

Subalternity, Silence, and Social Hierarchy: Hassan in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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Abstract

"There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard". (Arundhati Roy)

Khaled Hosseini, is an Afghan-American Novelist is well known for his contribution to Afghan Literature and praised for spreading awareness about Afghan- the traditions, culture, people, their lifestyles and history with the rest of the world. Though he left Afghan in his teen years, he held onto his roots, which is mirrored as setting in many of his works. His notable works are *The Kite Runner* (2003), *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013), *Sea Prayer* (2018). Most of these works are primarily set in Afghanistan, often reflecting themes on such as friendship, social injustices, suffering and redemption. *The Kite Runner* published in 2003, is Hosseini's most famous and influential debut novel that won several awards and spent over 240 weeks on the bestseller list on *The New York Times*. Introducing the protagonist Amir, Hosseini not only explores the themes of friendship, betrayal and the search for redemption but also the racial discriminations and abuse that the marginalized go through in a divided society like Kabul. It is a devastating and deeply moving tale that puts the readers on an emotional rollercoaster. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an Indian scholar, literary theorist, and a feminist-critic who is also considered one of the most influential postcolonial intellectuals. Her contribution to the world of literature and philosophy is astonishing, awarding her with the third highest civilian award given by the Republic of India, the Padma Bhushan in 2013. Spivak is well known for her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* where she argues how the Western intellectuals address and represent non-Western cultures. She also points out that knowledge produced by the West of the non-Western cultures are highly subjective and benefits their best interests. In the essay, she quotes on the West's act of abolishing Sati as "White men are saving brown women from brown men" (P. 297) where the women's resistance is completely ignored and is subjective to again, the West. She states that the marginalized cannot speak for themselves as they are limited by obstacles such as gender, religion, caste and other such political hierarchies. , The

character in *The Kite Runner* Hassan is an apt representation of the subaltern who is portrayed as an epitome of innocence, loyalty and forgiving. He belongs to the “Hazaras”, the lower class and unavoidably becomes a victim of racial discriminations, violence and rape. Though he is naturally intelligent, he is never given a chance at education due to his class. He is betrayed by the Protagonist Amir, still he remains loyal to their friendship. Hassan moves away, marries and has a beautiful family, but the joy is short lived. He can never be looked past his class. He faces a tragic ending where his voice is disregarded and his resistance costs his life, giving a conclusion that the subaltern cannot speak for themselves. This study showcases the injustice and trauma that the subalterns go through and justifies the nature of the sub-altern through Hassan’s character. It also proves how the subalterns cannot stand for themselves and when they do, it inevitably ends in a tragic resolution, costing one’s life.

Keywords: Subalternity, Discrimination, Trauma, Oppression, Resistance.

Introduction:

Khaled Hosseini was born on March 4, 1965 at Kabul, Afghanistan. He lived in Iran and France for a short period of time before moving to the United States at the age of 15. He lived there until his return to Afghanistan at the age of 38, an experience that is similar to his character Amir in *The Kite Runner*. He is the eldest among five children born to Nasser, a diplomat for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Maimoona Hosseini, a Persian language teacher at a girl’s high school. His childhood experiences involved reading a lot of Persian poetry, particularly the works of poets like Rumi, Omar Khayyam, Abdul-Quadir Bedil and Hafez. His family is from the Mohammadzai tribe of Pashtuns. After graduating from Independence High School at San Jose in 1934, he did his bachelor’s degree in Biology at Santa Clara University. After that he did his master’s in Medicine at the University of California, San Diego School of Medicine in 1933. He practiced Medicine for more than ten years. In 2003, he published his first novel, *The Kite Runner* which was considered the bestselling novel of 2005 in the United States. It was later adopted into a film under the name, *The Kite Runner* released in December 2007, in which Hosseini made a cameo appearance at the end of the movie. He runs a Khaled Hosseini Foundation to deliver Humanitarian aid in Afghanistan.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was born on February 24, 1942 at Calcutta, India into a Bengali Brahmin Family. Her Father, Pares Chandra Chakravorty was a doctor and her Mother Sivani Chakravorty is a Charitable Worker. Spivak did her Schooling at St. John’s

Diocesan girl's higher Secondary School. In 1959, she graduated from the Presidency College, Kolkata under the University of Calcutta. After Graduation, she worked as an English Tutor for 40 Hours a week. Spivak completed her M.A., in 1962 under the guidance of M.H. Abrams. She completed her PhD in 1964 from Girton College, Cambridge under the guidance of Paul de Man. In 1965, She became an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Iowa. In 1965, Spivak published her first academic work, an English translation of *De la Grammatologie*(1967) by Jacques Derrida. Spivak played a major role in shaping postcolonial theories with concepts like strategic essentialism and subaltern studies. She is influenced by variety of disciplines such as Comparative Literature, Feminism and Marxism. Spivak also served as a member of advisory board of numerous academic journals. In 2012, She became the only recipient of the Kyoto Prize in Arts and Philosophy in the category of Arts and Philosophy. In 2025, she received a Holberg Prize, one of the largest international research prizes funded by the Norwegian Government.

