

THE DIVISIONS OF POWER & CLASS CONFLICT WITHIN A SOCIETY: A MARXIST ANALYSIS OF KHALED HOSSEINI'S THE KITE RUNNER

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Abstract

This study seeks to explore the divisions of power and class conflict in Khaled Hosseini's novel The Kite Runner through Marxist perspective. The novel follows the journey of two childhood companions, Amir and Hassan where the political and economic conditions of their country shaped their lives and relationship. Marxism is the political and economic theory mainly based on Karl Marx's assertions, who believed that class divisions within a society always tend to lead to a proletariat revolt which eventually leads to a classless society where everyone holds an equal share in the economy and power. The present study adopts a Qualitative research design using content analysis. Analysis of various lines from the text led to the findings that The Kite Runner reflects Marxists perspective of class conflict and division of power which leads ultimately to various changes in society. Besides, the findings of this paper also reflect that The Kite Runner remains relevant today because of its insight into Afghan culture and the history of the Taliban.

Keywords: *The Kite Runner, Marxist perspective, class conflict, content analysis.*

1. Introduction

A perfect society consists of all of its people living together in harmony and stability. But more than often this stability and harmony is jeopardized and damaged by forces in the society which attempt to dominate and oppress the people who are not as economically or politically strong as them. The people belonging to the subordinate group of the society are always oppressed and exploited by the higher forces of society. Social class distinction, race, ethnicity, nationality and even religion is used

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as an excuse to oppress and exploit people. We see all of these factors involved in the oppression of the sub-ordinate groups in the novel *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini.

Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan and in 1980 he moved to the United States of America. He is a bestselling author and his books are famous for his apt portrayal of the Afghanistan before and after the Russian invasion. In his novel. *The Kite Runner* set in Afghanistan of 1970s, he tells the story of two friends Amir and Hassan. Through different characters and events, he depicts how class conflict was prevalent in Afghanistan.

Karl Heinrich Marx and Friedrich Engels were the pioneers of the Marxist theory. Marxism is a political and economic theory which is based mainly on the class struggles within societies. Marx's major idea was that the whoever owned the means of the production in the society had all the power and due to which they exploit and oppress the ones who do not have the power. Marx believed that oppression was inherently present in the political subconscious of all societies (Grudzina, 2006). For example, the land owner exploits the farmer, the Factory owner exploits his workers. Class Distinction is one of the main argument of this theory, people are divided in groups on the basis of their wealth and power which gives rise to conflict within these groups. The upper class exploited the lower class in every way possible and they were deprived of the basic necessities like education, food, health and good living places etc. According to Marxism literature reflects the culture and society and the political setting of the work.

The present study sought to investigate that how class conflict is portrayed in Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner* using the theoretical lens of Marxism. In this regard following are the objectives of the study:

1. To investigate the division of power among people based on their social class, ethnicity, religion and nationality.
2. To explore different ways used by the bourgeoisie within the society to exploit and oppress the proletariat using the benefits of these power divisions.

2. Literature Review

Marxism is one of the most significant criticism of the modern capitalist society. Karl Marx (1818-83) collaborated with Friedrich Engels (1820-95) and devised the notion that came to be known as “scientific” socialism. They believed that capitalism was just a temporary state which will eventually lead to the formation of a communist classless society where the wealth and ownership of things will be equally distributed. They were not against industrial development or science and technology. Basically, they wanted equal division of wealth within the society (Cahoone, 1996). Marx and Engels wrote in their Manifesto of the Communist Party (1848) that all history of the societies are actually the history of class struggle. For them capitalism is an ongoing economic revolution that builds and destroy societies. They said that the new bourgeoisie system has introduced new ways for oppression, new classes and forms of struggle.

Marxism is explored in various literary works. Marxism effected the characters of novel *Moth smoke* by Mohsin Hamid and *Murder of Aziz Khan* by Zulfiqar Ghous. Both the writers showed the socio-political issues of Pakistan through the lens of Marxism. They pointed out the relationship between exploitation and capitalism very artfully through their characters. The analysis of the both novels reveal that Marxism as a theory has a realistic approach to people and their personal lives (Parveen & Awan, 2017). Charles Dickens also weaves the theory of Marx in his numerous novels which are set in the Industrial Revolutions era, Marxist concepts such as class consciousness, sacrifices and social injustice are present in his novels. Dickens novels contain all the social fundamental ideas of Marxism and he has made these concepts relevant and accessible to the readers (Stearns & Burns, 2011).

