www.TLHjournal.com Literary Herald ISSN: 2454-3365
An International Refereed/Peer-reviewed English e-Journal
Impact Factor: 7.825

Race and Disability in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*: An Intersectional Perspective

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Abstract
While the theory of intersection kicked off as an exploration of the oppression of women of colour within society, today its ambit has broadened to include almost all social categories. *The Kite Runner* comes across as a narrative where a number of intersecting oppressive and discriminating forces are seen to be at work as "interlocking systems of oppression"- Gender, class, race, religion and disability to name some of the important ones. The narrative, in particular, offers an interesting study of intersectionality of race and disability. This paper seeks to explore what constitutes disability and examine how the differences of ethnicity and disability coalesce to create a more abject form of oppression in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and also enquires into the question of normalcy.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Race, Ethnicity, Disability, normalcy.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term intersectionality as "the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage." Theorizing about multiple forms of oppression has been at the centre of Intersectional studies for quite some time. In 1989 Kimberlé Crenshaw first used the word "intersectionality" in the context of feminism. While the theory of intersection began as an exploration of the oppression of women of color within society, today the analysis is potentially applied to all social categories (including social identities usually seen as dominant when considered independently). Activists and scholars have attempted to articulate how disability inequality operates by establishing "likeness" between disability oppression and the more widely recognized form of inequality, that of racial injustice.

Intersectionality may be defined as an approach to analyze how social and cultural roles, identities and categories intertwine to produce multiple axes of oppression; it is employed as an important paradigm in sociology, women and gender studies, and critical race theory. Intersectionality is the notion that individual and community lives are located at a social location of intersecting identities. These identities can be race, ethnicity, gender, social class, religion, age, disability status, nationality, geo-political location and linguistic abilities.

An individual is the centre, intersected by many forces such as social, racial, religious, gender, class, disability. Just as an individual's identity constitutes of his social roles, social status, personal history and future aspirations – any group's identity has a similar multifaceted composition. Patricia Hill Collins & Sirma Bilge point out, "major axes of social divisions in a

given society at a given time, for example race, class, gender dis/ability, and age operate not as discrete and mutually exclusive entities, but build on each other and work together" (4).

Racism and ethnicity are usually considered as the same concepts while in fact ethnicity is a sub-class of racism. In every nation, there are some ethnic groups with the same origin and similar customs that may or may not be judged equally by the power-wielding ethnic groups; Afghanistan is one such country. The difference between ethnicity and racism is that racism is based on the biological classifications while ethnicity reveals cultural identity of a group of people with the same nationality. They are also different in terms of socioeconomic position and geographic location. In most societies, several social ranking organizations do exist simultaneously. Some classify people by their racial or ethnic group, whereas others rank people by their gender, age, or class position and each ranking system has its different social classes; rewards, privileges, and such inequality continue from one generation to the next. "Racism can be defined as a way of thinking that considers a group's unchangeable physical characteristics to be linked in a direct, causal way to psychological or intellectual characteristics, and which on this basis distinguishes between 'superior' and 'inferior' racial groups" (Bill Ashcroft et al *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* 199). Likewise, in *The Kite Runner* the working system is based on the ethnical classification. Mostly, it is the Pashtuns that run the country and have the power in their hands and Hazaras are just common slaves of them.

Disability studies began to emerge in the West in the late twentieth century as a result of the success of the disability rights movement, the seminal work of a few scholars like Erving Goffman and Michel Foucault, and the flourishing of other interdisciplinary identity-based approaches that revealed compelling new aspects of the humanities while emphasizing rights. Several influential scholars working in the 1960s and 1970s provided intellectual groundwork for the field. In his classic study *Stigma* the sociologist Erving Goffman analyzed social interactions around people, including those with "abominations of the body," who differed from the expected norm (Goffman 4). He also demonstrated how easily stigmatized people can internalize rather than oppose dominant standards by which they are deemed inferior. The philosopher and critic Michel Foucault described how, starting in the nineteenth century, bodies seen as problems were sequestered, controlled, diagnosed, and otherwise socially managed. Foucault's insights about madness, docile bodies, and the clinical gaze also proved fertile for later disability scholars. Literary critic Leslie Fiedler in *Freaks* explored the long history of people's fascination with non-normative human bodies and their display for profit. Together with disability activism, such work prepared the way for disability studies.

