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The Kite Runner and the Problem of Racism and Ethnicity

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Abstract. Racism is a worldwide matter that is based on the physical characteristics of people possessed by certain people, their ethnicity, nationality and so on which make some people superior and some inferior. 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-handler ethnic groups. An example of such country is Afghanistan which is severely an ethnic country. This study explores the social, cultural, and scientific investigations done on the people's races and ethnical characteristics by using Afghan types as examples. Racism is not the result of scientific observation, but it is due to the human differences that happened between 16th and 19th century when people began differentiating among themselves. This aspect of racism is well expressed by the American sociologist "Feagin". In his view, the natural superiority of some people over others is rejected. The novel *The Kite Runner* depicts the two major Afghan ethnical populations, Pashtun and Hazara, and their social, cultural, and religious conflicts. Accordingly, this article will try to examine the root of ethnic prejudices and oppression among the Afghan people in the novel and the reasons for their ethnic conducts are explained and analyzed based on the Feagin's denial of human difference. Moreover, by providing some evidence it is proved that the biological difference is just some excuses for the powerful section to gain their egotistic goals.

Introduction

Post-colonialism is rooted in imperialism and if one wants to seek the historical aspect of imperialism, he should refer to the last years of 19th century when a large part of Africa and Asia were directly controlled by European powers. The term imperialism denotes the control of a weak nation by a prosperous and powerful country [1] and such a control is usually in the form of military, economic, and cultural exploitation. It was also a means through which the culture and practices of European countries influenced the rest of the world. But this Imperialistic stance of the powerful countries caused tension and resistance by the colonized nations and gradually the colonized countries faced resistance from the colonized. Nonetheless, this was not the end and a new era came to exist which is called post-colonialism. Postcolonial literature is a branch of literary studies that deals with the social, cultural, and political issues of colonized nations after their independence from the colonizer countries. Although post-colonial literature is a response to the empire, it also implies the literary works that were written after the colonial period since the word *post* means *after*. In a broad sense, "Postcolonial literature refers to the works that have been influenced by the imperial practice from the colonization to the present day" [2]. Besides, the effects and outcomes of colonialism are mirrored through this branch of study which one of them is the subject of racism and ethnicity.

Unfortunately, racism is a bitter reality that has been existed in all ages and in all societies. One subcategory of racism is ethnicity which most often is considered as a divisive substitute of the term racism. To be obvious, ethnicity may or may not be in a race. Actually, ethnicity refers to a group of people who are of the same "origin, history, values, attitudes, and behavior" [3] but they

may differ in terms of clothing, customs or religion. Ethnicity is in fact the cultural differences that exist among people of a nation. Thus, ethnicity could be called *cultural identity*. Hence, it is culture that plays a role in division of people into different groups since people's cloths, rituals, and even morals are structured by it. These cultural objects are materials like costumes and cloths or non-materials like language and customs. Generally, *ethnic group* is characterized by Yinger as:

A segment of the larger society whose members are thought, by themselves and/or others, to have a common origin and to share important segments of a common culture and who, in addition, participate in shared activities in which the common origin and culture are significant ingredients [4].

Race is said to be the biological heritage which is disclosed in the form "physical features, gene pools, and character qualities" [5] and is transmitted through generations. Although communities and cultures are different, results of racism which are oppression, repression, discrimination, and exclusion are alike. In accord with, as assumed by Gordon W. Allport: "Civilized men have gained notable mastery over energy, matter, and inanimate nature... But, by contrast, we appear to be living in the Stone Age so far as our handling of human relationships is concerned" [6].

Consequently, Racism is divided into two types; one is the racist behavior of the powerful countries against the colonized countries and the other is the conflicts and challenges among the ethnical groups in whether the colonized or colonizer countries that this type is mostly recognized as ethnicity [7]. For decades, Afghanistan which is a racist and ethnocentric country has been suffering from foreign interventions e.g. attack from Soviet Union in 1979 and also internal conflicts and wars including the period of Taliban rule over Afghanistan who were a severe racist group that vastly killed minority ethnic groups in Afghanistan like the Hazara.

