



IDENTITY, POWER AND SILENCE: WITNESSING HAZARA ATROCITIES IN *THE KITE RUNNER*

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Abstract

*Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic country, home to tens of different tribal groups. The Hazaras are one of Afghanistan's indigenous ethnic groups, mostly residing in central Afghanistan. Since the establishment of Afghanistan, ethnic conflicts have been a predominant challenge to building a nation-state. During the late 19th century, the Hazaras endured a systematic massacre at the hands of the Afghan state, leading to the forcible seizure of their lands by the ruling authority. Consequently, more than half of the Hazaras were killed, and the survivors were tortured, enslaved, and sold in Indian and Central Asian markets. The survivors were forced to seek refuge in neighboring countries as their ancestral territories fell under the control of a dominant ethnic group. The Hazara massacre occurred repeatedly, continued for nearly one and a half centuries, and is still ongoing in Afghanistan. As a long-standing process, it will require being investigated by international courts and contemplated as a paradigm in academic areas. This paper addresses the facts of a hidden tragedy in historical fiction and will discuss atrocities that took place in the context of genocide under international conventions and the Genocide Watch organization. This paper clarifies the Hazara genocide represented in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) and suggests the international community take preventive actions to stop it.*

Key words: *genocide, Hazara, ethnicity, Afghanistan*

Introduction

One of the major ethnic groups in Afghanistan is the Hazaras, who mostly reside in central Afghanistan and are dispersed throughout the country's northern, southern, and western provinces. "Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks are usually recognized as the largest ethnic groups (Ibrahimi, 2017, p. 3). With a sizable population in Afghanistan and nearby countries like Pakistan, Iran, and central Asian countries, the Hazaras are diverse in terms of culture. The Hazaras in Afghanistan are followers of different sects of Islam. "Some are Imami Shia, some are Ismailiya shia, a few are sunni" (Dupree, 1980, p. 60). Hazaras speak Hazaragi, a typical dialect of Persian, but names, terms, and expressions used in communication are a mixture of Persian, Turkish, and Avestan.

Genocide is coined as 'the crime of all crimes' after Rwanda's persecution in academic arguments. It is a severe act of violence against humanity. In *the Cambridge Dictionary*, the term 'genocide' is defined as "the crime of intentionally destroying part or all of a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group by killing people or by other



methods". In Article 2, *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crimes of Genocide* approved by the General Assembly, genocide is defined as follows:

Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such: a) Killing members of the group; b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group" (Genocide Convention, 1984).

This article argues that historical bias against the Hazaras has appeared since a hundred years ago. Beyond historical prejudice, intensive violence, massive target killings, and discrimination against the Hazaras have occurred in the past forty years. Relevant facts have been relatively represented in history and literature. This paper will inspect the anti-Hazara themes of *The Kite Runner* (2003) and examine Hazara Genocide considering conventions and statements against the war by international organizations. In conclusion, this study will answer the question of whether the Hazara Genocide occurred in Afghanistan or not? If yes, has it been reflected in contemporary literature? Some suggestions will be provided to scholars as well.

Theoretical Framework

Raphael Lemkin was the first scholar to conceptualize and critique genocide as the systematic destruction of a group or society. He coined the term and explains that "genocide is the destruction of a nation or of an ethnic group" (Lemkin, 1944, p.79). Martin Shaw, a British sociologist specializing in war and political violence, defines genocide as "a form of violent conflict, or war, between armed power organizations that aim to destroy civilian social groups and those groups and other actors who resist this destruction" (Shaw, 2007, p. 20). Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn conceptualize genocide as a form of mass killing, stating that "genocide is a form of one-sided mass killing in which a state or other authority intends to destroy a group, as that group and membership in it are defined by the perpetrator" (Chalk & Jonassohn, 1990, pp.4-5). Helen Fein further emphasizes the deliberate nature of genocide, observing it as purposeful action: "genocide is sustained purposeful action by a perpetrator to physically destroy a collectivity directly or indirectly, through interdiction of the biological and social reproduction of group members" (Fein, 1993, p.24). Dr. Gregory H. Stanton, Founding President of Genocide Watch, classifies genocide as "a process that develops in ten stages that are predictable but not inexorable. At each stage, preventive measures can stop it. The process is not linear. Stages may occur simultaneously. Each stage is itself a process. Logically, later stages are preceded by earlier stages. But all stages continue to



operate throughout the genocidal process” (Stanton, 2019). In 1996, he classified genocide into just eight stages. By adding two more stages, 'Discrimination' and 'Persecution', he presented the ten stages of genocide in 2019 as follows: 1) Classification, 2) Symbolization, 3) Discrimination, 4) Dehumanization, 5) Organization, 6) Polarization, 7) Preparation, 8) Persecution, 9) Extermination, and 10) Denial.

