analyze and interpret the age-long discriminations, marginalization, exclusions, and various kind of persecutions against the Hazaras by the majority Pashtuns, this discussion and analysis mainly focused on the narrative of the novel from the following four dimensions: firstly, from the dimension of the socio-hierarchical discrimination and exclusion against the Hazaras; secondly, from the dimension of religious discrimination and persecution; thirdly, from the dimension of ethnic discrimination and cleansing, and finally, from the dimension of religious stratification, and the legacy of silence in the face of systematic oppression against the Hazara in Afghanistan.

4.1 Socio-Hierarchical Discrimination and Exclusion

In *The Kite Runner*, one of the central themes is the socio-hierarchical discrimination and exclusion of the Hazaras reflects broader ethnic and class divisions in Afghan society. Khaled Hosseini uses the Hazara-Pashtun power relation and the dynamic, primarily through the relationship between Amir, a privileged Pashtun, and Hassan, a Hazara servant, to depict how deeply entrenched prejudice creates systemic inequality. The servitude and social hierarchy are shown as the Hazaras, such as Hassan and his father Ali, are depicted as servants in the homes of wealthy Pashtuns. Despite Hassan and Ali’s loyalty and closeness to Amir and his father, they are still treated as subordinates. Though Amir and Hassan are in a very good bond of friendship, Hassan’s Hazara identity defines his social status as a servant, regardless of personal bonds and friendship. When Amir and Hassan face Assef for the first time, Assef rebukes Amir for being friends with his Hazara servant, Hassan.

But he's not my friend! I almost blurted. He's my servant! Had I really thought that? Of course I hadn't. I hadn't. I treated Hassan well, just like a friend, better even, more like a brother. But if so, then why, when Baba's friends came to visit with their kids, didn't I ever include Hassan in our games? Why did I play with Hassan only when no one else was around? (Hosseini, 2003, p. 36)

This thought painfully underscores Amir's internalization of social hierarchy and the majority Pashtun's ideology of supremacy that fuels the subjection and the oppression of the Hazaras. The common view of the majority of Pashtuns is that the Hazaras are inferior and must be treated as slaves, and they can never be friends with the Pashtun.

The Hazaras are excluded from all kinds of economic and financial mobility and are almost restricted to menial labor for their livelihood. In the novel, Ali and Hassan live in a modest mud hut on the property of Baba's mansion, a clear physical representation of the socioeconomic gap. The narrative of the novel never advocates that they could own property, start a business, or rise socially. The narrative of the novel shows that the Hazaras are relegated to menial labor with no opportunity for advancement. The Hazaras are also excluded from education, as no Hazara child can attend formal schooling. It is evident in the novel that Ali and Hassan are both illiterate, while Amir is formally educated like his parents. Amir even mocks Hassan's inability to read, reinforcing the privileged Pashtuns' hold:

I read him stories he couldn't read for himself. That Hassan would grow up illiterate like Ali and most Hazaras I read him stories he couldn't read for himself. That Hassan would grow up illiterate like Ali and most Hazaras. (Hosseini, 2003, p. 24)

This highlights not just individual discrimination, but institutional erasure as the exclusion from economic and educational engagements. The exclusion from the right to education and economic engagement hastens the disgrace of the Hazaras. This erasure makes the Hazaras the least privileged and most marginalized minority community in Afghanistan.

The narrative of the novel also conceptualizes discrimination and exclusion, portraying these not only as individual prejudice but as a structural, cultural, and political condition, especially through the dehumanization of the Hazara characters like Hassan, Sanubar, and Ali. The dehumanization of the Hazaras is very evident when a soldier indicates the violent abuse of Hassan's mother, Sanubar, a Hazara woman. The soldier threatened Hasan by rebuking,

You! The Hazara! "Look at me when I'm talking to you!" the soldier barked. He handed his cigarette to the guy next to him, made a circle with the thumb and index finger of one hand. Poked the middle finger of his other hand through the circle. [...] I knew your mother, did you know that? I knew her real good. I took her from behind by that creek over there. (Hosseini, 2003, p. 6)

Moreover, violent characters like Assef embody the extremist majority Pashtun's ideology that legitimizes cruelty toward the Hazaras. Several other instances of dehumanization emphasize how these attitudes are normalized through cultural and historical narratives in Afghanistan. "School textbooks barely mentioned them and referred to their ancestry only in passing." (Hosseini, 2003, p. 8) This kind of dehumanization and the erasure of the Hazaras from the public sphere also upsurges the exclusion of the community from the social hierarchy, and this exclusion leads the severe discrimination and marginalization.

