

## **Ethnicity and Power Relations in Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner: A Critical Discourse Analysis**

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### **Abstract**

*Ethnicity can be considered as the sub-division of Racism by which some people consider themselves as superior and others as inferior. Ethnicity is the social grouping of people who have some common attributes based on geography but they may vary on the basis of culture, language and customs. Ethnicity is a worldwide issue which has a long history and deep roots in various parts of the world including Islamic countries such as Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a multiethnic group and there is major 14 ethnic groups with an approximate division of these ethnic groups into Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek and others. The present study is the study of ethnicity in Afghanistan as highlighted in the novel *The Kite Runner* (2003) written by an Afghan-American writer Khaled Hosseini. This research work critically analyzes the role of language and discourse in identifying social and cultural problems of ethnicity along with power relations, and resultant oppression with reference to this novel. Fairclough's 3D model of Critical Discourse Analysis (1995) and Van Dijk's (2008) model of discursive analysis have been applied for this qualitative research. The findings reveal that Khaled Hosseini has used language as a medium for the identification of social problems related to ethnicity between Sunni Pashtuns and Shi'a Hazara, and associated power relations practiced in Afghanistan.*

**Keywords:** *Ethnicity, power relation, The Kite Runner, Pashtun, Hazara, CDA*

### **Introduction**

Racism is a thought system based on the physical appearance, ethnicity, and nationality of people by which some people consider themselves as superior and others as inferior. Racism and ethnicity are

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overlapping concepts; however, ethnicity is a sub-class of racism. In fact, ethnicity means a group of people who are of the same “origin, history, and values” (Yetman, 1999) but with different culture, language and religion. In most of the countries, there are present various ethnic groups. An example is Afghanistan. The novel *The Kite Runner* (2003) by Khaled Hosseini presents two Afghan ethnic groups, Pashtun and Hazara with social, cultural, and religious conflicts. This novel has a great impact on people all across the world. Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan- American writer; however, his writings influence not only one culture but many others associated with his stories.

This novel foreground an unforgettable and heartbreaking story of two boys, Amir and Hassan, who have different ethnic roots. Amir and his rich father are from the dominant Pashtuns while Hassan and his father, Ali are Shi'a Muslim and ethnic Hazara group. Hazaras are considered inferior to Pashtuns but despite this fact, Amir and Hassan are close friends cum brothers. However, some incidents resulted in creating a distance between these friends and resultantly Hassan had to suffer. With the invasion of Soviet Union, Amir and his father Baba had to move America. At the end, Amir comes back to Afghanistan to find Hassan's son Sohrab and takes him to America. The writer has depicted the sufferings that the Shia ethnic Hazaras face due to the dominant Pashtuns. The ethnic and social discrimination mainly between Sunni Pashtun and Shi'a Hazara is noteworthy here. It is stated with astonishing twists and turns through language as discourse.

This study attempts to unfold the social issues including ethnicity, dominance and power relations presented through language in the text. It is investigated here how the writer has highlighted these issues with the aid of language and text. It correlates with an article “Blend of Ethics, Politics and Stylistics in Trauma Narrative” (Ahmad et al., 2021) where the political views are presented via stylistics and in this study the politics is highlighted via linguistic aspects of the text with embedded discourse in it. The main objective of this study is to explore how language can be the source to identify ethnicity, power, dominance, racism and similar social problems in a society. The main research question is how has Khaled Hosseini uses language as a discursive tool to identify ethnic power relations? This study investigates how the writer has used language to highlight the social problems and practices in Afghanistan among different ethnic groups involved in ethnic warfare.

One application of critical discourse analysis is to closely analyze the oral or written text to explore social and political issues in a society. But the analysis of the text cannot be done in isolation; rather the larger context in which text is located must be taken into account as an authentic text is produced and read in real world context with its all complexity, not in isolation (Huckin, 1997). It signifies that “Language is embodiment of traditions, standards and beliefs of a particular society” (Ilyas et al., 2020). CDA is used as a tool for the linguistic analysis of text here. The writer has skillfully used language for the representation of ethnicity and power relations. This novel brings for the bitter reality of oppression and dominance related to ethnicity knitted in the text. This research focuses on those aspects of language and discourse that have been used by the writer to explore and identify the social and cultural issues in war ridden Afghanistan rooted in ethnicity.