The Kite Runner, which its adapted film was produced in 2007 and received many attentions, is an English novel written by the Afghan-American writer Khaled Hosseini in 2003. This novel illustrates the story of a young Afghan boy named "Amir" and his wealthy father who are from the Pashtun ethnic group of Afghanistan and live with their servant "Ali" and his son "Hassan", who are from the Hazara ethnic group. Although in Afghanistan Hazaras are inferior to Pashtuns and are treated inhumanly by Pashtuns, Amir and Hassan are two close friends from different ethnic groups. However, as the story goes forward, a distance is made between these friends and when Soviet invades Afghanistan, Amir with his father, Baba, goes to America to live there. In America, the father and son face some difficulties with some Americans who do not have a positive view toward Afghans. However, they keep on living there and at last Amir becomes a successful writer in adulthood. At the end of the novel, Amir comes back to Afghanistan and brings Hassan's son with himself to live with him and his wife in America.

Although this novel has many themes within itself like war, friendship, migration, poverty, and so on; this article will discuss the theme of racism in an argument concerning the clash and conflict between the Pashtun and the Hazara, the two ethnical Afghan groups, through the lenses of the American sociologist "Joe R. Feagin" by whom the idea of inferiority of some people to others is denied. Thus, the aim of this paper is to take out the main reasons for racial and ethnic behavior of Afghan figures in *The Kite Runner* and bring the social, scientific, and political justifications of racist people in the novel to prove that as Feagin points out all these are just some excuses that the authoritative groups in a nation or generally in the world use to gain their plans which is their domination over other people and their mere use of natural properties due to their absence of mineral and agricultural resources [8]. Besides, Amir's reaction as the protagonist of the novel in the later chapters of the novel in bringing back Hassan's son to America and his sympathy with him can be representative of Hosseini's concern for the existence of ethnic and racist views in his country.

Literature Review

There have been various discussions and definitions on the topic of racism. The notion of race has often been challenged and there are different and sometimes unfavorable ideas on this subject. From the cultural point of view and as said by John Arthur in *Race, Equality and Burdens of History* racism is the way in which individuals exhibit their concealed and open attitudes toward people in community [2007]. Scientifically, race is defined as “an arbitrary selection of identification of specific physical or biologically transmitted characteristics” [3]. There is also an idea that genetically all people in every part of the world share the same origin [9]. In this regard, a tall blonde blue-eyed person would share some genetic structure with a short black person. Regardless of all these definitions, it can be said that race is a socially constructed concept that segregates people into different groups and in spite of the fact that these divisions are not true by nature; people’s social and economic place in society is influenced by them. The belief that one specific group is superior to the other groups due to its biological features has got an ideology that illuminates this point that some people owing to their physical and facial differences with other people are incapable to do the bests in their life and thus they should always obey their superiors in order to have a good living for themselves. Thus, culture acts as an ideology that is based upon a sort of false consciousness that plans to tyrannize and dictate a group of people [10]. This ideology affects people’s way of living and stops the unprivileged social and cultural progression and sometimes leads them to the slavery. For instance, when children are given such socio-cultural identities as a “Hazara”, they are fixed into a concept which is by no means natural, and it is instead only a socio-cultural construct that limits their physical and cognitive freedom to become who they want to be as adults [11].

In the late 1700s and early of 1800s, the discussion of human difference was centered on the subject of race. During colonization of the European nations in Asian and African countries, Europeans used their whiteness supremacy to rule over the colonized people. Among them was Darwin who in the Norton Critical editions illustrated that people with specific body types and color skins are from “barbarous races” that lack incapability to work, receive education, and etc. [12].

In a general outlook, 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. Within these ethnic groups lie various types of cultures; diverse types of clothing, different religions, unlike languages and accents, and so on. They are also different from one another in terms of socioeconomic position, geographic location, and etc. 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. 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.