Subaltern:

The term “subaltern” was coined by the Italian Marxist philosopher, Antonio Gramsci. He introduced the concept in his prison notebooks, referring to the peasants and labourers whose voices are not heard, inevitably becoming the victims of people holding dominant power in the society. It refers to someone belonging to a lower rank in social, economic or political hierarchy. They are often excluded from the hierarchy of power. Velutha, a young Dalit labourer from Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is an ample example of the subaltern as he is considered an “untouchable” (P. 80) and impure in the novel. Even though he is a skilled labourer, he is paid a wage less than other touchable workers in the factory. He is expected to be grateful even the wage is unfair because he is a “paravan” (P. 79). While subaltern denotes the marginalized, voiceless and the oppressed, subalternity refers to the experience of being a subaltern. It refers to the struggles or the state of a subaltern. For example, subaltern refers to lower class citizen, while subalternity is the discrimination and the abuse that they go through in authoritarian society. Arundhati Roy used the character of Velutha to showcase the unfair treatment provided to the Dalits in Kerala, “Mammachi didn't encourage him to enter the house (except when she needed something mended or installed)” (P. 83); even when they are shown a little bit of humanity, it is conditional.

Ranajit Guha, an Indian historian and the founder of the Subaltern studies. *Subaltern studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society* began as a project in 1982. He defines

subaltern as socially and politically marginalized bunch in South Asian Society divided in the name of religion, caste, class, gender and colonial domination. Their part and contribution as a commoner was completely ignored in history. “The word ‘subaltern’ in the title stands for the meaning as given in the Concise Oxford Dictionary, that is, ‘of inferior rank’. (‘Preface’ vii).

This concept aims to provide a voice and helps the marginalized to reclaim their place in the society. It creates awareness and resistance against dominion. He argues how historical writing of the subalterns cannot explain Indian nationalism for us, as it fails to acknowledge the contribution and efforts made by our own people of India. Guha uses the term “elite” referring to the dominant groups, chiefly the British officials of the colonial state and foreign industrialists, merchants, planters, landlords, financiers and missionaries.

Subaltern in Postcolonialism:

Prof. Jane Hiddleston says, “The term ‘postcolonialism’ can generally be understood as the multiple political, economic, cultural and philosophical responses to colonialism from its inauguration to present day”. (P. 1) Subaltern plays a tremendous role in postcolonial literature, serving as a weapon of resistance against colonialism. It aims to reshape the narratives of the natives provided by the colonizers. The Nigerian author Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is a groundbreaking work in African Literature. Centered in the pre-colonial Nigeria, the novel delves deep into the convolution of blind practices and culture in a traditional African society. Osu are considered as the outcasts, they are discriminated and even considered as cursed. Okonkwo, the protagonist shows strong resistance, “As he lay on his bamboo bed he thought about the treatment he had received in white man’s court” (P. 199) displaying open opposition of white man’s authority and power. Okonkwo is the subaltern who fought against the colonizers, seeking a voice for the voiceless. Amitav Ghosh, in his novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008), explores subaltern characters such as indentured labourers, oppressed women and enslaved sailors. Unlike, Spivak’s concept of subaltern where “the subaltern cannot speak” (P. 308), Ghosh creates a narrative where he gives them a voice against the dominating power. He displays Deeti, a subaltern woman against gender prejudices and discriminations, dominated by a patriarchal society. This character echoes Spivak’s concept of double marginalization of women.

Hassan as a figure of Subaltern:

Hassan is an accurate example of subaltern, His traumas puts the readers in a sorrowful mood. Hassan went through a rough path even from his childhood. Unaware of the

scandalous union he is born from, Hassan faces a series of discrimination and abuse throughout the novel. His subalternity starts from his birth itself, as he is born into a family of Hazaras- the lower class within the religion of Muslims. Adding to this bad luck, he's also born with a cleft lip, making it hard to survive in a place where high class people illtreat the lower class. Many of Hassan's experiences can be applied in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's most controversial essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'. Spivak raises the question: Can a subaltern truly speak? Are their voices heard? If they can't, who is speaking for them and how are they representing the subalterns? As Hassan is the subaltern here, Can he really speak? Hassan is brought up in a small mud house by his father Ali, having his mother leaving him soon after his birth.

