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## The Outlook: Journal of English Studies

[A Peer-Reviewed, Open Access Journal; Indexed in NepJOL]  
ISSN: 2565-4748 (Print); ISSN: 2773-8124 (Online); JPPS Star-Ranked Journal  
Published by Department of English, Prithvi Narayan Campus  
Tribhuvan University, Pokhara, Nepal  
<http://ejournals.pncampus.edu.np/ejournals/outlook/>

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### The Echoes of Subaltern's Misery in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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**Article History:** Submitted 15 Apr. 2023; Reviewed 21 June 2023; Revised 3 July 2023

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.3126/ojes.v14i1.56662>

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#### Abstract

In his magnum opus, *The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini mirrors the misery and dehumanization of indefensible Hazaras, an ethnic group of Afghanistan. The novel illustrates the pathetic conditions of the Hazaras as a subaltern minority in the background of the political turmoil in Afghanistan. As marginalized people, they endure both physical and psychological oppression imposed by the Pashtuns, who believe themselves as superior and consider the Hazaras as others. Though the Hazaras are suppressed with physical violence, verbal abuse, slavery, genocide, etc., they are found indefensible in behaviour. Their silence to social domination points to how the mainstream history has gauged the voice of lower strata working class peasants in Afghanistan. The paper aims to explore the misery of Hazaras as a subaltern group, illuminating their endurance in response to injustice imposed on them. It primarily focuses upon the silence of Ali and Hassan to injustice and discrimination which signifies them as subaltern characters. The paper employs subaltern approaches as suggested by Antonio Gramsci, Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The paper ultimately agrees with the view of Spivak that subalterns cannot speak for their rights and justice.

**Keywords:** Subaltern, dehumanization, discrimination, marginalization, the Hazaras

#### Introduction

The term 'subaltern' denotes diverse meanings in different disciplines and has been established as "an operative research concept through the work of the Italian Marxist leader, Antonio Gramsci" (Zaib 213). The subaltern at present is generally considered "a figure of exclusion, representing the specular opposite of the citizen" who "represents a lack of access to institutions of rights and obligations" (Thomas 2). These subalterns in times have been victimized by "colonialism, classism, casteism and gender discrimination" in South Asian societies (Awasthi 77). The idea of subaltern is "pivotal in a number of schools of literary criticism such as post-colonialism, Marxism, and feminism" (Hussein 34). Similarly, the heart-rending plight of such subalterns has been

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the chief matter of concern in literature in English from South Asia which is equally illustrated in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*.

Published in 2003, *The Kite Runner* was observed with unanimous praise. The novel was admired for its honest portrayal of characters and dreadful narrative of the massacre accompanied by Afghanistan's turbulent political scene. The novel was particularly appreciated for its vivid portrayals of life during war-torn Afghanistan in the 1970s. Among the different spheres of themes acknowledged in the novel, the vicious suffering of Hazaras, an ethnic group of Afghanistan is a predominant one.

The novel presents the microcosms of society where, as a ruling majority Sunni Muslim Pashtuns lead a life of luxury whereas Shia Muslim Hazaras have to involve in the household works. The novel is based on Amir and his father Baba who are Sunni Muslim Pashtuns and Hassan and his father Ali who are Shia Muslim Hazaras. Belonging to a subaltern group and so-called inferior race, Hassan and Ali are physically and psychologically suppressed and victimized on several occasions by Pashtuns and the Taliban. However, Hassan and Ali remain loyal, devoted and protective of their masters as their masters were Pashtuns by their race. As loyal servants, they remain ever ready to die for their masters despite ethnic discrimination imposed on them. As the major subaltern figures in the novel, they do not lose self-respect but rejoice with devotion and sacrifice.

The novel can be studied from different perspectives like diaspora, migration, family relationships, religious righteousness and many others. However, the paper focusses upon the pitiful plight of Hazaras who are always directly or indirectly prejudiced by the ideologies of the dominant class living in Afghanistan. Moreover, the paper presents these Hazaras as a subaltern group and explores how they have been suppressed with reference to the social, political, economic and cultural backdrops. Besides, the paper explores the way subalterns endure pain in response to crime and injustice imposed on them.