As a category and a label, disability is diverse, unclear, and open to interpretation, yet the presence of a disability label may lead to unequal outcomes in one's ability to access education, housing, health care, transportation, and other aspects of independent functioning (Gold & Richards, 2012; Savaria, Underwood, & Sinclair, 2011). A Socio-historical approach is founded on the idea that disability must be seen from a social model of disability that distinguishes between the impairment (biological and functional limitation) and the disability (the social oppression that results from the category), as against the cultural ideas and practices that continue to view disability through the medical–psychological model, which emphasizes the individual's

pathology and interventions that attempt to normalize the individual (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008). In contrast, the social model of disability focuses on the disabling consequences of social exclusion (Stevenson 2010).

Disability scholars such as Ellen Samuels, Nirmala Erevelles, and Cynthia Wu label relationship between race and disability as "constitutive relationship", meaning that race informs disability in the same way that disability informs race. *The Kite Runner* comes across as a narrative where a number of intersecting oppressive and discriminating forces are seen to be at work as "interlocking systems of oppression"- Gender, class, race, religion and disability to name some of the important ones.

While literary works rely upon the potency of disability as a symbolic figure, they rarely take up disability as an experience of social or political dimensions. Most representations of disability in literature tend to lend a distinctive idiosyncrasy to any character that sets it apart from the "norm," Mitchell and Snyder contend that:

> In works as artistically varied and culturally distinct as Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Montaigne's "Of Cripples," Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Dunn's *Geek Love*, Powers's *Operation Wandering Soul*, and Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter*, the meaning of the relationship between having a physical disability and the nature of a character's identity comes under scrutiny. (Narrative Prosthesis 224)

Mitchell & Snyder maintain that today, disability studies has moved beyond a directly politicized 'search for a more "positive" story of disability' (*Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* 59) to explore a more complex, nuanced understanding of the relationship between literary representations of disability and their specific cultural contexts. This expansion has allowed critics to explore new definitions of disability and ethics. Davis suggests that the understanding of *all* types of human identity is reconfigured by a focus on disability. (Lennard J. Davis, 'The End of Identity Politics and the Beginning of Dismodernism', in *Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Davis.) Quayson argues that disability is central to our understanding of *all* literary writing: 'the plot of social deformation as it is tied to some form of physical or mental deformation . . . [is] relevant for the discussion of all literary texts' (*Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* 159). Both of these arguments suggest that a focus on disabled bodies in texts is an enabling and productive critical perspective through which a wide range of political, ethical and aesthetic questions can be addressed. Tony Sibers argues that the representation of the disabled body does not suggest an obstacle or linguistic impasse, but rather 'a lever to elevate debate'. (*Disability Theory* 2)

David Braddock and Susan Parish argue that, "Despite the advances in human understanding that were secured during the Renaissance, beliefs in the bestial nature of, and possession by,

people with mental disabilities continued during the early modern period" (*An Institutional History of Disability* 21). However, with Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird* and Toni Morrison's *Sula* a positive movement towards disability can be observed where disability doesn't symbolize the idiosyncrasies of the characters. These works can also be regarded as initial moves towards interweaving race and disability.

The Kite Runner offers an interesting study of intersectionality of race and disability in the form of two important characters in the novel- Hassan and Ali. Both of these characters are located at the intersecting boundaries of race, and disability. They not only come from the underprivileged, oppressed minority Hazara community but also stand vulnerable, both for their characteristic ethnic identity as well as their disability. This paper seeks to examine the question - If one belongs to ethnic minority, and is disabled, how these differences coalesce to create a more abject form of oppression in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and also enquires into the question of normalcy.

The Kite Runner has for its backdrop Afghanistan, a strife-torn, beleaguered nation with a history of ethnic clashes, power struggle and terrorism. First the weak titular governments saw the Russian invasion followed by the terror of Taliban rule that witnessed horrible crimes being committed in the name of religion and perpetrated one of the worst ethnic cleansing in history. The destruction of the World Trade Center in September 11, 2001 made the world sit up and take note of the magnitude of terrorism that seemed to threaten to engulf the whole of the Western world, the US in particular. By 2003 an increasing number of nonfiction books about Afghanistan, its recent history and US involvement there began to hit the bookstands, but Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* created a niche of its own among these books.

