

Masculinity, War and the Politics of Ethnic Identity: A Study of Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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Abstract: This paper explores the proximity between masculinity and war, and examines how these two concepts are related to the politics of ethnicity-based identity through a study of Khaled Hosseini's debut novel, *The Kite Runner*. The novel portrays the plight of the various marginalised sections in the war-ravaged Afghanistan. However, a close reading of the novel exposes the novelist's complicity in the hegemonic order which has perpetuated the exploitation of the marginalised, and the novel's consequent failure to offer any alternative to the violent, exploitative space, created by masculinity and war.

Keywords: Masculinity, War, Ethnicity, Khaled Hosseini

There is a dialectical relationship between masculinity and war. War creates a fertile ground for the flourishing of the masculine traits. Similarly, an over glorified masculinity prepares the ground for war. Khaled Hosseini, the Afghanistan-born American novelist's debut novel, *The Kite Runner* (2003) can be read as an interesting case study for exploring this relationship between masculinity and war. Hosseini's novel also reflects how the concepts of masculinity and war are closely related to the politics of ethnicity-based identity. *The Kite Runner* depicts the victimisation of ethnic minorities, women and children in a war-ravaged, male-dominated society. However, Hosseini's novel cannot be considered as a radical critique of the dominant, exploitative order. By portraying the ethnic minorities and women in stereotypical terms as weak and passive, and as almost absent figures, the novelist reinforces the same ideological presuppositions which help the racist, patriarchal society to maintain its hegemony over the marginalized. *The Kite Runner* encapsulates a very turbulent period of modern Afghan history, starting with the overthrow of monarchy and invasion of the Soviets, and ending with the rise of the Taliban. The novel intertwines the personal life of Amir, the son of an wealthy Afghan businessman with the violent political events of the twentieth-century Afghanistan. In the early part of the novel, Amir is shown enjoying a fun-filled childhood in the company of Hassan, the son of the family's long-time, trusted servant, Ali. However, Amir shares a tensed relationship with his father, whom he calls "Baba". Though Amir constantly seeks the attention and affection of Baba, he feels neglected. Baba is often critical of Amir since he considers the latter as weak and effeminate. The tension in the father-son relationship eases a bit when Amir wins the kite-fighting tournament. However, Amir's happiness after the win lasts only for a few moments since his relationship with Hassan

changes for the worse immediately after the competition gets over. When Hassan runs after the last cut kite for the sake of Amir since it is treated as a coveted trophy, he finds himself trapped by a gang of three boys in a narrow alley, and gets raped by the leader of the gang, a local bully called Assef. Though Amir witnesses the incident from a distance, he does not make any attempt to protect Hassan out of fear. Instead, to get rid of a constant sense of guilt in the presence of Hassan, Amir falsely accuses the latter of theft, and ultimately forces Hassan and Ali to leave his house.

In the wake of the Soviet invasion, life in Afghanistan becomes difficult for wealthy businessmen like Baba, and hence, Amir along with Baba leaves for Pakistan as refugees and finally settles down in California, USA. Amir becomes a writer, and leads a relatively stable life in USA though, in the meantime, his father dies of cancer, and fails to have a child out of his marriage with Soraya, the daughter of another Afghan refugee family. Amir's stable life gets terribly shaken when he suddenly receives a phone call from Rahim Khan, Baba's best friend. Rahim Khan urges Amir to come back to Afghanistan and make amends in life. It is through Rahim Khan, Amir discovers the hard fact that Hassan is his half-brother. Hassan is the illegitimate child of Baba and Ali's wife, Shanaubar. Amir also comes to know how Hassan and his wife were brutally killed by the Taliban, and Hassan's son, Sohrab has been held captive and sexually exploited by a Taliban officer, who coincidentally is none other than Assef. Without caring for his own life, Amir directly takes on Assef and rescues Sohrab. After a series of frustrating legal battles, Amir finally succeeds in taking Sohrab to California, and adopts the anguished child as his son. Hosseini portrays a masculinity-obsessed, war-torn society in his novel. However, masculinity in the novel does not just suggest the absence of the so-called "soft" feminine qualities; it is also associated with a particular ethnic identity. Though Afghanistan is a multiethnic society, the Pashtuns who practice Sunni Islam are the dominant sect in Afghanistan. On the other hand, the Hazaras who identify as Shiite are a small ethnic group. Unlike the Pashtuns who have always enjoyed a dominant position in the Afghan political and economic spheres, the Hazaras have occupied the lower stratum in the Afghan society, and throughout centuries, they have been persecuted by the ruling elite, especially the Pashtuns. Amir's description of his father as "a force of nature, a towering Pashtun specimen with a thick beard, a wayward crop of curly brown hair as unruly as the man himself, hands that looked capable of uprooting a willow tree ..." makes it clear that it is not only the physical attributes but also his Pashtun identity which define Baba as an assertive masculine figure.