Atrocities in *The Kite Runner*

Khaled Hosseini portrays the atrocities and historical marginalization of the Hazaras in *The Kite Runner*. He highlights the systemic discrimination faced by the Hazara community in Afghanistan through the novel's plot, conflicts, themes, and character development. This study aims to examine the experiences of the Hazaras portrayed in Hosseini's work through the lens of genocide theory, particularly drawing on Gregory H. Stanton's framework, which outlines the sequential stages of violence and discrimination that may culminate in genocide.

1. Classification

Psychological warfare continued against the Hazaras for more than a hundred years. As mentioned above, a soldier insults Hassan, a teenager who does not know about the ethnic conflicts. Similarly, a teacher hates the Hazaras and Shia people when he skims the book about the history of the Hazaras, and a group of youth insults Ali with pejorative words. In *The Kite Runner* Hazaras are classified as “Others” in Afghanistan. As mentioned above, the first stage of genocide is the classification of the people into “us and them”. The classification of the Hazaras portrayed in Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* in Hazara and Pashtun, Shia and Sunny, upper class and lower class, master and slave, Persian speaker and Pashto speaker forms. Amir reads a history book that one chapter is dedicated to the Hazaras. “The book said that my people had killed the Hazaras, driven them from their lands, burned their homes, and sold their women” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 9). In general, classification of Hazara community has two cultural categories: Religion and race. Louis Dupree writes in *Afghanistan* “non-Hazara Afghans use two counts against the Hazara: 1) they are physically Mongoloid and, by tradition, descendants of the destructive army of Genghis Khan; 2) most are Shi'a Muslims” (Dupree, 1980, p.161). Religious factors perpetuated the ongoing persecution and violence against the Hazaras in Afghanistan.

2. Symbolization

Hassan and his father, Ali, are Hazara characters in *The Kite Runner*, symbolized as a poor and marginalized ethnic group. Hazara was a symbol of poverty, betrayal, infidelity, and disloyalty. The word 'Hazara' was a humiliating adjective. In chapter one, Hassan and Amir, the protagonists of the novel, go to the cinema, and a soldier humiliates Hassan because he is a Hazara. The soldier barks at Hassan, offensively saying:



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. Poked it in and out. In and out. 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.7).

Hassan supports Amir bravely against Assef. He protects Amir as his friend and puts himself at risk, but Amir recognizes Hassan and his father as members of the lower class and a symbol of poverty. He regrets having admitted Hassan to play with him.

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. 41)

Aseef reveals his prejudice and anger towards Hazaras. He asks Amir why you let the Hazaras touch you. "How can you talk to him, play with him, let him touch you?" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 41). Amir believes that the Hazaras are a despised group of people. The history has been written in such a way that the Hazaras should always be deprived and victims of discrimination. The author highlights the stereotype of Afghans or non-Hazaras in Amir's thoughts. Every non-Hazara believes that the Hazaras do not deserve a higher position in Afghanistan. "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" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 25). Amir also had stereotypical perspectives toward their friend Hassan.

3. Discrimination

Since the 19th century, there has been discrimination against the Hazaras, although it has lately become more systematic. Still, extremist mullahs that preach Salafism and Deobandi thoughts speak against the Hazaras and threaten them with death and destruction. Amir reads a history book and finds more details and the reasons for Hazara's massacres in the 19th century.