### **Literature Review**

One relevant study is “The Role of Linguistic Devices in Representing Ethnicity in *The Kite Runner*” (Asghar et al, 2013). Here, the suffering of the ethnic group Hazara is represented by using different linguistic devices for the representation of ethnicity and culture, thus an intricate story of oppression and dominance is presented in the novel. The language tools of deletion and omission are also employed in the novel.

One associated work is “Representation of Power Relationships in *The Kite Runner*” (Malik & Murtaza, 2013). This detailed analysis revealed that the linguistic devices have played a crucial role in linguistic manipulation for the construction of reality to support political objectives of Western Agenda in Afghanistan. He used foregrounding, backgrounding, presupposition for this purpose.

Another relevant study is “*The Kite Runner* and the Problem of Racism and Ethnicity” (Hosseini et al., 2016). Here, Afghan people and their ethnic attitudes are analyzed through Feagin’s theory of denial of human difference. It is established that the biological difference is just an excuse for one tribe to gain control over the other and for egotistic goals. The major findings demand for a solution to the problem rather than a straight forward denial of the problem in a country with many ethnic identities.

One more associated study is “A Study of Ethnicity in Afghanistan in Light of *The Kite Runner*” (Khan et al., 2019). The study explores the issue of ethnicity in Afghanistan in *The Kite Runner*. They declare this novel as a picture of the constructed ethnicity between so-called extremist Pashtuns and a group of the Hazaras. It applies Norman Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis as a theory and declares this novel as fictitious and constructed work, so the discourse-producer and his stance regarding the constructed ethnicity are challenged.

### **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

The present research is qualitative and based on the Critical Discourse Analysis both as theory and as a method. Van Dijk model of CDA (2008) is used for exploration of language as discourse in the novel *The Kite Runner* (2003) by Khalid Hosseni. He suggested that Critical Discourse Analysis is a type of discourse analysis which studies the ways in which social power abuse, inequality and dominance is enacted, produced as well as resisted by text in political and social context (Van Dijk, 2008).

Fairclough's 3D model of CDA (1995) is used to analyze the text mainly at three levels: Textual analysis, Discourse practice and social practice. The textual analysis is based on linguistic features including vocabulary and grammar. The discursive analysis works on to identify discourse in the use of certain language. The social practice analysis unravels the hidden ideologies, power relations and the hegemonic patterns.

Data for this research paper is collected from an Afghan-American novelist Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner*. The entire novel is not being analyzed and certain parts of the novel are selected for analysis where language strings have a scope of CDA exploration. The main focus for choosing these parts is to work on those sentences or paragraphs in which the writer has used language as discourse to highlight the ethnicity among Pashtun and Hazara along with power relations and associated oppression in Afghan society.

### **Data Analysis (Discussion)**

Afghanistan is well known as “a country comprised of various groups with differing cultural traits ...” (Larry, 1998). In Afghanistan,

there remains a conflict based on ethnicity and power relations among different ethnic groups. The present research analyzes Khaled Hosseini's attempt to use text as a source of representation and identification of social problems including particularly ethnicity along with power relations and oppression of one group against the other. The core objective of this research paper is to study the discrimination between ethnic groups mainly Sunni Pashtun and Shi'a Hazara which are mentioned in Khaled Hosseini's novel. This study focuses on the racist and ethnic behavior of Sunni Pashtun and Shi'a Hazara.

In Afghanistan when its population is approximately 40 million, there are many different ethnic groups. These ethnic groups mainly include Pashtun, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmens, Aimak, Nuristani, and Balochi. The plot revolves around Afghanistan and America, and two ethnic groups of Pashtun and Hazara. As Pashtuns are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, it means they are in the majority, so they exercise their power and influence in society. In contrast, the Hazara are minority, less in number and it also implies their lower political, economic, and social power; they are not considered a part of the community rather they are treated as aliens who are not treated as equal human beings. These facts could be seen clearly through the language of the text of the novel. Hassan and his father Ali, who belong to the ethnic group Hazara, are treated inhumanly by Pashtuns.