A masculinity-conscious society uses various strategies to assert a masculine identity, and promotion of aggressive sports is one of those. In her essay, "Fight Club: Historicizing the Rhetoric of Masculinity, Violence and Sentimentality", Suzanne Clark discusses how aggressive sports like boxing were promoted in post-Vietnam American society to

eliminate “the dangers of feminine sentiment and a softening of manliness”. Similarly, in *The Kite Runner*, one can find a society which glorifies masculinity to such an extent that it becomes obsessive. Baba as the epitome of an aggressive masculinity expresses his disappointment with Amir because of the latter's preference for poetry books to sports: “Real men did not read poetry and God forbid they should ever write it! Real men – real boys – played soccer just as Baba had when he had been young”. Amir does not fit in Baba's category of “real men” due to his lack of interest in sports like soccer, and hence, Baba finds “something missing” in Amir. Joshua Goldstein in his book, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice-Versa* (2001) rightly says that in a masculinity-obsessed society, war or any kind of competition is constructed as a signifier of manhood or masculinity. Victory is a confirmation of male identity, whereas defeat is equated with emasculation. Amir's desperation to win the kite fighting competition is understandable since he is aware of the fact that the win would help him to regain some esteem in his father's eyes. It is this burden of masculinity which indirectly leads Amir to betray Hassan. Since admitting his failure to save Hassan from the clutches of Assef and his gang would make everyone, especially his father question his masculinity, Amir does not share the horrible incident with anyone, and instead, prefers to cut off his relationship with Hassan. It is true that Amir as a sensitive person bears the burden of a guilt-ridden conscience throughout his life for betraying Hassan. Moreover, he does not share the assertive masculine traits of his father. However, Amir never questions the authority of his father, and in fact, exhibits admiration for Baba's strong personality.

The Afghan nation has not only been conceived as a male-dominated space shaped by military values, it is also a space which exhibits strong racial prejudice against the minorities, especially the Hazaras. The persecution of the Hazaras continues during the Taliban rule as well since most of the Taliban leaders are Pashtuns. The marginalization of the Hazaras has been made possible not only through physical violence but also through the dissemination of racist ideas at the ideological level. Amir, the narrator says, “For years, that was all I knew about the Hazaras, that they were Mogul descendants, and they looked a little like Chinese people. School textbooks barely mentioned them and referred to their ancestry only in passing.” The novel shows how Amir's family servants Ali, a Hazara and Hassan have been subject to constant humiliation due to their ethnic identity. Though Baba and Ali grow up together as playmates, “in none of his stories did Baba ever refer to Ali as his friend”. In fact, Ali's Polio-infected fragile physique is symptomatic of the poor socio-political and economic existence of the Hazaras in the Afghan society. Steven Lester Gardiner, a critic argues, “Soldierly masculinity is found precisely in that majority of cultures that participate in the war system”. Assef, the epitome of “soldierly masculinity” is more vociferous

in his prejudice against the Hazaras. Assef refers to Hassan and says, "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*... Afghanistan for Pashtuns, I say." Assef also describes with a sense of pride how Hazaras were massacred by the Taliban in August, 1998 at Mazar-i-Sharif.

The violence which becomes intense after the rise of the Taliban has its roots in the Pashtuns-dominated traditional Afghan society itself. The repressive ideology of the Taliban is merely an extension of the dominant ideology, represented by the Pashtuns. Ahmed Rashid in his book, *Taliban: The Story of the Afghan Warlords* (2001) explores the ethnicity-based exploitation in the Afghan society, and argues that since most of the Taliban leaders are from the Pashtun tribe, "Taliban punishments were in fact largely drawn from Pashtunwali rather than the Sharia ...". Though the entire Afghan society is a victim of the war, it is the marginalized sections, especially the Hazaras, women and children who mostly bear the brunt of the conflict. In *The Kite Runner*, almost every character irrespective of his or her ethnic identity suffers due to the war. People like Baba and General Taheri lose their dominant positions, and are forced to migrate to America. But it is Ali, a Hazara who dies in a land mine. Similarly, Hassan, a half Hazara is brutally killed by the Taliban, and Hassan's son gets sexually exploited by Assef, the Taliban leader. Thus the novel projects the Hazaras as the direct victims of war. When Amir comes back from America to Afghanistan to rescue Sohrab, he can see only "RUBBLE AND BEGGARS ... And the beggars were mostly children now, thin and grim-faced, some no older than five or six. They sat in the laps of their burqua-clad mothers alongside gutters at busy street corners ..." Along with the ethnic minorities and women, children are the most exploited lot in the war-ravaged Afghanistan. A UNICEF survey of Kabul's children found that most children had witnessed extreme violence and did not expect to survive (Rashid, 109). Hosseini portrays the plight of the Afghan children through the agonising story of Sohrab.