### **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

The main source of information for the study is Khalid Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*. The study has used both print and online sources for information. In particular, it uses secondary sources, such as critical books, reviews and journal articles. The chosen text is examined using content analysis within the theoretical insights of subaltern studies developed by Antonio Gramsci, Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

The term 'subaltern' has a long and imprecise history as it has been used to refer to different meanings. The concept since its first use to the present time "has undergone several changes" (Dutta 69). For Ludden, "Subaltern Studies does not mean today what it meant in 1982, 1985, 1889, or 1993" (2). Etymologically, the word 'subaltern' is derived from two Latin words *sub* and *alter* which means below and other respectively (Abrams and Harpham 307). In the middle ages, the term subaltern was used to signify "vassals and peasants" (Ludden 4). Similarly, by 1700, the term was used as a military term. In the military context, it denoted "lower ranks in the military, suggesting peasant origin" (Ludden 4). In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the notion of subaltern was highly influenced by the notion of Marxism, nationalism, post-colonialism and feminism. Now, the term "has come to be used broadly to represent subordination in social, political, religious, and economic hierarchies" ("Subaltern"). These illustrations show how the meaning of subaltern has been constantly changing throughout history.

It was Italian political activist Antonio Gramsci who used the term 'subaltern' for the first time to refer to the people or groups of people who are excluded from the dominant political hierarchy. Gramsci used the term to refer to a person with low rank in

a specific society who is obliged to live with the ideological suppression of dominant class. According to him, "the subaltern classes by definition are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a "State": their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of States and groups of States" (52). For him, "the history of the parties of the subaltern groups is very complex" (52). Basically, the subaltern is forbidden with the right and responsibilities to construct history and identities similar to dominant people of the same territory. The subaltern remains beneath the willpower of the influential class and partake in the authority conceived and controlled by them.

Subaltern studies gains its height as a matter of study in England during the 1970s when a group of historians decided to "launch a new journal in India" (Ludden 1). Ranajit Guha headed the formation of Subaltern Studies Group or Subaltern Studies Collective that finally assisted to establish the subaltern studies as a post-colonial theory and acclaimed worldwide currency. For him, the subaltern is "a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society" (161) commonly associated with gender, race and ethnicity. The subalterns are "rendered without agency by his or her social status" (Young 337). Therefore, the subalterns never have opportunities or platform to raise their claims as "hegemony forces them to believe that the dominants are their mouthpieces" (Ghafoor and Farooq 30).

The notion of subaltern further gains its popularity with the thought-provoking debate of Indian American critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who is much acclaimed for her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" The essay explores "how the subaltern woman is portrayed as detached, dumb, or unheard" (Jambhulkar and Joshi 523). Her work is centralized upon the silence of the women in the postcolonial background. The essay describes how the subaltern woman is raised, as quite or silent, less human who is never heard. Spivak concludes her thought-provoking question as the subaltern cannot speak (308). Finally, she comes to the conclusion that if a subaltern dares to speak, one does not become subaltern at all.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Unjust and Turbulent History***

Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* has a historical signification, which is connected with unjust and violent history of Afghanistan. The land has been a place of suppression based on ethnic discrimination throughout a long history. Similarly, the novel is connected with old-aged kite fighting practices in Afghanistan. The kite fighting tournament is parallel to the turbulent history of Afghanistan since the land has been a playground for internal and external conflict for a long time. The actual kite flying discussed in the novel involves contests between rivals "like paper sharks roaming for prey" (55) which is analogous to "going to war" (43). The tournament used to be observed with great celebrations by children, including youths and adults. However, the brutal activities led by Taliban "banned kite fighting" (187), marking the end of long-held customs from Afghanistan in 1994.

Hosseini has fictionally integrated a long and complex history of Afghanistan in his work. Afghanistan has been dominated by the Pashtun majority who describe themselves as the original descendants of the place residing before the year 1000. In the novel, considering oneself as of superior race, Assef, a Pashtun descendent frequently dominates Hassan claiming Afghanistan as "the land of Pashtuns". Moreover, he assumes Pashtuns as "the true Afghans, the pure Afghans" whereas he denies the coexistence of "Flat-Nose" Hazaras (35). The Hazaras are not only the group dominated since long in the history of Afghanistan, but there are also other ethnic minorities like

Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmen whom the hegemony of the Pashtuns has victimized. As a result, there lies “years of unhappiness in their *watan*” (316). The book's political dimension reveals the complicated social structure of ethnocultural minorities of Afghanistan and dreadful relations among them.

Hosseini's novel also reveals the historical scenario of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and its consequences upon the land and its people. The Soviet Army invaded Afghanistan in 1979 that resulted a bloody shred almost for a decade that signifies “ongoing era of bloodletting” (32). The novel best mirrors “collateral damage” (175) of Kabul resulted by the Soviet invasion, and civil war led by Taliban. Hosseini also pinpoints the lives of ethnic people who are forced to live in extreme poverty due to internal and external conflicts.