Discussion

Since Afghanistan is an ethnically assorted nation, the objective of the present research is to study the racist and ethnic views among Afghans in the Khaled Hosseini’s novel, *The Kite Runner*. The text is analyzed and interpreted by using Feagin’s argument on the human difference with the individuals’ role in construction of this notion in society. This idea is rejected by Feagin that some specific groups because of their physical and biological are distinguished from others and according to him such definitions that are said to be based on the scientific observations are not true and real and they are actually far from close scientific observation. These artifact definitions are considered by Feagin to be based on the popular beliefs that gradually formed in the 16th till 19th century. The following explanations and analyses are provided to give an obvious picture of ethnicity views in Afghanistan.

Racist behavior between Pashtuns and Hazaras in Afghanistan

In the small country of Afghanistan where its population till 2009 was approximately 28 million people, there are many ethnic groups like Tajiks, Pashtuns, Uzbeks, Hazaras, Baluchi, and Turkoman. Accordingly, Afghanistan is defined as “a country comprised of various groups with differing cultural traits, including language, religious practices, physical appearance and attire, and customs...” [13]. The plot and events of the novel *The Kite Runner*, written by Khaled Hosseini, is set in Afghanistan and America and is around the two groups of Pashtuns and Hazara that are respectively the majority and minority ethnic groups in Afghanistan, who respectively include 46% and 9% of population of Afghanistan. Besides, the term “majority” refers to the extensive number of Pashtuns in Afghanistan, it also implies their power, influence, and wealth in this society. In contrast, while the term “minority” discloses the low number of Hazaras, it also reveals lack of the economic, political, and social power and influence faced by certain groups (Hazaras) and as a result exclusion from a positive participation from social, political and generally full participation in community. It is said by Amir in the novel that Hazaras were deeply oppressed by Pashtuns. They were killed by Pashtuns and forced to get out of their lands and homes and were considered as Pashtuns’ slaves. “The book said that my people had killed the Hazaras, driven them from their lands, burned their homes, and sold their women.” [14]

Pashtuns had many reasons for their violent behavior. One of their justifications was that Afghanistan was ruled by Pashtuns since the establishment of the Durrani Empire in 1747 [15]. In the past, Afghanistan was a region of the Persian Empire. When in the 18th century the king of Persia announced that all people must convert to Shism, Pashtuns who lived in the south of Afghanistan, opposed this edict and eventually attacked Kabul and soon with the leading of Durrani they gained the control of Afghanistan. Hazaras were a small group in the central territory of Afghan state that were thought to be from the Mongolian race and as Amir says: “they were Mongol and that they looked a little like Chinese people.” [16]. The Hazaras arrived in Afghanistan in the 13th and 14th century and when they rebelled against the oppression of the Pashtuns in the 19th century, they were repressed by the Pashtuns and thus excluded from many social rights including the right for receiving education. This point has also been mentioned in the novel by Amir:

School textbooks barely mentioned them and referred to their ancestry only in passing. Then one day, I was in Baba’s study, looking through his stuff, when I found one of my mother’s old history books... and was stunned to find an entire chapter on Hazara history. An entire chapter dedicated to Hassan’s people! In it, I read that my people, the Pashtuns, had persecuted and oppressed the Hazaras. It said the Hazaras had tried to rise against the Pashtuns in the nineteenth century, but the Pashtuns had quelled them with unspeakable violence [14].

Another big reason was that the populated Pashtuns were Sunni Muslims and the minority Hazaras were Shi’a Muslims. This subject alone made Hazaras more secluded in society and for this reason they sometimes were offended by Sunni Muslims of Afghanistan. An example of this is when Amir is justified by his teacher in this way:

The following week, after class, I showed the book to my teacher and pointed to the chapter on the Hazaras. He skimmed through a couple of pages, snickered, handed the book back. “That’s the one thing Shi’a people do well,” he said, picking up his papers, “passing themselves as martyrs.” He wrinkled his nose when he said the word Shi’a, like it was some kind of disease. [14].

Moreover, the US Department of State country report on Afghanistan for 2012, in a part titled “National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities”, illustrates: “Ethnic tensions between various groups continued to result in conflict and killings. For example, in November riots occurred at Kabul University after Sunni students tried to prevent ethnic Hazara students from observing Shiite religious practices.... . [17].

