

Subaltern Ethos as Reflected in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and *And the Mountains Echoed*

3.1 The Origin of the Concept of 'Subaltern'

The concept of 'subaltern' has been attributed varied connotations over the years. Its scope expanded and academicians and philosophers analyzed it thereby making it a pivotal tool while delving into post-colonial literature. In the layman language it means someone belonging to an inferior status. Yet later it became a stepping stone in studying the impact imperialist powers had on the colonized population. But it is imperative that before doing an in-depth analysis of the concept of the subaltern and discussing the theory of subalternity, we trace the origin of the notion of the subaltern.

The term 'subaltern' was coined by the Italian philosopher, linguist, and politician Antonio Gramsci. He first used this term in his book *Prison Notebooks* which was written between 1929 to 1935 when Gramsci was imprisoned by the Italian fascist government. Subaltern can be any group of people who are denied access to their rights by the hegemonic power. Subaltern classes primarily included peasants, workers and people hailing from economically low strata of the society who were not accorded an agency and who lingered in the periphery of the social fabric. The origin of the word is traced to Gramsci though later it was studied extensively and adapted in the Post Colonial theory. It is now an integral aspect of postcolonialism and has been examined thoroughly by academicians and post-colonial scholars.

Gramsci was keen on researching about the historiography of subaltern classes and thus in the book *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* he chalked out a six-step pointer of sorts to analyze the history of subaltern class. It comprised of the following aspects: 1. their objective formation 2. their active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formations; 3. the birth of new parties and dominant groups; 4. the formations that subaltern groups produce to press their claims; 5. new formations within the old framework that assert the autonomy of the subaltern classes; and other points referring to trade unions and political parties... (Gramsci 202–3)

Though the word 'subaltern' first came into being through Gramsci's works, it went through multiple interpretations to become how it is understood in the post-colonial ideology. Gramsci's subaltern largely constituted peasants, workers and inferior

groups suppressed by the hegemony of the ruling elitist Fascist government. But the concept of a group which was not given a voice by the ruling party and which lurked on the edges to make their voices heard and their rights accorded was something which acted as a stepping stone to the theory of subaltern. Hence in a way Gramsci paved a way for the acknowledgement of such a group which was voiceless and whose stories were hitherto told by elitist people thereby making it unauthentic and skewed.

There have been arguments that the post-colonial philosophers took the concept of the subaltern as formulated by Gramsci to a different dimension. Yet if we gauge at the theory of the subaltern we would realize as mentioned above that Gramsci's concept of subaltern was further delved into and put into context by employing not just the political milieu of Italy but across nations. The research paper titled 'Retracing the concept of the subaltern from Gramsci to Spivak: Historical developments and new applications,' propagates:

Gramsci's standpoint is fundamentally instrumental to any student who reaches an understanding of the origin of the notion of the subaltern because it tends to detach itself from the mechanistic and economic form that narrowly characterizes most of the Marxist traditional studies. The subaltern classes refer fundamentally in Gramsci's words to any "low rank" person or group of people in a particular society suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class that denies them the basic rights of participation in the making of local history and culture as active individuals of the same nation. Gramsci's intentions when he first used the concept of the subaltern are clear enough to be given any other far-fetched interpretations. The only groups Gramsci had in mind at that time were the workers and peasants who were oppressed and discriminated by the leader of the National Fascist Party, Benito Mussolini, and his agents. (Louai)

Inspired by Gramsci's conceptualization of the subaltern a number of twentieth century scholars became keen on exploring the notion of subaltern and made an attempt to relate it to post-modern times. Owing to this the concept of subaltern, which was slippery to begin with went on to have a wider scope as was ever intended