When the Taliban accomplished the seizure of Kabul in 1996 after long years of foreign control, people “dance on that street” (174) as warm welcome for their takeover. However, the Taliban fail to maintain people's affection for long as they turn more discriminatory and impose radical Islam and fundamentalist laws. They also restrict age-old cultural practices, stopping music, dance and rituals. They also curtail human rights and oppose women's rights limiting them within four walls of the home. As radical Islamic people, the Taliban cruelly massacre the “Hazaras in Mazar-i-Sharif” (187). The Taliban become so cruel that they “leave the bodies in the streets, and if their families try to sneak out to drag them back into their homes”, they “shoot them too” (243). Therefore, the dead bodies are left on the streets for several days. According to a Taliban in the novel, the bodies are left on the street as a food “for the dogs” (243). As the identity of Hazaras under the Taliban control Afghanistan was as equal to dogs; for a Taliban, it was just a “Dog meat for dogs” (243). All these events in the novel indicate the brutality of Taliban who killed the lives of innocent people for the sake of ethnic cleansing.

The novel also features how political turbulence has viciously affected many innocent children and disabled minorities. They are forced to live in orphanages as they “lost their fathers in the war, and their mothers couldn't feed them because the Taliban didn't allow them to work” (222). Moreover, the children in orphanages are victimized with different forms of abuses like as Sohrab in the novel. They are forcefully taken away from orphanages by the Taliban for entertainment purposes like the animals in circus. All such heart-rending scenes can be traced in final part of the book where Hosseini has cited numerous examples of devastating lives of Afghanistan. There is an example of a man who is willing to sell his artificial leg to earn his leaving. There is also an example of a couple who are stoned to death for committing a crime of adultery. The novel comprises the stories of young people who are obliged for prostitution to run their life and families. Hosseini thus concludes Kabul as the city of “Rubble and Beggars” (245).

People who are socially, politically, or geographically outside the dominant power structure are frequently referred to as subalterns. They are neglected by national history or portrayed as of inferior race. Similarly, the right and obligation to create histories and identities akin to those of the dominant inhabitants of the same land is restricted to the subaltern. In this context, the Hazaras can be identified as a subaltern group in Afghanistan.

### ***Discrimination and Marginalization***

The novel mirrors the subject of social discrimination and prejudice based on racism and ethnic discrimination. Moreover, the novel moves around the theme of religious intolerance, child abuse, women's suffrage and war assaults. The marginalized

group like the Hazaras are often threatened with genocide and equally dominated by Pashtun, Russian forces and the Taliban. On the other side, Pashtuns entertain comforts and luxury from an early age of life and view the poor Hazaras as inferior people. Amir, a Pashtun boy identifies the visible boundary of social class between himself and Hassan yet both “feed from the same breast” (10). Likewise, Baba never considers “Ali as his friend” (22) though they grow up in the same home exactly like Amir and Hassan many years after. The notable thing is that Amir does not recognize Hassan “as friend either” (22).

Hosseini depicts the Hazaras as historically under-represented, under-taught and the subordinated group of Afghanistan. The brutal discrimination of Hazaras just for being Shia Muslims has been illustrated throughout the novel. According to Hosseini, the Hazaras are even ignored by the state as they are “barely mentioned” in “school textbooks” (8). Pashtuns often oppress the Hazaras and “quell them with unspeakable violence” (8). However, the Hazaras are illustrated as tender and sympathetic persons, “incapable of hurting anyone” (9). As a Hazara, Hassan comprises such innocence who never hurts anyone for his own sake and protection.

The novel well documents how the Hazaras like Ali and Hassan are prohibited in Afghanistan with educational opportunities. In the novel, Hassan “grows up illiterate like Ali and other Hazaras” however, he is always “drawn to the mystery of words, seduced by a secret world forbidden to him” (24). After the completion of household work, Hassan follows Amir to the sunlight and shadows of pomegranate trees where he listens to Amir’s stories. Hassan sometimes points out some flaws in Amir’s story which Amir cannot tolerate. For Amir, “illiterate Hazara” (30) is incapable to know anything and point out flaws in his work. Thus, Hassan is often prejudiced by Amir’s ideologies. Like Amir, there are several other characters who project similar biases against the Hazaras. When Farid sees Amir taking the risk of life for the rescue of Sohrab, son of Hassan; he surprises for his purpose. For Farid, the Hazaras are not worthy to be helped and respected. It really signifies how the Hazaras and Shi’as are regarded in Afghanistan.

In a particular society, a person of low rank who must endure the ideological repression of the dominant class is referred to as a subaltern. In this context, Ali and Hassan can be identified as subalterns since they never revolt for their freedom nor remain dissatisfied with repressed life. Rather they seem ever optimistic that there would be a mutual relation between Shia and Sunni one day. Ali often sings a song of liberation and harmony between Shia and Sunni. But the increasing domination of hierarchical groups to the downtrodden minorities is turning his song into “only a dream a dream that is never to be true” (10). Thus, the novel spins to the theme of never-ending suppression and discrimination against marginalized people in Afghanistan.