As they belong to the Hazaras, they work as servants to Amir and his father Baba. Amir and Hassan grew up feeding from the same breasts, as Amir's mother Sofia dies due to hemorrhage during the delivery of Amir. They were sharing same traumas from their birth itself, both growing up without a motherly figure in their lives. Amir describes Hassan, revealing that Hassan might be smarter than Amir though he never received a proper education like Amir. Though Hassan had a potential and natural attraction towards knowledge and education, he is neglected of a right to education. "What use did a servant have for the written word?" (P. 26).

As Foucault remarked, All "will to knowledge" is tied up with the will to power. (P. 184). Though the novel talks about Hassan as much as Amir, Hassan doesn't have his own voice, his whole life is narrated by Amir similar to Spivak's idea. Hassan needs somebody from the power structures to speak for him like Amir, as his voice is trained to be silenced among higher class people and of course Amir narrates and dictates Hassan's life according to his biases and prejudices. The representation of their relationship through Amir's voice is apparently a limited one.

Hassan's whole world is Amir considering his first words were "Amir". But Amir limits their friendship in several occasions. We could even take Amir as a boy who is fond of religion, "In the end, I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara" (P. 24) revealing how class consciousness runs deep even in children's minds. Hassan was declared to be illiterate the minute he was born into a Hazara's womb. Amir would read him stories and riddles until he understood that Hassan was better at solving than him who actually received the privilege of a proper education. The precise example is when Amir almost denies his friendship with Hassan and calls him his servant to Assef's mean comments. In a dominant society like

Kabul, where marginalized people survive without a voice, they face marginalization from their inner circle too, even the people they consider as friends treat them as just a Hazara.

Spivak says, “The subaltern becomes everything that elite discourse is not: it’s Other” (P. 315) This shows how people are reluctant to view Hazaras as a mere human being just like them, thus religion and societal class limits people from enjoying honest relations. This reflects Spivak’s idea of Double Marginalization. It generally refers to the oppression faced by subaltern women, who faces double marginalization from both colonial, postcolonial power structures as well as by their own native community which divides gender by patriarchy. In this context, Hassan is the subaltern who faces double marginalization by his oppressive society as well as his own best friend. Amir who is supposed to be treating Hassan with affection and respect is just like those classist society, the difference is that the oppression that comes from outside is expected and apparent but when it comes to Amir, it is quiet and unexpected betrayal which is even worse to Hassan.

Hassan faces a lot of troubles both physically and mentally, especially from Assef- a wealthy bully. Assef starts out as a classic bully, his obsession with purifying Afghanistan of the Hazara minority, turns him into a sociopath and a sex-trafficker. He waits to take revenge on Hassan who merely defended himself when he was troubled by Assef. This part is where the innocence dies and dark turns take place. Baba is not as close as other father-son relationship with Amir. Amir yearns for his father’s love and tries to make him proud. He believes that winning at Kite-flying tournament would help him win over Baba’s affections. The game doesn’t stop with just Kite-flying, it is continued with Kite-running, the runners would catch the last standing kite and Hassan is the best Kite-runner.

In the winter of 1975, Hassan runs to catch a kite for the last time. Amir wins at the game and it is left to Hassan to catch the kite. Amir wants to show the kite to his father, making note of his victory. Hassan promises to return with the kite, “For you a thousand times over” (P. 63). This particular quote reveals how devoted Hassan is in his friendship with Amir. Amir runs through the streets hoping to find Hassan with the kite. He asked a local merchant of Hassan’s whereabouts. When he reveals that Hassan was chased by some other boys, it becomes obvious that it is Assef and his friends seeking revenge. Amir finds Hassan with the blue kite standing helpless in front of Assef. Assef bullies Hassan and promises to let him go with a deal that is to give the kite to Assef. Amir witnesses everything but still maintains silence. Hassan is hesitant to give the kite and Assef sexually exploits Hassan. Amir observes everything quietly without saving Hassan from those evil kids. But Amir so

eager to win Baba's affection that he stays silent as they strip away Hassan's innocence. Amir wants the kite more than his friend. This is what the subaltern goes through as their life is considered worthless.

Similar to Spivak's idea, rape is used as a tool to dominate and suppress the voiceless furthermore. Amir considers Hassan as a scapegoat to win Baba, Hassan is considered as the price. He tries to diminish the guilt by saying "He was just a Hazara, wasn't he?" (P. 73). Hassan comes back with the kite and blood stains in his pants but Amir pretends that nothing happened. Amir, unable to see Hassan's face everyday reminded of the guilt, avoids Hassan completely and accuses Hassan of theft hoping that Baba would kick them out of the house. Baba forgives them but Ali and Hassan voluntarily move out to Hazarajat. Thus the stories of the subalterns are fabricated by the dominant.