4.2 Religious Discrimination and Persecution

Religious discrimination against the Hazaras is one of the central dynamics in *The Kite Runner* as the novel portrays the long-standing religious and sectarian divide between the dominant Sunni

Muslim Pashtun, and the marginalized Hazaras, mostly Shi'a Muslims, using this tension as a backdrop to both personal and national conflict. The religious dimension of the discrimination against the Hazaras is intricately interwoven with ethnic prejudice that creates a social structure where the Hazaras are systematically dehumanized by the majority Pashtun, and the dehumanization automatically paves the way for marginalization and annihilation. Amir got a book on the Hazaras in which he found that his own people, Pashtun, did all kinds of violence against the Hazaras. When he showed the book to his teacher, the teacher not only denied the facts but also accused the Hazaras as liars just for being Shi'a. Hosseini remarks:

Pashtuns had oppressed the Hazaras was that Pashtuns were Sunni Muslims, while Hazaras were Shi'a. The following week, after class, 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, passing themselves as martyrs." He wrinkled his nose when he said the word Shi'a, like it was some kind of disease. (Hosseini, 2003, p. 8)

This kind of denial and allegation highlights the dehumanization through religious and sectarian markers. In the novel, the Hazara characters are shown as inferior not only due to their features but also because of their religious identity. The novel lays bare how such markers justify the maltreatments and brutal violence against the Hazaras, both socially and politically, throughout Afghan history.

Furthermore, by exploring the dogmatic formation of Afghanistan's fractured society, the novel connects religious discrimination to identity politics, where ethnic and religious identities are politicized. Whereas the politicization of ethnic and religious identities leads to civil conflict and personal alienation. Alessandro Monsutti (2016) indicates that the religious divide between the two communities dates back to the time of Amir Abdur Rahman (1880–1901) when he subjugated the land of the Hazaras:

The subjugation of Hazarajat by Abdur Rahman not only disorganized the Hazara tribal system but also opened up the region to Pashtun nomads, who secured the best pastures for their herds. Relations between the two communities have always been difficult, with the religious divided compounded by divergent economic interests. (Monsutti, 2016, p.67)

The protagonist Amir's internal conflict and guilt are rooted in this environment, as he struggles with his privileged status as a Pashtun and Sunni. This privileged status ultimately "radicalized other", and the "radicalized other" paved the way for systemic discrimination and persecution, a process that ultimately leads to the dehumanization of the Hazaras. Hosseini connects this theme with broader patterns of exclusion seen throughout Afghan society, showing how religion becomes a weapon for social stratification and persecution. Especially in the time of Taliban regime, as Ahmed Rashid (2001, p. 68- 69) comments, "The sectarian enmity between the Sunni Pashtuns and the Shia Hazaras went back a long way, but the Taliban had brought a new edge to the conflict for they treated all Shias as *munafiqueen* or hypocrites and beyond the pale of true Islam." Through the observation of Amir, Hosseini (2003, p.22) states,

Never mind any of those things. 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.

Though in the beginning, Amir believes that their friendship and the loyalty of Hassan can outdo the age long "the face of Afghanistan" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 22), but the novel depicts that the

discriminations and the religious persecutions are quite impossible to disregard for the religious sectarian outlook of the Afghan society.

4.3 Ethnic Discrimination and Cleansing

Ethnic discrimination and cleansing are another very important dynamic of *The Kite Runner*. The novel is a powerful exploration of ethnic discrimination in Afghan society, particularly focusing on the systemic marginalization and cleansing of the Hazara ethnic group. Through the lens of subjective relationships and historical context, the novel exposes the deep-rooted preconceptions and social injustices faced by the Hazaras due to their ethnic identity. It is evident that from the time of Amir Abdur Rahman to the Taliban Regime, the Hazaras are the worst victims of the Pashtun.

Hassan represents the voiceless and oppressed segment of Afghan society. Despite his loyalty and affection, Hassan is never truly treated as an equal. His ethnicity, marked by distinct facial features and ethnic differences, renders him a target of both subtle and overt discrimination. One of the most disturbing examples occurs when Assef, a sadistic Pashtun boy, brutally assaults and rapes Hassan, calling his Hazara identity “a stain” on Afghanistan. The novel also critiques the internalized prejudgment within seemingly kind characters. Amir, though conflicted, remains silent during Hassan’s assault and later contributes to his expulsion from their household. This silence and expulsion reflect the broader complicity of privileged groups in sustaining ethnic hierarchies.

Even after the Soviet invasion and the rise of the Taliban, these ethnic divisions persist. The Taliban’s persecution of Hazaras, including public massacres, is referenced in the latter part of the novel, highlighting how ethnic discrimination becomes institutionalized in political regimes. The situation became very severe in the Taliban occupied Afghanistan as the Taliban had blockaded all the roads to stop the food supply to the provinces of the Hazaras. Famous Pakistani journalist and historian, Ahmed Rashid (2001, p. 67), in his famous book *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* mentions,

But the Hazaras were also starving simply for who they were. [...] Three hundred thousand Hazaras in the province of Bamiyan were already hungry, while another 700,000 in the three neighbouring provinces of Ghor, Wardak and Ghazni were also suffering from shortages - one million people in all.