Set in the 70's in Afghanistan, *The Kite Runner* is the story of Amir, a Pashtun (the privileged majority) and Hassan a Hazara (underprivileged, oppressed minority) boy. Hassan is Amir's loyal friend and son of their servant Ali. They are both raised together in Amir's father house, playing and kiting on the streets of a peaceful Kabul. Amir feels that his wise and good father Baba blames him for the death of his mother while giving birth to him, and also that his father loves and prefers Hassan to him. Amir feels a great respect for his father's best friend Rahim Khan, who supports his intention to become a writer. After Amir wins a competition of kiting, Hassan runs to bring a kite to Amir, but he is beaten and raped by the brutal Assef in an empty street when Hassan refuses to part with Amir's kite; the coward Amir witnesses the assault but does not help the loyal Hassan. When the Russians invade Afghanistan Baba and Amir first escape to Pakistan and finally migrate and settle down in California. Later Amir meets his countrywoman Soraya and they get married. After the death of Baba, Amir, who has begun to make his mark as a novelist receives a phone call from the terminally ill Rahim Khan (his father's business partner and best friend and Amir's confidante and mentor), who discloses to him the fact that Hassan was his half-brother (born out of an illicit relationship between Baba and Ali's wife Sanaubar) forcing Amir to return home to face the demons and make amends; to find Hassan's son Sohrab; to have his long overdue cathartic duel with Assef; to free Sohrab from Taliban's clutches and to finally return to US, his adopted home, with his nephew/adopted son Sohrab.

Seemingly innocuous tale of two friends, the novel is set against the backdrop of various factions in their country committing terrible atrocities in the name of ethnicity and religion.

Ancient tribal traditions such as "badal" (blood vengeance), use of religion for personal gains and ethnocentrism evident in Afghan history are partly to blame for this. Hosseini takes up the most pressing social evils, customs and prejudices plaguing the nation: the ethnic-religious relations – Sunnis (Pashtuns) and Shi'as (Hazaras); hypocritical religious zealots using religious righteousness as a façade for their atrocities.

The Kite Runner offers a number of cases that exemplify the exploitation of Hazaras through the inhuman behaviour of Pashtuns in Afghanistan that leads to their eventual neurosis and forces them to pathetic submissiveness which gradually becomes their inherited trait. They experience incessant pain; both physical and psychological, that is imposed on them by Pashtuns who believe themselves to be superior and consider Hazaras as "mice-eating, flat-nosed, load-carrying donkeys". (The *Kite Runner* 9) Behavioral dehumanization is mostly predominant in the novel in case of Hazaras such as physical violence, verbal abuse, slavery, genocide etc. The novel showcases the turmoil and subsequent marginalization of the Hazaras by Pashtuns. Assef, the villain in the novel makes it amply clear that there is no place for Hazaras in Afghanistan. What he says about Hassan foreshadows all that is going to befall the ethnic minority, "Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns. It always has been, always will be. We are the true Afghans, not this Flat-Nose here. His people pollute our homeland, our *watan*. They dirty our blood ------ Afghanistan is for Pashtuns. That's my vision." (*The Kite Runner* 38)

The first instance of how ethnic, underprivileged minority tends to accept the position of the oppressed unquestioningly takes place when on the day after Amir's birthday party. Amir hides his new watch in Hassan's bed to frame the boy as a thief and forces his father to fire Ali, releasing his conscience from recalling his cowardice and betrayal. Hassan doesn't say a word to defend himself from the utter falsehood Amir has leveled against him. Peng Yuan-yuan traces Hassan's reticence to his ethnic ethics, "Hassan didn't complain about Amir's treachery and framing, Hassan sacrificed himself to preserve narrow and selfish Amir because he was bounded by the class and social ethics, which made him willing to bear everything in their own ethics and class environment. As a result, Hassan had never shown any dissatisfaction with this unequal status, nor had he tried to change his fate". (*The Kite Runner* 59)

Although Amir and Hassan are best of buddies, their belonging to different ethnic groups does come to surface as when Hassan is not invited to play with Amir's Pashtun friends when they come to his home, "*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?" (*The Kite Runner* 38)

Amir had known the fact beforehand from history:

> ... The curious thing was, I never thought of Hassan and me as friends either. Not in the usual sense, anyhow. Never mind that we taught each other to ride a bicycle with no hands ……. 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 Shia, and nothing was ever going to change that. Nothing. (*The Kite Runner* 24)

Assef, the most despicable character in the novel tries to bring home this point to Hassan when the latter comes to Amir's defense during their fight. Hassan's rape and humiliation at the hands of Assef echoes the ethnic cleansing of Jews by Hitler; Hosseini doesn't leave this interpretation to conjecture – Assef's mother is a German and Assef's birthday gift to Hassan is a biography of Hitler. In addition to Assef, the novel mentions the soldiers who humiliated Hassan or the passers-by, especially the teachers of Amir. Clearly, the Pashtuns' racial discrimination was deep-rooted and difficult to eradicate.