Fatma (2016) analyzed the novel *The Great Gatsby* through the Marxist perspective and she explored class struggle in different situations. The rich want to find ways they can always remain rich, the poor struggles to get out of their misery and poverty and come to the status of the upper class. Marxist analysis of Herman Melville's novel *Bartleby The Scrivener* shows that he captures the complexities of the class struggle not by idealizing the workers rather he very realistically portrays the extent to which they are

exploited. The workers are cut off from the real world and also from the materials which they themselves constructed. They represent the class of literate clerical workers who are used by the capitalist society for their industrial works. They are the examples that how industrial capitalization results in dehumanization and alienation (Castle, 2007).

The novel *The Kite Runner* has also been analyzed through different perspectives.

Du (2017) explored that *The Kite Runner* was a story of Amir, and his journey from childhood to adulthood and how the sins of past haunted his future until he found a way of redemption and his journey was not only of redemption but of self-Actualization as well. *The Kite Runner* showcases the journey of Amir from sin to self-salvation intertwined with national and racial conflict, it beautifully depicts the trauma and pain that Afghanistan went through. Rape, violence, death, betrayals and discrimination all of these factors create a theme of trauma in the novel. The racial trauma that the Hazara community faces due to being oppressed is also the part of the novel. (Chun, 2014)

Aswathi (2018) writes that it has been the order of the world since the time of origin that dominance of one group on another has been a natural part of the society, oppression due to caste, class, religion and ethnicity all has been prevalent in one way or another. Different mechanisms used by people to oppress the sub ordinates are explored through literature of that society, she further asserts that the repression that the people suffer at the hands of the upper class is not only the dominants faults rather the sub-ordinates also help them in doing that by tolerating it and not revolting against it. Hassan's self-sacrificing nature only aided his dominants to take advantage of him and keep him oppressed. He was loyal to Amir and protected him in any way that he could, yet Amir who belonged to the upper Pashtun class never called him his friend and always thought of him his servant. This dominance is also present in another of Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* in which the gender discrimination and the dominance of males over the females is beautifully depicted. Mariam the main character is subjugated to this hierarchy of genders all her life. She

lived in a patriarchal society which always protected the males of the society.

In *The Kite Runner* Amir, the protagonist belongs to the superior Pashtuns class whereas Hassan was from the marginalized Hazara community, that's why despite being his best friend, Amir felt that he was better and superior than him. He tricked, exploited and made fun of Hassan at every opportunity that he got. The class difference that was spread all over the country also had its effect on their friendship. Since childhood he understood that there was an ethnic and socio-economic division between him and Hassan and also between his father and Ali (Banu, 2016). The characters of Ali and Hassan are double marginalized as they belong to the religious/ethnic minority as well as the lower class. Firstly, they are Shia in a country which is dominated by Sunnis, and they belong to a poor Hazara Family, while Amir and his father live healthy lives in big mansions, they live in poor economical and health conditions, and this discrimination is shown to be wide spread throughout all Afghanistan. In fact, it is the rape of Hassan by the hands of Pashtun majority boy that is the main event around which the book is centered (Tundelkar, 2016).

While reading *The Kite Runner* through an orientalist perspective, Chitra (2014) also states that although Amir belongs to the privileged part of the society and Hassan to the lower yet Hassan turns out to be a better man amongst the two. Their relationship always remained strained due to Amir's internal struggle regarding accepting Hassan, who is ethnically and Socially below him, as a friend.