In the end, *The Kite Runner* uses personal guilt, redemption, and historical trauma to emphasize the enduring scars of ethnic discrimination and cleansing as Brannigan, J. (1998, p.203) opines, “For new historicists literary texts occupy specific historical and cultural sites, at which, and through which, historical forces clash, and political and ideological contradictions are played out.” The novel compels readers to reflect on the cost of silence, the legacy of injustice, and the moral imperative to confront societal bias.

4.4 The Legacy of Silence in the Face of Oppression

The legacy of silence in the face of oppression is another important dynamic of Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*, as it presents a multi-layered narrative of the legacy of silence against the Hazaras’ marginalization and persecution in Afghanistan. The novel argues that the silence - both as a political device and as a cultural phenomenon - perpetuates the Hazara marginalization and maintains existing power hierarchies in Afghan society. The silence of the Hazara characters in *The Kite Runner* is not merely personal reticence but an inherited cultural trait shaped by generations of marginalization. In Pashtun-dominated Afghan society, Hazaras have historically

been relegated to servile positions, their voices rendered socially and historically negligible and muted. This historical muteness is mainly due to being an ethnic and religious minority and the exclusion from the social hierarchy. By isolating the Hazara people in the Hazarajat region, both historically and socially, the Pashtun majority and the state mechanism reinforce the political and historical invisibility of the Hazaras. In the novel, these historical and social segregations are mirrored in narrative space as the Hazara perspectives are filtered through the Pashtun narrators, further silencing the direct testimony against the oppression of the Hazaras.

The oppression of the Hazaras in the novel is deeply tied to the legacy of silence. Both the characters' personal silences and the larger societal erasure of the sufferings of the Hazara, encapsulate the historical, cultural, and political mechanisms that sustain the oppression and the marginalization of Hazaras. It is a silence woven into the fabric of Afghan society, reinforced by spatial segregation, cultural conditioning, and narrative social hierarchy. Hassan's and Ali's quiet endurance shows the historic silencing of the Hazara voices under Pashtun dominance. Ali's parents were killed by two young Pashtuns and the killers never got the punishment for the killing as the victims were Hazara. Hosseini (2003, p. 21) writes,

In 1933, the year Baba was born and the year Zahir Shah began his forty-year reign of Afghanistan, two brothers, young men from a wealthy and reputable family in Kabul, got behind the wheel of their father's Ford roadster. High on hashish and *mast* on French wine, they struck and killed a Hazara husband and wife on the road to Paghman.

The silence against the killing of Ali's parents isn't just of a particular incident but it's systemic, stemming from the historical and social hierarchy that normalizes the killing, marginalization, and oppression of the Hazaras in Afghanistan. Amir's silence during Hassan's assault represents not only the personal cowardice of Hassan but also the complicity in the socio-cultural erasure of the persecution of the Hazaras. These acts of silence and erasure reflect the intergenerational failure to challenge the societal hierarchies, thereby perpetuating trauma. The novel suggests that silence - whether through fear or apathy - becomes an unspoken inheritance, passed from rulers to elites, and from elites to common people, as Brannigan, J. (1998, p.203) remarks, "It recognises also that the text is part of the process of historical change, and indeed may constitute historical change." The novel reveals how the legacy of silence is deeply rooted in fear, social conditioning, and internalized subjugation and the legacy of silence operates as a mechanism of oppression against the Hazaras.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be summarized that the Hazara–Pashtun conflict is a historically rooted and deeply politicized ethno-religious tension in Afghanistan marked by cycles of domination, marginalization, contestation of identity and the legacy of silence. At its core, the conflict reflects broader structural inequalities embedded in Afghanistan's ethno-political order, where the Pashtuns have historically held hegemonic state power and cultural dominance, while the Hazaras, an ethnic and sectarian minority, have faced systemic exclusion.

The Hazara identity has often been omitted from the dominant national narratives in Afghanistan, as the Afghan historiography is largely influenced by the Pashtun nationalist ideologies. The Pashtun-dominated narrative has either erased or negatively framed the Hazara history as the Hazara ethnic minority has endured systemic oppression, marked by political exclusion, economic deprivation, and religious discrimination. This exclusion has led to a cultural trauma and memory politics that continue to impact the Hazaras for centuries. The plight and

resilience of the Hazara people continue to raise fundamental questions about ethnicity, national belonging, and justice in Afghanistan.

The Kite Runner serves as both a fictional narrative and a socio-historical commentary on the discrimination, marginalization, and injustices against the Hazaras in Afghanistan, where ethnic and religious identities are politicized. The ethno-religious and socio-historical discriminations against the Hazaras not only deepen the problems of national belonging and identity politics in Afghanistan but also expose the distressing minority dissection in the fractured Afghan society by leading the society to social alienation and civil war.

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