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 were Sunni Muslims, while Hazaras were Shi'a. (Hosseini, 2003, p. 9)



Regarding the Hazara genocide, Ahmed Rashid writes, “Within hours of taking the city, Taliban mullahs were proclaiming from the city's mosques that the city's Shia had three choices: convert to Sunni Islam, leave for Shia Iran, or die. All prayer services conducted by the Shia in mosques were banned” (Rashid, 2010, p. 74). In various chapters of *The Kite Runner*, the Hazaras’ massacre in Mazar-i-Sharif is narrated by Amir: “A few weeks later, the Taliban banned kite fighting. And two years later, in 1998, they massacred the Hazaras in Mazar-i-Sharif” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 213). After many years, Amir recalls that the Massacre of Hazaras was announced in newspapers. He says, “I had read about the Hazara massacre in Mazar-i-Sharif in the papers. It had happened just after the Taliban took over Mazar, one of the last cities to fall. I remembered Soraya handing me the article over breakfast, her face bloodless” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 277). Hosseini has subtly revealed the Hazara genocide in his work.

4. Dehumanization

For a long time, there was extensive propaganda against the Hazaras by the Afghan state. Cultural institutions such as mosques, schools, and madrasas were besieged to dehumanize the Hazaras. Moreover, mullahs, teachers, students, shopkeepers, farmers, and all different classes of society rebuked the Hazara boys and girls for more than one hundred and thirty years. “People called Hazaras *mice-eating, flat-nosed, load-carrying donkeys*. I had heard some of the kids in the neighbourhood yell those names to Hassan” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 9). Because they were Shia Muslims and had Mongoloid visages, the Hazaras were systematically dehumanized at different levels of society.

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. (Hosseini, 2003, p. 10)

In the following paragraph, non-Hazara youth insult, chase, and humiliate Ali, a Hazara-aged man. They harass him and equate him to animals. “They called him ‘flat-nosed’ because of Ali and Hassan’s characteristic Hazara Mongoloid features” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 9). The author explains that hatred against Ali and Hassan, cursing them as mouse eaters, and calling them demons is common in society. Amir reads some pejorative words in the book on Hazara's history.

The book said a lot of things I didn’t know, things my teachers hadn’t mentioned. Things Baba hadn’t mentioned either. It also said some things 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. (Hosseini, 2003, p. 9)



Hosseini represents the dehumanization of the Hazaras as the social behavior of teenagers in Kabul city, as follows:

The real trouble was with the older kids. 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?”(Hosseini, 2003, p. 9).

Assef wants to advise president Mohammad Daoud Khan for killing all the Hazaras of Afghanistan. He says, “I’ll ask the president to do what the king didn’t have the *quwat* to do. To rid Afghanistan of all the dirty, *kasseef* Hazaras”(Hosseini, 2003, p. 40). Afghan kings and rulers orchestrated the systematic oppression and massacre of the Hazara people over various periods of time.

5. Organization

Ahmed Rashid (2012) notes that the Taliban organized a formal Hazara mass killing for two hours in Mazar-i-Sharif, in 1998. In the novel, Assef a member of the Taliban compares the Hazaras to dogs and says that we chased the Hazaras door to door in the city and immediately shot them wherever we found them. He explains the incidents as below: “We left the bodies in the streets, and if their families tried to sneak out to drag them back into their homes, we’d shoot them too. We left them in the streets for days. We left them for the dogs. Dog meat for dogs” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 277). *The Hazara Inquiry*(2022) shows, nearly a hundred suicide attacks against Hazaras were organized only in Afghanistan in the last ten years. According to the report, “..in 2018, UNAMA identified 19 incidents perpetrated by ISIS-K that led to 747 civilian casualties – 233 killed and 524 injured. In 2019, there were 10 incidents resulting in 485 civilian casualties – 117 killed and 368 injured” (The Hazara Inquiry, 2022). It indicates that the Hazara massacre never stopped since the nineteenth century.

6. Polarization

Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan has polarized the society as Shia and Sunni. The Hazaras are polarized as Shiites, infidels, and unreal Muslims. In his novel, Hosseini underlines, “Pashtuns were Sunni Muslims, while Hazaras were Shi’a” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 9). The Taliban in Mazar-i-Sharif asked the Hazaras to convert from their religion or must be killed. They propagated against the Shia and introduced them as unbelievers. In the 2019 report of the US State Department, it is clarified that Shia Hazaras as a religious minority are facing danger in Afghanistan.