The theme of representation and identity is also explored in the novel *The Kite Runner*. When Amir embarks on his journey of redemption of his sins, everything from his past haunts him. He remembers his attitude towards Hassan and how he betrayed him due to his mindset regarding his own superiority. The most disturbing thing was Amir's memory of how he never learnt anything about the Hazara genocide from his father or his school, it shows that as the Pashtun were in majority they had the power to change and obliterate the history that did not suited them. Being a Pashtun gave Amir the power which he used to mistreat Hassan in their relationship. (Saraswat, 2014)

While doing the thematic analysis of the novel, one of the theme analyzed is friendship and betrayal. Although Amir and Hassan belonged to different social classes, they grew up together and spent all of their childhood together yet whenever questioned about their relationship Amir felt a reluctance to call him his friend. Amir's cowardice ruined Hassan's life and then he spent all his life with that guilt of betrayal. (Ahmad, 2018)

Nisa (2014) analyzed the ethnic conflicts in *The Kite Runner*, she analyzed that hostility, rivalry and struggle are the three main causes which leads to ethnic conflict between the Pashtuns and Hazaras in the novel. This ethnic conflict has caused the oppression of the Hazara Community by the Pashtuns, the physical features of the Hazaras are used to racially ridicule them. Additionally, the fact that both of these groups belong to different Sects of Islam, Shia and Sunni respectively, further fuels the conflict between them. Using ethnicity and religion as their reason for superiority the Pashtuns rule Afghanistan and oppress the other groups.

Along with ethnic conflict and discrimination, racial discrimination is also present in the novel. The novels depict that how due to social structural and psychological structures racial discrimination is rampant in Afghanistan. As the Hazaras are different from the Pashtuns who are in majority in various ways like religion, social class and even physical appearance, they are often humiliated, oppressed and even killed by the Pashtuns. The writer shows that how this act of racial discrimination effects the society as well as the characters and their mental states (Handayani, 2016).

Hosseini and Zohdi (2016) stated that *The Kite Runner* depicts the phenomenon of Racism through the two major ethnic population of Afghanistan, Pashtuns and Hazara how these two have social, ethnic and religious conflicts among each other. The research proves through the Feagins theory that biological factors are just used as excuse by the powerful sector to achieve their own goals. In Afghanistan basically the powerful Pashtuns run the country and the Hazara are treated as slaves.

The novel *The Kite Runner* has been analyzed through multiple perspective like ethnic conflicts, racial conflict, redemption,

self-actualization etc. But this study explores the novel from a Marxist perspective.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This paper follows a qualitative research design with a descriptive, exploratory and interpretative approach. The purpose of utilizing qualitative research for this study is that it gives comprehensive description of text. Qualitative research is used to examine the text and to evaluate it. According to scholars (Creswell & Maietta, 2002) a qualitative research is aimed to deeply investigate, infer and analyze social phenomena through a typical context. Qualitative research is always based on researcher's own interpretation. In other words, qualitative research is based on individual experiences with no place for scientific technology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In qualitative research the researcher gets the chance to study the case closely and gets the accurate knowledge. It also helps the researcher to go deeply into the text (Merriam & Grenier, 2009). Therefore, the present study used the text of "The Kite Runner" as a primary source for analysis while articles and books were used as secondary sources to support the research.

3.2 Content Analysis

Content analysis is being used to study the novel. It is a Qualitative research method which was developed 20 years ago includes bundles of techniques to analyze any text systematically (Mayring, 2000). An intensive reading of the novel The Kite Runner was carried out. In this regard Wellek and Warren's intrinsic and extrinsic technique (1977) of content analysis was used to attain the objectives of the study. Intrinsic technique refers to the themes within the text while extrinsic technique refers to the themes that are extracted from external sources such as biographies, articles and books. Thus the sentences and utterances that depicted the class conflicts and power divisions in the society were extracted using intrinsic technique. While relevant books and articles were used through extrinsic technique for critical opinions.

4. Discussion

The *Kite Runner* is a best-selling novel by Afghan Writer Khaled Hosseini. It follows the story of the protagonist Amir and how his relationship with his father and his servant's son Hassan eventually changes his life forever. Amir spent all his childhood playing with Hassan yet he could never bring himself to think of him a friend as Hassan belonged to the poor class and was a marginalized Hazara, at the same time Amir spent his days yearning to prove himself worthy to his father and get his affection. So, when one day he is granted with an opportunity to choose between his father's affection or helping out Hassan he chooses the former, a decision that changed his life forever. Until life offers him a chance for redemption and a way that he could be good again by saving Hassan's son.

The Kite Runner has numerous themes in it but the present research will focus on how the Afghan society is divided to social classes and how power is divided in the novel based on the social class, ethnicity and even religion.