The incidence that underscores racism most conspicuously and has tragic consequences takes place on the kite fighting day. Amir wins the local kite tournament and finally earns Baba's praise. Hassan helps Amir in kite fighting. During the end of the tournament, Hassan runs for the last kite, a great trophy saying to Amir, "For you a thousand times over." (*The Kite Runner* 66). However after finding the kite Hassan encounters Assef in an alleyway. Assef first offers to forgive Hassan on condition that he just gave Assef the blue kite, adding that nothing is free in this world. Hassan turns down the offer. This makes Assef angry and he changes his mind. He lets Hassan keep the kite in return for a shameful and obscene act - He rapes Hassan. Amir, on the other hand, witnesses the act but is too scared to intervene. Amir runs because he wants to gain Baba's praise, but before he runs, he says to himself, "I ran because I was a coward. I was afraid of Assef and what he would do to me. I was afraid of getting hurt. That is what I made myself believe. I actually aspired to cowardice because the alternative, the real reason I was running, was that Assef was right: Nothing is free in this world. Maybe Hassan was the price I had to pay, the lamb I had to slay, to win Baba. Was it a fair price? The answer floated to my conscious mind before I could thwart it: He was just a Hazara, wasn't he?"." (*The Kite Runner* 72-73).

Ironically, it is Assef who tries to bring home to Hassan the truth about his relationship with Amir; that he has an illusion that he is being treated as a friend and a good human being at Baba's home especially by Amir whom he thinks to be his best friend. Assef tells Hassan to think whether he receives the same compassionate treatment at home as Amir or not, he says, "But before you sacrifice yourself for him, think about this: would he do the same for you? Have you ever wondered why he never included you in games when he has guests? Why he only plays with you when no one else is around? I'll tell you Hazara. Because to him you are nothing but an ugly pet. Something he can play with when he is bored, something he can kick when he is angry. Don't ever fool yourself and think you are something more" (*The Kite Runner* 61). When Hassan replies that he and Amir are good friends.. Assef reminds him, "Friends? Assef said laughing. You pathetic fool someday you'll wake up from your little fantasy and learn just how good of a friend he is. Now bas! Enough of this. Give us that kite" (*The Kite Runner* 61).

The immigrant Pashtuns carry their baggage of ethnic superiority with them in the land of their refuge too. Sohrab's presence in Amir's house in California exasperates Amir's father-in-law Genereal Taheri so much that he demands an explanation from Amir when he meets Sohrab for the first time, "So, Amir Jan, you're going to tell us why you have brought back this boy with you?" (*The Kite Runner* 330) and when the General's wife Jamila objects to his question, he responds by saying "While you're busy knitting sweaters, my dear, I have to deal with the community's perception of our family. People will ask. They will want to know why there is a Hazara boy living with our daughter. What do I tell them?" (ibid)

The Kite Runner reads like an allegory of ethnic strife that has been characteristic of the Afghanistan. To his great amazement, Amir finds that the text books barely mention the Hazaras. It is when he is reading his mother's old history books that he finds one whole chapter devoted to the history of the Hazaras. The chapter shows how the Pashtuns had persecuted and oppressed the Hazaras; how the Hazara upraising was put down with unspeakable violence. The Hazaras had been killed, driven from their lands, their homes burned down and their women sold by the Pashtuns. Hassan's story ends much in the same way when he falls a victim to racial discrimination. After Rahim Khan persuades him to return to Kabul, Hassan moves to Kabul with his family and begins to live in the house with Rahim Khan. One day when Rahim Khan is away in Peshawar, the Taliban people come to the house and ask him to leave. The Taliban can't stand a Hazara family living in that great mansion and refuse to believe what Hassan tells them. They shoot Hassan brutally despite the fact that even the neigbours support his story.