7. Preparation

The ethnic cleansing of Hazaras is portrayed in different chapters of *The Kite Runner*. According to Assef, non-Pushtuns should be expelled from Afghanistan since it is the



motherland of the Pashtun people. He prepares himself for ethnic cleansing and mass killing of an ethnic group.

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. “Afghanistan for Pashtuns, I say. That’s my vision. (Hosseini, 2003, p. 40)

In February 1993, thousands of Hazara people were massacred by Majaheedin in the Afshar suburb of Kabul. Afghan Justice Project reports, “Massoud also convened a meeting in the Hotel Intercontinental on the second day of the operation, February 12, attended by military commanders and political figures, including Rabbani, Sayyaf, and Fahim.” (Afghan Justice Project, p.74). This meeting was very similar to the Wansee conference in preparation for the final solution.

8. Persecution

Persecution of the Hazaras is a thick chapter of the history of Afghanistan. It is presented in *The Kite Runner* in the role of many characters. The antagonist of the story, Assef has a racist ideology like Adolf Hitler. He has ethnic cleansing of Hazaras in his mind. He praises the Mazar-i-Sharif massacre and expresses his hatred against the Hazaras. He stated that he supports ethnic cleansing and thinks that Afghanistan should be rid of other ethnic groups that have caused harm to the country. The Hazaras were persecuted by members of various social strata, including kings, soldiers, teachers, police, clerics, and ordinary citizens. In the following quotation, Assef a symbol of tribalism persecutes Hassan. Amir says,

We crossed the residential street and were trekking through a barren patch of rough land that led to the hill when, suddenly, a rock struck Hassan in the back. We whirled around and my heart dropped. Assef and two of his friends, Wali and Kamal, were approaching us. (Hosseini, 2003, p.37)

Assef is a Pashtun character, an anti-Hazara teenager, and known as a sociopath figure in this novel. He is a follower of Adolf Hitler (1889 –1945) dictator of Germany, the leader of Nazi Party. Not only Assef but his friends also follow the same ideology. Hosseini depicts Hazara persecution in the following quotation:

Of all the neighbourhood boys who tortured Ali, Assef was by far the most relentless. He was, in fact, the originator of the Babalu jeer, *Hey, Babalu, who did you eat today? Huh? Come on, Babalu, give us a smile!* And on days when he felt particularly inspired, he spiced up his



badgering a little, *Hey, you flat-nosed Babalu, who did you eat today?*

Tell us, you slant-eyed donkey! (Hosseini, 2003, p.38)

Regarding the Hazaras persecution, Ahmad Rashid writes, “Thousands of Hazaras were taken to Mazar jail and when it was full, they were dumped in containers which were locked and the prisoners allowed suffocating. Some containers were taken to the Dasht-e-Laili desert outside Mazar and the inmates massacred there” (Rashid, 2010. p.74). Assef is very pleased with Daoud Khan's arrival as president. He tells his friends that the Shah has gone and Muhammad Daoud Khan who is my father's friend has come to power. Daoud Khan will remove the Hazaras from Afghanistan and this land belongs only to the Pashtuns. His mother had already taught him that he should do the same as Hitler and destroy the Hazara community in Afghanistan. He will meet Daoud Khan and share his fascist ideology with him regarding the extermination of the Hazaras in Afghanistan.

Do you know what I will tell Daoud Khan the next time he comes to our house for dinner?” Assef said. “I’m going to have a little chat with him, man to man, *mard to mard*. Tell him what I told my mother. About Hitler. Now, there was a leader. A great leader. (Hosseini, 2003, p.39).

Khililzad notes that Daoud was an abnormal person in terms of personality. He writes, “Daoud then moved toward the truck driver and bit off his left ear. Blood ran down his cheek and neck. The ear, bloodied and covered in spittle and dust, lay on the side of the road” (Khalilzad, 2016, p.15). He, as Prime Minister of Afghanistan, used to bite people like a wild animal and was very violent towards the citizens. Assef knows that a cruel man like Daoud Khan would be able to persecute the Hazaras in Afghanistan. “A man with vision. I’ll tell Daoud Khan to remember that if they had let Hitler finish what he had started, the world be a better place now” (Hosseini, 2003, p.40). It was the reason for Assef's happiness.