In the society where the novel is set, money decides how much power a person gets and what type of the lifestyle they lead. "Baba proved them all wrong by not only running his business but becoming one of the richest merchants in Kabul." (Hosseini, 2006, p.15). "Most of the boys walked to school, and Baba's black Mustang drew more than one envious looks" (Hosseini, 2006, p.84). The attitude of everyone towards Amir's father showed that wealth was main reason for influence and respect in the society.

Amir and Hassan fed from the breast of same women, they spent all their childhood together yet their class difference was evident in various ways. Amir belonged to the Pashtun community, he was son of a rich father and he was from the majority Sunni sect of Islam, all of these things provided him with things and opportunity that Hassan belonging to the poor Hazara community didn't have. "Hassan I parted ways. I went pass the rosebushes to Baba's mansion, Hassan to the mud shack where he had been born, where he had lived his entire life" (Hosseini, 2003, p.6). Amir was from the privileged society, he lived in a mansion his rich father built, Hassan on the other hand went back to his mud shack after the whole day of labor and hard work as he

was a poor servant. Both kids were of same age but they lived in different conditions due to their class different.

Like Hassan and Amir, their father also had a childhood companionship yet Amir noticed that how his father never referred to Ali as his friend, something which Amir realized that he thought of as well. "Ali and Baba grew up together as childhood playmates...But in none of his stories did Baba ever refer to Ali as his friend...I never thought of Hassan and me as friends either." (Hosseini, 2006, p.24). This reluctance of unwillingness to accept Hassan or Ali stems from the fact that both Amir and his Father knew that they belonged to the upper Pashtun class, the more privileged part of the society and friendship with the lower part, no matter how close they were, was not something that they could fathom. "In the end, I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara, I was a Sunni and he was a Shi'a and nothing was ever going to change that." (Hosseini, 2006. p.24). When confronted by Assef about how could he call Hassan as his friend Amir first thought which comes to his mind is that "But he's not my friend...he's my servant" (Hosseini, 2006, p.38). This shows that no matter what Hassan did for him; Amir could never accept him as his friend or equal due to his social status.

Amir had all the luxuries that that rich kid had, he had warm food ready for him, someone to cater to his each and every need while Hassan was deprived of those things because he was poor and a servant. While Amir enjoyed his luxuries Hassan was the one who did all his work for him. "While I ate and complained about Homework, Hassan made my bed, polished my shoes, ironed my outfit for the day and packed my books and pencils." (Hosseini, 2006, p.26). These lines show how the class difference effected the lives of the two children differently. They both were of same age yet still they lead completely different lives just because they had different social and economic status. Like most of the poor and marginalized part of the society Hassan was deprived from the right to education too "That Hassan would grow up illiterate like Ali and most Hazara had been decided the day he was born...after all, what use did a servant have for written word?" (Hosseini, 2006, p.26). The powerful always use the strategy of keeping their sub-ordinates under their control by keeping them away from education and this what we see happened in the Afghan society as well, the right to education was kept

for the upper class, poor Hazara people like Hassan and Ali were never given the chance to change their lives through education and because of that they remained stuck in a situation in which they were the poor servants of the powerful Pashtuns. Amir also used his privilege of education to ridicule Hassan and give him an indication of his superiority at every opportunity that he got. "My favorite part of reading to Hassan was when he came across a big word that he didn't know. I'd tease him, expose his ignorance." (Hosseini, 2006, p.27).

For Hassan everything that he learns about stories and words was dependent on Amir "Words were secret doorways and I held all the keys" (Hosseini, 2006, p.28). Due to his illiteracy career prospects or hopes of a better future were lost for Hassan, he was destined to remain in the position that he was "He'll never be anything but cook." (Hosseini, 2006, p.32).

Hassan was exploited by the society very severely. He was brutally beaten and raped by rich Pashtun boys and not helped by the very person that he always stood up for. The very fact that Hassan was always singled out to be bullied and humiliated shows that the power within the society was always with the rich and majority, although Amir was timid and cowardly yet he was always spared because he was a son of a powerful man "how lucky I was to have Baba as my father, the sole reason, I believed Assef mostly refrained from Harassing me too much." (Hosseini, 2006, p.36). Hassan on the other hand was forced to pay respect to his tormentors, he is obliged to call Assef "Agha" no matter how badly he may treat him about which Amir Observes that "I wondered briefly what it must be like to live with such an ingrained sense of one's place in a hierarchy." (Hosseini, 2006, p.39). Hassan knew his low position in the society and he always acted according to that. Further the exploitation and oppression of Hassan continues when after being raped by Assef and Wali, he is obliged to serve them in a party and face further humiliation by their hands, had he been rich and powerful he could have stood up for himself but his poverty forced him to remain their sub-ordinate "I saw something I'll never forget. Hassan serving drinks to Assef and Wali from a silver Platter." (Hosseini, 2006, p.93). Amir often compares Hassan to a Lamb.