Ali comes across as the most pathetic case of dehumanized being, the way he quietly accepts the worst possible insult that can be hurled on a man, particularly, an Afghan man. He lives in the same house as his master knowing that his master had dishonoured him by having an illicit relationship with his wife, "How had Ali lived in that house, day in and day out, knowing he had been dishonored by his master in the single worst way an Afghan man can be dishonored?" (*The Kite Runner* 208)

In addition to suffering atrocities because they belong to minority ethnic race, the case of Hassan and Ali in particular, is made worse by the fact that they are exposed to additional oppression, discrimination and harassment because their identity is intersected at the same time by another category – disability.

Tobin Siebers in his book *Disability Theory* makes a pertinent remark "In fact, a number of disability theorists have made the crucial observation that disability frequently anchors the status of other identities, especially minority identities" (p.5). David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder maintain that "stigmatized social position founded upon gender, class, nationality and race have often relied upon disability to visually underscore the devaluation of marginal communities". Both Hassan and his father Ali not only belong to the underprivileged, oppressed ethnic minority, but also to the disabled category – Hassan has a cleft lip (the novelist prefers 'harelip' a term likely to give offence) while Ali is afflicted with multiple disabilities – facial disfigurement and physical disability. Their characteristic Hazara Mongoloid features invite scorn and people call them "flat nosed". (*The Kite Runner* 8).

Amir begins the story of his childhood with the memory of climbing poplar trees with his friend Hassan whom he introduces to the reader:

> I can still see Hassan up on that tree, sunlight flickering through the leaves on his almost perfectly round face, a face like a Chinese doll chiselled from hardwood: his flat, broad nose and slanting, narrow eyes like bamboo leaves, eyes that looked, depending on the light, gold, green, even sapphire. I can still see his tiny low-set ears and that pointed stub of chin, a meaty appendage that looked like it was added as a mere afterthought. And the cleft lip, just left of midline, where the Chinese doll maker's

> instrument may have slipped, or perhaps he had simply grown tired and careless. (3)

David Jefferess points out that, "This meticulous description of Hassan's face, followed by repeated references to it, serves to humanize Hassan; yet the repeated comparison to a doll – both here and throughout the novel – also reflects the way in which Hassan's face is imaged as something crafted, but imperfect, individual, yet standard: a toy. Marginalized as a Shi'a, Hazara servant, yet the narrator's closest friend, Hassan, through this initial description of his face, is marked as an object of pity. His hare lip prevents him from smiling, we are told, and so he has a perpetually sad face." (PMLA 395).

While commenting on Conrad's use of phrenology in *Heart of Darkness*, which he links with 'patrolling of normalcy", Lennard Davis observes "But I do want to show that even in texts that do not appear to be about disability, the issue of normalcy is fully deployed. One can find in almost any novel, I would argue, a kind of surveying of the terrain of the body, an attention to difference—physical, mental, and national." (12) Davis offers another instance from Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, he refers to doctor's examination as "This eugenic gaze that scrutinizes Winnie and Stevie is really only a recapitulation of the novelistic gaze that sees meaning in normative and non-normative features" (11).

In what is referred to as the "social model" of disability, disability is a social construction in the most obvious sense: it is the ways in which social relations, the built environment, laws, customs, and practices are structured and organized that causes certain bodies to be disabled, while other bodies are facilitated. Impairment is seen as a natural part of biological life, not "abnormal," and is incorporated into a person's sense of self. Disability is a term that has come to refer exclusively to what society, social conditions, prejudices, biases, and the built environment have produced. Disability is thus not applicable to the body *per se* but to the body in a hostile social environment, which is very much the case in *The Kite Runner* where the predicament of both Hassan and his father Ali is compounded by the fact that they live in a hostile society. The hostility stems from the fact that they come from an inferior, under-privileged ethnic minority. Considered outsiders, they are exposed to ridicule and humiliation for being disabled as well as second-rate citizens. It is a question worth asking whether they would have faced the same humiliation for their disability if they hadn't belonged to the underprivileged ethnic minority.

Disability labels such as *intellectual disability* and *mental illness*, have been bound up with racially charged meanings. Racial minorities have tended to receive more stigmatizing diagnoses and interventions (Metzl 2009), while less stigmatizing disability labels have been created to protect racial and class privilege (Blanchett 2010). Colonial ideologies conceiving of the colonized races as intrinsically degenerate sought to bring these "bodies" under control via segregation and/or destruction. Such control was regarded as necessary for the public good. The association of degeneracy and disease with racial difference also translated into an attribution of diminished cognitive and rational capacities of non-white populations. Disability related labels such as feeble-mindedness and mental illness were often seen as synonymous with bodies marked oppressively by race (Baynton, pp. 5-7).