The writer has successfully used language to represent different characters such as the characters of Baba, Amir, Hassan, and Ali for the framing of different ethnic, religious, and economic fragmentation in Afghanistan. For example, Baba and Amir belong to Sunni Pashtun ethnic group and a rich family, live in a large house while Hassan and Ali are Shi'a Hazara and they belong to a poor family, work as servants in Baba's house, lives in a small quarter at Baba's place. The features of the society that all these four characters represent are given in the table below:

<b>Baba and Amir</b>	<b>Hassan and Ali</b>
Pashtun	Hazara
Sunni Muslim	Shi'a Muslim
Rich	Poor

Majority	Minority
Powerful	Powerless
Both physically fit	Face physical deformation
Dominant one	Suppressed one

When we critically analyze the language of the text, it can be viewed clearly how Hazaras are treated inhumanely by Pashtuns. Because of Ali's physical appearance and being Hazara, the children in the neighborhood mocked him by saying: "Who did you eat, you flat-nosed Babalu?" (Hosseini, 2003). The reason behind why they called him "flat-nosed" was the characteristic Hazara features that Ali and Hassan possessed. They were suppressed just due to their difference in ethnic identity and because they were considered powerless so they cannot do anything about it. This is not that they are treated in such a bad way just presently rather in history Hazaras have suffered a lot due to Pashtun's misconduct and oppression. This is also mentioned in the novel's text when Amir was in Baba's study and he found one of his mother's old history books with a chapter on Hazara. Amir reads in the book that Hazaras had been oppressed and persecuted by his people, the Pashtuns. In the 19th century, when the Hazaras tried to rise for their rights against Pashtuns, again Pashtuns "suppressed them with dreadful violence". The Pashtuns expelled Hazaras from their lands, sold their women, burned their properties, and violently killed them, and the reason behind their violent acts was ethnicity.

Furthermore, Amir added that he did not know about all this because his teachers and even Baba had not mentioned them before and only what he knew about Hazaras was: "People called Hazaras mice-eating, flat-nosed, load-carrying donkeys" (Hosseini, 2003). The writer has used the term "stunned" while describing the reaction of Amir because Hazaras were not considered worthwhile to be talked with. So, a complete chapter in the history book was dedicated to them. In CDA, a scheme of argumentation is used in which certain actors or characters are justified with positive and negative attributes (Wodak, 2001) and thus the positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation are reproduced (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001). This is visible clearly in the language used by the writer in the novel. When referring to Pashtuns, Amir uses the term

“my people” while using the term Hazaras for Hassan’s people. Amir’s teacher also wrinkled his nose when he said Shi’a while pointing toward Hazaras as if it was some kind of disease. This is visible from the language of the text that from the past till now all the Pashtuns have suppressed Hazaras and do not even mention them in books or to their children.

Similarly, Assef is also a Sunni Pashtun and belongs to a rich family as Amir, he views Hassan especially Hazaras as: “We are the true Afghans, the pure Afghans, not this Flat-Nose here.” “His people pollute our homeland” (Hosseini, 2003). The writer used the pronoun “we” when Assef was referring to Pashtuns and used “they” for Hazaras. This is the preference on the basis of ‘Us’ and ‘Them’. Here a Pashtun tells his point of view visibly that the land of Afghanistan only belongs to Pashtuns and not to any other ethnic group. Even Ali’s wife says about Ali: “I have seen old donkeys better suited to be a husband” (ibid.). The point is that Ali is depicted with negative traits and as a target of disgrace. The writer has used the term ‘old donkeys’ to represent what Hazaras are thought to be. Assef asserts ethnic identity in these words: “Afghanistan is like a beautiful mansion littered with garbage, and someone has to take out the garbage.” Amir Replied: “In the west, they call it ethnic cleansing” (ibid.). Here the writer has pointed toward another view about Hazaras by Pashtuns with the use of the term “garbage”. Here Assef is using this word ‘garbage’ for Hazaras and then again the writer has used the term “ethnic cleansing” to indicate the problem of ethnicity that Afghanistan has under the ethnic-system.