Additionally, Hazaras were mocked and insulted by Pashtuns for the form of their eyes and generally their face, the subject that severally was repeated in the novel by the author, especially in the first parts of the novel. One instance for such behavior is when Amir says: “It also said some

things I did know, like that that people called Hazaras mice-eating, flat-nosed, load carrying donkeys. I had heard some of the kids in the neighborhood yell those names to Hassan" [14].

From the above lines it is understood that Pashtuns misused the history and the racial difference between themselves and Hazaras so that they could run and control the country. It is recognized by Feagin that from 1400s to the early 1900s the power handlers used the racist ideology and brought colonial exploitation to more than 80% of the world. Many of the ideological frameworks for Feagin such as the racist frameworks "are typically created, codified, and maintained by those at the top of society, although this construction takes place in ongoing interaction with the views and practices of ordinary citizens" [8].

Like what Feagin says about the foundation of human difference by people themselves, the Afghan society with a false and unreal representation of Hazaras as some stupid and cockeyed souls, conducted by Pashtuns, was convinced that other Afghan ethnic groups in Afghanistan are biologically different from each other and Mongolian Hazaras are not equal with other Afghans at all. In *The Kite Runner*, almost all non-Hazara characters, consciously or unconsciously, have accepted the negative labels stuck to Hazaras, even Amir who befriends Hassan is strongly under proclamations of these tags. One example for this situation is when Amir was apparently reading a book for Hassan but in fact he was making some sentences offhand and he enjoyed himself when he saw that Hassan was excited for the stories of the book.

All these justifications made Pashtuns knew themselves superior to the Hazaras and behave toward them violently. In the novel, Amir and Hassan are represented as the two opposite pillars of the same society; the wealthy and the poor, Sunni and Shi'a, Pashtun and Hazara, powerful and the feeble. One significant point about the novel is that from the very beginning of the story the theme of ethnicity and racism is announced by the protagonist of the novel:

I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975. I remember the precise moment, crouching behind a crumbling mud wall, peeking into the alley near the frozen creek [14].

Here, Amir is referring to the time when Hassan was raped by a group of teenage Pashtun guys who were against the Hazara ethnic group. By referring to the sexual violence at the start of the story, the severe condition of Hazaras in Afghanistan and the negative acts of Pashtuns toward Hazaras is divulged by the author. Such a beginning foreshadows the place of ethnicity thoughts in the minds of characters of the story. At the end of this chapter, the theme of ethnicity through Amir's clarification is reemphasized by the author: "I thought of the life I had lived until the winter of 1975 came and changed everything. And made me what I am today" [14]. This matter is also expressed by Feagin who notes that both the performers of racist acts and its recipients are alienated by these systems of racist relations. He keeps on saying that racism separates people from each other, superior and inferior race, and makes them to be in struggle with each other; one tries to hold its unjustly standing in society and the other is in attempt to conquer the oppression of the privileged race or ethnic group and this struggle hinders both groups from development of common consciousness [8].

Although Amir and Hassan were grown together and no one was so much close to them, Amir never displayed his feelings toward Hassan since his unconscious mind was filled with the words that were based on the human differences and superiority of Pashtuns over Hazaras. Similarly, Amir's father in spite of his flexibility toward Hazara people showed a different manner of himself toward Hazaras:

... 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 Shi'a, and nothing was ever going to change that. Nothing [14].

These lines also expose the strong racist and ethnic relations in Afghanistan and that even if the powerful individuals want to have a more positive attitude to the minority ethnic groups, the society prevents them to do so, therefore this ethnic view in the community of Afghanistan acts as

“torture” for both the superiors and inferiors, accordingly in *The Kite Runner* it torments both Amir and Hassan, respectively the representatives of Pashtun and Hazara ethnic groups.

Another scene that portrays Amir’s acceptance of his dominance and authority over Hassan and other Hazaras is when Assef and his friends, who are all Pashtuns, through the ignorance of Amir find this opportunity to rape Hassan. In addition, at the hospital in a dream Amir is reminded by Assef that they are both two Pashtuns who had the same reaction toward Hassan: “We’re the same, you and I. You nursed with him, but you’re my twin” [16]. Assef did not make any difference between Amir and himself; both of them were Pashtuns and from wealthy families and both committed the same act; Hassan was raped by Assef and with the Amir’s silence he was supported. Thus this fact is disclosed that although Amir was aware of the violent act of Assef, he was just a viewer and did not make any attempt to help Hassan.