### ***Loyalty and Silence***

The novel deals with the social injustice related to the subject of discrimination based on race. It deals with this in the way that there are two clans, Pashtuns and the Hazaras. The Hazaras are treated as slaves; they are pretty much the lowest of the low. The novel is based on the loyalty of slaves to their masters who are Pashtuns by race. Hassan seems as “Loyal as a dog,” (63) to his master Amir which results catastrophic rape in earlier days of his life. Moreover, Hassan chooses his merciless death as his continuation of loyalty to Amir. But Hassan never reflects resistance to dehumanized behaviour on him. When Hassan is victimized with sexual violence as a means of payment for his loyalty to Amir, Hassan responds merely with silence: “Hassan doesn’t struggle. Doesn’t even whimper.” Hosseini compares the sight with “the look of the lamb” (66).

The novel includes the matters of silence and secrets to illustrate the endurance of Hazaras people. Hassan never discloses and complains about his sexual abuse to anyone. When Ali inquires about his bleeding and unusual appearance, Hassan discloses nothing to him: "He says it is nothing" (71). Moreover, even after that dark day of the cruel violence, he never loses his respect for Amir but he always remains "God old Hassan. Good old reliable Hassan" and "keeps his promise" forever (61).

Hassan is mocked very often by other children just because he is a Shi'a and a Hazara. He is labelled as "*mice-eating, flat-nosed, load-carrying donkeys*" (8). Hassan is mistreated not only by the children but also by the government institutions. As Amir and Hassan are on the way to the movie, a soldier misbehaves with Hassan because he is a Hazara. Hassan has no options against military authorities except "croaking with tears" (6). Similarly, Hassan's father Ali also has to face similar misbehaves on several occasions. Ali "doesn't say anything" (7) when he finds Amir walking behind him imitating his walk. Likewise, older kids in the neighbourhood often trouble Ali for his appearance and race: "They chase him on the street, and mock him when he hobbles by" (8). Ali always remains silent for such mocking of the kids. Instead, he keeps on continuing his work.

Hassan's tolerance can be noticed when he is hit by a pomegranate by Amir. Instead of the active response, "Hassan does pick up a pomegranate . . . opens it and crushes it against his own forehead" (81). The incident verifies that Hassan behaves respectfully to Amir even in the time of anger. Hassan's high level of tolerance can be analysed when Amir falsely plots Hassan for his stolen watch. Since Hassan has never opposed anything to Amir, "Hassan confesses to the stealing" (93) to instill the good image of Amir to Baba. The circumstance forces Ali and Hassan to leave their long held settlements, however they accept it with silence.

The novel also provides numerous examples of how the Hazara people are persecuted in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. Just being a Hazara, Hassan has to accept cruel behaviour of Taliban several times. Hassan finds no way out except to be a passive observer when a young Talib hits his wife without any sincere reason. The merciless shutting to Hassan and his wife Farzana is a breath-taking incident in the novel. As they are in loyal service to their master's house, they are killed by the Taliban. Nobody dares to go against the case of the Taliban. Instead, "Hassan's and Farzana's murders are dismissed as a case of self-defense. No one said a word about it" (192-93).

The incidents illustrate the endurance of Hazaras against dehumanized behaviour on them. Though the Hazaras are suppressed with physical violence, verbal abuse, slavery, genocide, etc., they are found indefensible in behaviour and indicate that they cannot speak for their rights and wellbeing. Their endurance to the cruelty and injustice points to how social structure and mainstream politics have gauged the voice of lower strata working-class Hazaras, a subaltern group in Afghanistan.

## Conclusion

Hosseini, in his novel *The Kite Runner*, presents the echoes of subaltern's misery in a truly superior way. The novel presents the shocking story of marginalized Hazaras through the story of Ali and Hassan which deals with the dreadful truth about the hegemonic power in the society that results in terrible discrimination in human affairs. Hosseini has illustrated numerous societies, histories and cultures from marginalized groups who are known as the subalterns in view of Gramsci, Guha and Spivak. The novel also highlights the difficulty of the Hazara people like Ali and Hassan who are confined in the conflict and are entirely stunned by external forces. In spite of all harrowing domination and marginalisation of the masses, Ali and Hassan accept their

vulnerabilities, collect and use their resistance and capacity to go along the limiting boundaries and perform the acts of self-sacrifice however discouraging and destructive they may be.

The author depicts the worse condition of women in Afghanistan. Women are confined within the four walls of their own houses deprived of education and other facilities. The merciless killing of the woman at Ghazi stadium and young Talib's cruel behaviour toward Farzana in front of her husband in the street echoes the poor circumstances of the women in Afghanistan.

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