It is not mandatory that the soldiers must belong to a specific Pashtun ethnic group rather they could belong to any of the groups. But despite this fact, the soldiers misuse the power they possess which points out the relationship between power and politics. Its example is also present in the text when Ali and Hassan were passing through the military barracks and one of the soldier called Hassan and said: “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). Due to the reason that Hassan was a Hazara and his mother ran off with a group of singers and dancers, everyone and even those soldiers mocked him for this reason. Thus ethnic roots do not leave any one at any point as safe from criticism and sarcasm. The rude behaviour not only in actions but in the use of language is noticeable against those who are less in power. Their identity is put into question and they are degraded at multiple times. One feels a lot defamed

and disgraced when the others use a certain phrase or word against the other considering the other as low in esteem.

There are many other themes in the novel including love, guilt, redemption, and friendship but ethnicity, social power, dominance and oppression are embedded all over the text. Despite the strong friendship bond between Amir and Hassan, Amir is stuck to the same as other people think about Hazaras. He finds himself unable to look beyond the stereotypical social constructions and beliefs about two major ethnic groups in Afghanistan. That is why Amir has to say with bitter realization: "Because history isn't easy to overcome. Neither is religion. In the end, I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara" (ibid.). In spite of his close friendship with Hassan, Amir also differentiates Hassan on ethnic grounds. These lines expose the powerful ethnic situation in Afghanistan and that even if some people think of a changed attitude towards other ethnic groups; the society does not allow for it easily. Khalid Hosseini highlights through his text that to transcend the hierarchies which are constructions of culture and moving from generation to generation is not an easy task.

Although the above-mentioned facts indicate the severe presence of conflicts within ethnic groups like Pashtun and Hazara and violence by some people, there are clues in the novel that highlight the fact that these disputes can be settled. An example is the friendship of Amir and Hassan. Amir in his adulthood comes up with a sacrificial spirit when he goes back to Afghanistan to rescue Sohrab, Hassan's son by endangering his life. It reminds me an observation: "Contextual information is quite essential" (Afzaal et al., 2020) to move forward for correction and new directions. It calls for "the priorities of language choices" (Asia et al., 2020) and emphasize that text is a good source to educate the young generation to be ethical and positively oriented in social setups. Thus, the texts can be relatable, or thought-provoking, but they always have the potential to spark discussion and debate with "the active participation of the readers" (Ahmad, 2020). Thus, the texts not only operate at thematic level but their discursive value makes them what they are. It is utmost important that the texts are read with a close critical view to reach to the depths of the language used in the texts.

## **Conclusion**



This study proves that the language is used as a tool for the identification of the social problems mainly ethnicity, power abuse and oppression in Afghanistan through Khaled Hosseini's novel, *The Kite Runner*. It is revealed that the writer has effectively used language in a very powerful way for the identification of ethnicity among various social groups especially the Pashtuns and the Hazaras. It is also revealed that Hazara ethnic group who are Shi'a Muslims, have to face many problems due to ethnic differences because initially Pashtuns ruled Afghanistan. So, Pashtuns think of themselves as leaders and view Hazaras just as "load-carrying donkeys". Hazaras are also nicknamed flat-nosed, mice-eating, illiterate, slant eyed donkeys, etc. Through the subtle use of language, the writer has unfolded the social issues and has knitted discriminatory ideologies inside the text. The writer has skillfully utilized the language and text for the representation of ethnicity, power relations and oppression which are practiced in Afghanistan throughout the history till today. Thus, it can be said that language is a powerful instrument in which several ideologies and beliefs can be embedded. Thus, the readers must untwist those thoughts and ideas for getting the real knowledge about an issue in the center of a text. Furthermore; they must shape their attitude with a thorough study of a certain issue and devise possible solutions of a social or political problem for the improvement of a problematic social scenario.

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