Two such instances in the novel bear out what Baynton claims. Amir never misses an opportunity to tease Hassan about his illiteracy; his inability to understand words. On one such occasion Amir tells him that the meaning of the word 'imbecile' is smart, intelligent. Amir regrets taking advantage of the gullible Hassan," I would always feel guilty about it later." (*The Kite Runner* 27)

On another occasion Amir feels insulted when Hassan, the illiterate servant boy, points out something that seems to him quite unnecessary in the first story that Amir has written. Amir is taken aback by Hassan's question, "I was stunned. That particular point, so obvious, it was utterly stupid, hadn't even occurred to me." Smarting under the blow at what was intended as an innocent query, Amir's racial prejudice comes to the fore, "Taught by Hassan, of all people. Hassan who couldn't read and had never written a single word in his entire life. A voice, cold and dark, suddenly whispered in my ear, *What does he know, that illiterate Hazara? He'll never be anything but a cook. How dare he criticize you?*" (*The Kite Runner* 32).

Ali's presence looms large over the whole narrative, although he is not one of the main characters, which is quite usual so far as representation of disability in literature is concerned. Lennard Davis rightly points out:

> If disability appears in a novel, it is rarely centrally represented. It is unusual for a main character to be a person with disabilities, although minor characters, like Tiny Tim, can be deformed in ways that arouse pity. In the case of Esther Summerson, who is scarred by smallpox, her scars are made virtually to disappear through the agency of love. Dinah Craik's *Olive* is one of the few nineteenth-century novels in which the main character has a disability (a slight spinal deformity), but even with her the emphasis on the deformity diminishes over the course of the novel so by then end it is no longer an issue. (Introduction. *Disability Studies Reader* 9*)*

In Ali's character the intersection of race and disability results in highly tragic consequences. He is a quiet figure, in whom various lines of oppression intersect to showcase the whole gamut of forces impinging on the identity and freedom of a human being. In addition to his "twisted atrophied right leg that was sallow skin over bone with little in between except a paper-thin layer of muscle" (*The Kite Runner* 8), he suffers from congenital paralysis of lower facial muscles; sterility; comes from a minority religious group; belongs to the underprivileged class, factors that place him at the centre of the intersection of multiple oppressive and discriminative forces: "Ali's face and his walk frightened some of the younger children in the neighborhood. But the real trouble was with the older kids. The chased him on the street, and mocked him when he hobbled by. Some had taken to calling him Babalu or Boogeyman". (*The Kite Runner* 8) Even his wife Sanaubar despite the fact that she shared the same ethnic heritage and family blood joined the others in ridiculing Ali.

Disability is not only about deficiency whether mental or physical but is also and more importantly about how one's class, ethnicity and religion in society work to undermine or degrade one's identity. Disability as a biological fact as well as a social construct parallels the difference

between race and ethnicity, "disability is like race". To be normal but to be still regarded incapable of intelligence, to have the ability to learn but to be still regarded incapable of receiving it just because one is deprived of it because of one's religion, ethnicity and underprivileged status in society. All these factors make one liable to be branded as 'imbecile' or broadly speaking disabled. For all his love and affection for Hassan, Amir finds himself fuming at himself when Hassan, the illiterate Hazara boy, points out something about Amir's first story that had never occurred to Amir, something that seems so obvious to him now; he is hurt and feels humiliated that his mistake should have been pointed out by a Hazara. Amir seems to confuse natural intelligence with the cultivated, educated one. To his young mind it is unacceptable that a person who couldn't read or write should be able to point out what his educated mind had missed out completely. But the fact that Hassan is inferior to him socially makes the hurt all the more humiliating.

Ben-Moshe et al. define disability as a highly relative term:

> "Disability is fluid and contextual rather than biological. This does not mean that biology does not play out in our minds and bodies, but that the definition of disability is imposed upon certain kinds of minds and bodies. . . . But more than that, disability, if understood as constructed through historical and cultural processes, should be seen not as a binary but as a continuum. One is always dis/abled in relation to the context in which one is put. A person has a learning disability if put in a scholarly setting; using a wheelchair becomes a disability and a disadvantage when the environment is inaccessible; someone who wears glasses may be disabled without them when attempting to read written language or see far away, but this can change depending on the context that they are seeing and being seen within". (210–11)

If disability is taken to denote a fluid, flexible condition, largely determined by contexts, Amir's case could be regarded as another instance of disability. His case is worse in that he is considered weak and not masculine enough within his own community – the racially superior, privileged Pashtuns. He belongs, at the same time to both the victim and victimizer category.