A Lamb is a sacrificial animal that is slaughtered on the occasion of Eid-ul-Azha of Muslims, Amir says about Hassan's face moments before his rape that "It was look I had seen before. It was the look of the lamb."

(Hosseini, 2006, p.71). By comparing Hassan to the lamb Amir is showing how powerless and resigned he was in the face of his fate. Hassan has no power to save himself, just like the Lamb Amir let him be sacrificed for his own greater good. His poverty and low status in the society renders Hassan unable to do anything for himself.

Another form of exploitation that goes on bigger than the individual level is that of the Pashtun community on the Hazara Community. The Pashtuns are rich and powerful, they exploit and humiliate the Hazara on the basis of their ethnicity and Religion. We even see the example of the powerful Pashtuns hid the history about the Genocide of the Hazara community when Amir learns about it from his Mothers books but he realizes how no one ever mentioned that in school or at home. "I read that my people, the Pashtuns, had persecuted and oppressed the Hazaras...The book said that my people had killed the Hazaras, driven them from their land...The book said a lot of things I didn't know, things my teachers hadn't mentioned. Things Baba hadn't mentioned either." (Hosseini, 2006, p.9). This shows that how the literature and history are always in the control of the powerful as well. Throughout the novel we see how the Pashtun majority people like Assef and Wali humiliate the Hazaras and exploit them. Almost in every household the servants belonged to Hazara community, "Every morning, I watched from my bedroom window as their Hazara servant shoveled snow from the driveway, cleared the way for the black Opel." (Hosseini, 2006, p.46). The rich Pashtuns enjoyed their lives which were made easier by their poor Hazara Servants.

"Russian tanks would roll into the very streets where Hassan and I played, bringing the death of the Afghanistan I knew and marking the start of a still ongoing era of bloodletting." (Hosseini, 2006, p.34). Just like the Pashtuns felt superior over the Hazaras, in the same we even see exploitation on national level. The Russian invasion of Afghanistan depicted how the richer countries preyed on and invaded the poorer countries for their own need and greed.) In the same way after the Russians were defeated the Taliban took over again we the exploitation of the poor and powerless by the hands of the powerful for instance when they took Children from the orphanage and the care taker couldn't do anything because of his poverty. "If I deny him one child, he takes ten. So I let him take one...and take his goddamn filthy money. Then I go to the bazaar and buy food for the children." (Hosseini, 2006, p.237). If he wants

to feed the children of his orphanage he has to remain oppressed by the powerful people of the society.

5. Conclusion

The present study investigated the division of power among the people based on their social class, ethnicity, religion and nationality in the novel *The Kite Runner*. Besides this study also explored different tools of bourgeoisie within the society to exploit and oppress the proletariats using the benefits of these power divisions.

Content analysis of the novel using intrinsic and extrinsic technique shows that how the class status and the division of the power in the society effects the lives of people both on individual bases and on larger scales as well. It is clear how the Pashtuns, being the Bourgeoisie of the society exploit and oppress the Hazaras the proletariats. The analysis shows that no matter on what basis or reasons exploitation is done, either social, ethnic, religious or even national reasons, in the end everything comes down to Class struggle and conflict. The exploitation of Hassan by Amir and Assef is possible because he is from the lower class and they are both from the upper class. Similarly, the oppression that the Hazaras suffer on the basis of their ethnicity and religion is also possible because the Hazaras as a community are poor and they could not do anything against the rich Pashtuns. Even the Russian invasion of Afghanistan shows that the powerful and rich can do whatever they want to the poor and powerless. Hence based on this analysis we can conclude that the in the novel *The Kite Runner* Khaled Hosseini has very craftily shown the class conflicts and depicted how power within a society are divided to the rich and wealthy.

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