Assef is also a character that strongly desires the elimination of the Hazara from Afghanistan. He is a German-Afghan guy that is exactly what John Arthur says about racist people. Assef with blue eyes and blonde hair holds “attitudes [that] include unjustified hostility toward a racial group” [18]. He strongly dislikes Hazaras and some sort of sense of violence could be seen in his behavior toward them. His hate toward Hazaras is derived from the past when some Germans were sent to Afghanistan by Hitler and especially to Nuristan where its people had blue eyes and blond hair [19] since these Germans due to their facial appearance did not approve to be from Aryan origin, the matter that was important for Hitler. In *The Kite Runner*, Assef is determined to remove all the Hazaras from the region of Afghanistan and actually it is as a mission for him since Afghanistan was the ground of the Pashtun people and Pashtuns were the real Afghans and the true heirs of it. Assef also blames Amir and his father, Baba, and calls them “a disgrace to Afghanistan” [14] for their support of Hassan and his father because they are Hazaras. In adulthood, Assef joins Taliban, who were mostly Pashtuns, in order to fulfill his mission. He tells Amir that "Afghanistan is like a beautiful big house that was filled with garbage (Hazaras)" [16] and it is his duty to remove the garbage. All these lead him to kill many Hazaras in Hazarajat, the hometown of Hazara ethnic group, in a massacre that was arranged against the Hazaras. For Assef this massacre is an honor and Amir to him is a traitor who escaped from his country and left it for Hazaras.

In spite of all the points that were mentioned about the harsh presence of ethnicity and conflicts of some ethnic groups like Pashtun and Hazara and violent acts of some persons like Assef toward Hazara, there are several signs in the novel *The Kite Runner* that reveal the fact that these quarrels can be solved in the Afghan society and Afghanistan can be changed to a united country. One big example of it is the friendship of Amir and Hassan, one from Pashtun and the other from Hazara ethnic group and their reciprocal sacrifices; Hassan in his childhood helps Amir over and over at the expense of being raped by Assef and his friends and Amir in his adulthood proves his sacrifice spirit when he goes back to Afghanistan and rescues Sohrab, Hassan’s son, at the cost of having a mortal and fatal quarrel with Assef and going to the death edge. Thus, it cannot be judged that the conflicts struggles between ethnic groups in Afghanistan are the outcomes of racism and ethnicity, though they have roles in this course, they are not the main reasons.

Conclusion

According to the definition of racism and ethnicity, it could be concluded that racism is more a social construct than a biological difference which roots in acts of some groups of people that use their facial preference to obtain their goals. Racism has negative outcomes with itself and its most important destroying product is exclusion from social participation and at last exclusion from all human rights that includes the other negative effects of racist outlook like oppression, discrimination, and as a result imbalance in society. Majority of ethnic groups with having money and power in their hands provokes wrong attitudes toward minority ethnic groups and try to take control the society, fix their position in society, and destroy whoever they dislike. They use the misconception of human difference that was created between 16th and 19th centuries to prove that they are superior to other people. In *The Kite Runner*, the novel written by Khaled Hosseini, the subject of racism and ethnicity is thoroughly conspicuous and perceptible in the early parts of the

book when Amir and Baba are in Afghanistan and in the chapters that are related to the dominance of Taliban in Afghanistan. The unfair behavior of Pashtuns including Baba and Amir is detailed by Amir himself throughout the novel and the severe and terrible actions of Taliban toward Hazaras who are immediately killed whenever they encounter with a Taliban member is explained by him. As it was mentioned before, the idea of human difference was not accepted by Feagin who believed that facial or biological differences do not indicate that some people are superior to other people and thereby they should not impose their power over other people. Accordingly, in the novel *The Kite Runner*, Pashtuns are noteworthy in this case by whom the Hazaras' appearance is mocked and they are mostly positioned as slaves of Pashtuns who are not respected by the community of Afghanistan.

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