The story fast forwards to march of 1981, displaying Amir and Baba leaving Kabul as Afghanistan's political situation changes drastically. They move to start a new life in America. Amir grows up, falls in love and gets married. He is still haunted by the past but tries to move away from it. Shortly after his marriage, Baba dies due to inoperable lung cancer. The couple also struggles with infertility but both do not give up on their marriage. In June 2001, Amir receives a call from Rahim Khan, Baba's friend and a fatherly figure to Amir. He requested Amir to come visit him in Pakistan. Just before hanging up, Rahim Khan tells Amir that there is a way to be good again. Rahim Khan knows Amir's past and gives him a chance at redemption. Amir lands at Peshawar and meets Rahim Khan. They update about their lives and the conversation lands on Hassan.

Years back, Rahim Khan visits Hassan and invites him back to Baba's house where he was residing. Hassan arrives with his wife Farzana. They welcome their son Sohrab delivered by his runaway mother Sanaubar, who returned to Kabul. His mother dies soon. Now Amir starts to wonder about Hassan. Rahim Khan hands him a letter from Hassan. The letter expresses friendship, longing and nostalgia. He reveals about the horrors of Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Despite everything, Hassan promises that he is waiting for Amir's return. Amir asks about how Hassan is doing now. Rahim Khan reveals that this letter was written before 6 months and that Hassan along with his wife was shot in the streets. Hassan lived his whole life as a voiceless and oppressed individual. He dies unheard. This perfectly aligns with Spivak's idea, "The subaltern cannot speak" (P. 308). Thus, through Hassan's life and traumas, it is evident that the Subalterns cannot speak for themselves; they can't defend or seek a voice that could be heard in a dominant and oppressive society. They live and die as

subalterns, but the tragedy doesn't end there but continues as a loop. The reason that Rahim Khan called Amir is to rescue Sohrab from an orphanage in Kabul. Amir resists but Rahim Khan is forced to reveal the forbidden truth about Hassan's father. Ali is infertile, Baba had an affair with Sanaubar and Hassan is indeed Baba's biological child.

Hassan was half brother to Amir, his whole life was a lie concealed by Baba as well as Ali. Amir is frustrated and heartbroken but agrees to rescue Sohrab. He finds the orphanage that Sohrab is said to be residing. But the man in charge told Amir that he sold Sohrab to a Taliban official. When Amir arrives at the place where Sohrab was taken, he is met with Assef who turned out to be the Taliban leader. Amir asks to let Sohrab go but Assef tells that if he wins the fight with Assef, he will let them free. During the fight, Amir gets badly injured but Sohrab slingshots Assef and both of them run away. Sohrab was also sexually assaulted by the Taliban. He experienced the same trauma that his father had gone through. Amir decides to adopt Sohrab, giving him a chance at a good life but the process seems impossible as there is no proof that Amir is the uncle of Sohrab. Sohrab is tired and he just wanted to give up. He's mentally struggling and commits suicide. However, he miraculously survives and finally gets adopted. Just like Hassan, Sohrab also faces oppression and social injustice. Hassan died as a subaltern without a voice; Sohrab also didn't have a voice. He is rescued by others. Thus, the subaltern requires someone else to speak for them as their voice is never heard. Thus, the ultimate tragedy is the continuation of the same cycle.

Conclusion:

Towards the end of the novel *The Kite Runner*, readers are left with one question. Though Amir is the narrator of the entire novel, Is Amir really the protagonist? From birth to death, Hassan is oppressed, abused and silenced. Through Hassan's figure, it is evident that the subaltern cannot actually speak; they are stuck in the same cycle. No matter how good an individual they might be, they are always considered as lower class. The subaltern here is not even worth a kite, that's the ultimate fate of the subalterns. Amir never shows a sense of friendship to Hassan, Hassan's friendship remains unrequited. The concept of double marginalization is mirrored through Amir and Hassan's relationship. When Hassan stood up for Amir, he was exploited. When Hassan tried to justify himself to the Taliban, he was killed with his wife. He tried speaking up, but he ended up lifeless in the streets of Kabul. Hassan embodies subalternity through his enforced silence amid Afghanistan's rigid ethnic hierarchies, where the voices of Hazaras like his are systematically muted by Pashtun dominance. The truth about Hassan's birth is revealed, his father is actually Baba, so he is

actually a Pashtun. Initially, Amir hesitates to rescue Sohrab, but when he learns about this forbidden truth about Hassan's birth, he accepts to save Sohrab, readers can't help but think it is due to the awareness that Sohrab actually belonged to the high class. If Amir isn't the narrator, would still be considered the protagonist? Amir might be a friend in Hassan's eyes, but merely a villain to Hassan in the readers' minds. Amir may not be the one killing Hassan, but he is the one who held the knife silently behind Hassan. Thus, this study proves that it is through Hassan's life that the concept of Subaltern is well reflected. The Subalterns are silenced by the power structures; they face double marginalization and cannot speak for themselves. The representation of subalterns by the power structures ignores their role in resistance.

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