Going by the Afghan standards of masculinity, Amir would be easily categorized as disabled within his own community; he isn't man enough. As a child, Amir's father laments his inability to fight back, for "a boy who won't stand up for himself becomes a man who can't stand up to anything" (*The Kite Runner* 24). Amir's shame at not saving Hassan is felt not simply as personal failure but as a failure to fulfill his role as a male. His father regards him as insufficiently masculine and goes to the extent of admitting it to Rahim Khan in the strongest words he can, "If I hadn't seen the doctor pull him out of my wife with my own eyes, I'd never believe he's my son." (*The Kite Runner* 22)

Following the same line of reasoning, Hassan cannot be labeled imbecile if he can't read or write because to be illiterate is perfectly normal in his community, but the context within which he is placed, he falls short of being a normal human – he is living amidst a community of educated, racially superior, privileged people. Similarly, seen in the context in which he is placed, Amir also turns out to be suffering from disability. Amir's father disparages his desire to write

"real boys/men don't read poetry, they play soccer" (*The Kite Runner* 21). In a developed society, one's interest in reading poetry and writing would not only be regarded as perfectly legitimate ambitions but also laudable qualities and command admiration and respect.

If one belongs to ethnic minority, and is also disabled, these differences coalesce to create a more abject form of oppression. Both Ali and Hassan are exposed to the same forces of oppression – ethnicity, class, religion and disability by the dominant, privileged upper-class religious majority. Ali, Hassan and his family are the worst sufferers as they stand at the intersection of the twin oppressive forces- race and disability; they bear the brunt of the atrocities both as minority and disabled and finally lose their lives as result of the fighting among warlords and ethnic cleansing. Thus through the characters of Hassan and his father Ali, Hosseini explores the fundamental tensions involved in forming an identity rooted in a multifaceted culture and an always-developing historical experience – the intersection of race and disability being just one of them.

The character of Hassan in *The Kite Runner* serves to question the theory that canonical authors frequently rely on disability as a narrative device both to give their fictions energy and ultimately to reaffirm normalcy in their works; that narratives often buttress the norm. The foundational works in literary disability studies argue that literature and culture in the West often upheld normalcy and consigned disabled people to the margins, what Lennard Davis refers to as 'hegemony of normalcy'. In the *The Kite Runner* it is the protagonist, who is supposed to be morally, intellectually and physically superior, turns out to be inferior in all these attributes compared to Hassan the racially, intellectually and morally inferior human being. Compared to Amir and Assef, Hassan is the one who the author has imagined to be what constitutes the 'norm'. Karim and Assef despite possessing all the advantages that help a human being's normal moral, emotional and intellectual growth turn out to be just the opposite – Karim as one who cannot stand for himself or justice and Assef who represents all that is evil, monstrous, brutal and inhuman. Hassan has none of these advantages but he is what every normal human being should be.

When Amir is back in Afghanistan to rescue Sohrab from the clutches of Assef (now a Taliban bigwig) who is keeping Sohrab as his slave, he has a final encounter with Assef and it is Sohrab who saves Amir by shooting his slingshot at Assef. It is a reenactment of Amir's childhood incident when Sohrab's father Hassan had saved Amir by threatening Assef with his slingshot. The structure of the narrative yet again questions the theory of 'hegemony of normalcy'. The so-called imbecile, racially inferior characters are employed to show what it is to be normal in contrast to those who masquerade as the normal.

Davis' observation on Conrad's use of phrenology in *Heart of Darkness* very pertinently points out the need to examine the question of normalcy, "This activity of consolidating the hegemony of normalcy is one that needs more attention, in addition to the kinds of work that have been done in locating the thematics of disability in literature." (12) *The Kite Runner* seems to be moving precisely in the direction that Davis charts out for further studies on disabilities: "One of the tasks for a developing consciousness of disability issues is the attempt, then, to reverse the hegemony of the normal and to institute alternative ways of thinking about the abnormal" (ibid).

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