Though Hosseini succeeds in depicting the plight of the marginalised sections, he cannot be celebrated as a champion of the down-trodden. In *The Kite Runner*, women are almost absent figures. Amir's mother, though highly educated, is dead. Hassan's mother, Shanaubar ran off with a clan of travelling singers and dancers, and hence, "Hassan never talked about his mother as if she had never existed". In any traditional male-dominated society, women are assigned only support roles such as nurse, mother or wife. It suggests how femininity is constructed to reinforce "man as warrior" construction. Motherhood has been used as an important trope in the novel. Since Amir's mother dies during childbirth, her memory has been completely erased. Shanaubar remains a mystery till she comes back and assumes motherhood for nurturing Hassan's son. So, motherhood becomes a means for her redemption. Soraya Taheri is initially portrayed

as a rebellious woman. She elopes with an Afghan man before her marriage with Amir. However, Soraya, “the rebel” suffers from a constant lack due to her inability to give birth to a child. She feels complete only after adopting Sohrab as a son. Moreover, Soraya's act of rebellion does not take place in Afghanistan, but in relatively liberal Virginia, United States of America.

Hosseini has shown the repressive nature of heterosexual relationships in a male-dominated society through the relationship between Soraya's parents, General Taheri and Jamila. Though Jamila can sing well, she was forbidden to sing after marriage. That is why, Amir, the narrator says, “Everywoman needed a husband. Even if he had silenced the song in her”. However, surprisingly, the novel remains silent about the nature of the relationship between Baba and Shanaubar. Moreover, the novel simply glosses over the circumstances under which Shanaubar leaves her new-born baby and turns into a gypsy. It reflects how the novelist himself is not immune to the racist ideology. The novelist's sympathies are with Jamila, a Pashtun woman, whereas Shanaubar, a Hazara fails to receive any such sympathy. Instead, she has been portrayed in a negative light due to her failure to live upto the image of the “ideal” mother. Moreover, the novel's depiction of the Hazara characters in stereotypical terms is very problematic. Ali is portrayed as physically deformed and sterile. Similarly, Hassan, a half Hazara is cleft-lipped. Thus, the portrayal of Hazaras as weak and submissive, in a way, justifies the hegemony of the Pashtuns in Afghan civil and political spheres.

The Kite Runner portrays a very sinister world where there seems to be no possibility for an alternative space. The only space which is posited as an alternative by Hosseini is America. According to Baba, “There are only three real men in this world ... America, the brash savior, Britain and Israel ... The rest of them ... they're like gossiping old women”. Despite the fact that the three countries eulogized by Baba have openly exhibited imperialistic ambitions, and imperialism is very much a masculine enterprise, the novel is no where critical of these nations. Instead, it is shown that people like Baba and General Taheri who have been rendered homeless and jobless in war-torn Afghanistan can lead a relatively stable life in America. Kite fighting has been banned in Afghanistan by the Taliban, but Sohrab can breathe fresh air of freedom and have a new lease of life by flying kites in America. However, this positioning of America by the writer as the alternative space exhibits nothing but a West-centric discourse.

Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the Taliban emerged as a resistance movement aiming to drive out the Soviet troops from Afghanistan. However, the rise of the Taliban as a powerful force would have been impossible without the financial and military support provided by America. Hence, it would not be an oversimplification to say that America has a major role behind the present state of Afghanistan.

Hosseini's uncritical projection of America as the "savior" is in complete opposition to Anand Gopal's strong indictment of the interventionist politics of America in the name of fighting terror and rebuilding a new Afghan nation. In his book, *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban and the War through Afghan Eyes* (2014), Gopal through his investigative journalistic accounts has exposed the complete failure of the West, especially America in the Afghan nation-building process. Moreover, Hosseini has simply glossed over the widespread racial and class-based exploitation present in the American society. Instead of giving any kind of insight into the troubles faced by the Afghan refugees in America, *The Kite Runner* uncritically portrays America as "the land of opportunities". Thus, instead of meaningfully engaging with the neo-colonial relationship between Afghanistan and America, Hosseini takes recourse to a West-centric discourse, and posits America as the perfect alternative to a "vilified" Afghanistan.

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