Assef also believes that Hazaras should leave Afghanistan because it is the land of a particular ethnic group. “Afghanistan for Pashtuns, I say. That’s my vision” (Hosseini, 2003, p.40). Assef is very angry that Hitler's vision has not been implemented in the world. He regrets why they did not act like Hitler in Afghanistan. He says it is too late. “Assef shifted his gaze to me again. He looked like someone coming out of a good dream. “Too late for Hitler,” he said. “But not for us.” (Hosseini, 2003, p.40). Assef's racist view as a young Pashtun towards the Hazaras is very appalling. He intends for Daoud Khan to expel the Hazara community with all his might. He considers the Hazara people impure, just as Hitler considered Jews and gypsies to be impure and useless. “He reached for something from the back pocket of his jeans. “I’ll ask the president to do what the king didn’t have the quwat to do. To rid Afghanistan of all the dirty, kasseef Hazaras” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 40). He accused Amir and his father of being



friends with a Hazara. He says that Hazaras should live in Hazarajat (Hazaristan), a remote area far away from Kabul and big cities.

Assef slipped on the brass knuckles. Gave me an icy look. "You're part of the problem, Amir. If idiots like you and your father didn't take these people in, we'd be rid of them by now. They'd all just go rot in Hazarajat where they belong. You're a disgrace to Afghanistan". (Hosseini, 2003, p.42)

Hosseini characterizes Amir through his dialogue as a member of the Taliban. Many years later, when Amir decides to find out about Sohrab, he plays the role of a Taliban member. He asks himself, "What mission is that?" I heard myself say. "Stoning adulter-ers? Raping children? Flogging women for wearing high heels? Massacring Hazaras? All in the name of Islam?" The words spilled suddenly and unexpectedly and came out before I could yank the leash(Hosseini, 2003, p. 284).Hazaras' persecution was a systematic strategy employed by the Taliban in Afghanistan.

9. Extermination

In *The Kite Runner*, the violence inflicted upon the Hazaras aligns closely with all ten stages of genocide as outlined in Gregory H. Stanton's framework. The sequence of the events explains that the Hazaras have been targeted systematically because they were Hazara, Shia, Persian speakers, and an aboriginal ethnic group in Afghanistan. Under state propagation, Hazaras were introduced as infidels, traitors, poor, filthy, and deserving of extermination. In the story, Assef claims the extermination of the Hazaras and frequently appreciates ethnic cleansing. "Assef's face brightened. 'Ethnic cleansing. I like it. I like the sound of it'"(Hosseini, 2003, p.285).Afghan states propagated that Hazaras are not real Muslims, deflected our religion, and tainted our blood and homeland.

10. Denial

The massacre of Hazaras in the 19th and 20th centuries was interpreted as a hoax and denied by the state of Afghanistan. Taliban also denies the Hazara genocide in Yakaolang, Mirzaolang, Qizil Abad, Ghazni, and Mazar Sharif. The investigation is prohibited on this issue in Afghanistan.

Result and Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the Hazaras, as a stateless nation, have been subjected to systematic discrimination, violence, forced migration, mass killings, and forms of state terrorism. Their ethnic identity has rendered them a subaltern community for more than one and a half centuries. While violence against the Hazaras has been extensively documented in historical accounts, it has received comparatively little attention in literary representations. Khaled Hosseini is among the few authors who have foregrounded the Hazara experience, most notably in his acclaimed novel *The Kite Runner*. The discussion of this research can be summarized as follows:



1. The Hazaras are aboriginals, one of the major ethnic groups in Afghanistan, and have been the subject of discrimination and genocide throughout history.
2. Hazara genocide is a long-standing process, less reflected in history and literature yet.
3. Khaled Hosseini references genocide, persecution, and discrimination against the Hazaras in *The Kite Runner*.
4. Hazara Genocide is ongoing and denied in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

Khalid Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* is a popular novel that reveals the historical ethnic conflicts in Afghanistan. Hosseini represents the historical and social realities of Afghanistan and highlights ethnicity as a challenge to nation-state building in Afghanistan. The story reveals that civil wars, crises, and political problems are rooted in ethnic conflicts. Hazara genocide is represented in *The Kite Runner* implicitly. According to Dr. Stanton's classification, Hazaras are still victims of ongoing genocide in Afghanistan. The readers are suggested to inquire about the Hazara genocide in Afghanistan.

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