by Gramsci. It was linked to the post-modern times and analysed to fit into the contemporary times by eminent scholars. Thus, came into being the Subaltern Studies Group, which was formed by South-Asian scholar Ranajit Guha. Many other prominent South-Asian scholars and thinkers came to be associated with the Subaltern Studies Group namely Dipesh Chakraborty, David Arnold, Partha Chatterjee, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak among others. The concept of subaltern intrigued these scholars to no end and as result the idea of subaltern was further delved into. Spivak has offered insightful analysis of the notion of subaltern. Based in the US Spivak has consistently championed the cause of the marginalised voices shushed by the Western world. A feminist and Marxist, she was influenced deeply by Jacques Derrida and his concept of deconstruction. She discovered Derrida and went on to translate Derrida's *De la grammatologie* which was widely read and became a great success amongst students and peers. Spivak employed Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction while putting forth subaltern theory. As a feminist she spoke vociferously about women as subalterns and their role in the contemporary times as subjects of the colonial rulers. She is often termed as the co-founder of post-colonial theory, a title she mostly refutes. Her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak" till today remains a much discussed and intriguing piece of discourse on the concept of subaltern. Spivak in the paper talks about how colonialism has impacted the class of people who do not have an agency and how even when their plight is delineated by the Western world, it does not serve a purpose as it is terribly skewed. She furthermore cites the example of the Indian subcontinent and discusses how the practice of *Sati* was looked into by the colonialists. Spivak argues that women are subaltern on dual levels, one being from the inferior class and other on account of their gender. She mentions in her essay, "What must elite do to watch out for the continuing construction of the subaltern? The question of 'woman' seems most problematic in this context. Clearly, if you are poor, black, and female, you get it in three ways." On the practice of *Sati*, as per which a widow self immolates herself on the pyre of her dead husband, Spivak says that though she doesn't mean to support *Sati*, she wants to question that because the sect of people who introduced this practice, propagates it, while the colonial forces abolish it. In between the two parties the voice of the woman is lost. She is not offered any

agency and choice in the matter. This is where Spivak formulated her oft quoted statement, "White men are saving brown women from brown men." (Spivak)

Academician Lynsie Thompson elucidates in her paper on Spivak's essay:

The English men as colonisers are collectively represented as the protector, the saviour of Indian women from an oppressively patriarchal Hindu society. However, Spivak then presents the other side to the sati abolition argument, whereby 'the women actually wanted to die.' If this argument is rephrased to the more universally applicable: 'brown women do not need saving,' then these two polemics may serve as posts against or between which the representations of British dealings with India can be positioned. Through an examination of various sati and mutiny texts, and R. K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs*, the extent to which Spivak's sentence truly represents the Anglo-Indian relationship may be determined by how far the coloniser is presented as the hero, or the intruder, on the colonised. Although dating from the colonial to the postcolonial (1827-1976) Spivak's sentence resonates in all of the texts, but to varying degrees according to the contexts and individual motives for writing, as Major comments: 'western discourse on sati was far from monolithic... it was also deeply affected by the circumstances in which it was produced. The political and ideological circumstances of the time affected the way in which sati was perceived and portrayed,' Spivak herself states that she does not provide a 'clinching solution' which, incorporating the mutiny and postcolonial texts, suggests that there are other facets of the colonizer-colonized relationship to discover. (Thompson)

Thus, Spivak presented novel arguments which questioned the relationship between the colonizers and colonized thereby giving voice to the subaltern class. As a feminist she emphasized on the plight of women in the colonies and made an earnest attempt to understand the repercussions of the foreign rule on their social and political standing which was already bleak to begin with.

Concerning subaltern, in his book on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Stephen Morton says:

For Spivak the term 'subaltern' is useful because it is flexible; it can accommodate social identities and struggles (such as woman and the colonised) that do not fall under the reductive terms of 'strict class analysis.' As she asserts in an interview published in the US journal *Polygraph*, "I like the word 'subaltern' for one reason. It is truly situational. 'Subaltern' began as a description of a certain rank in the military. The word was used under censorship by Gramsci: he called Marxism 'monism,' and was obliged to call the proletariat 'subaltern.' That word, used under duress, has been transformed into the description of everything that doesn't fall under strict class analysis. I like that, because it has no theoretical rigor". (qtd. in Morton 46)

Furthermore, talking about her essay 'Can Subaltern Speak,' Morton says in a rather succinct manner:

In this essay, Spivak juxtaposes the radical claims of twentieth-century French intellectuals such as Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze to speak for the disenfranchised and the self-righteous claims of British colonialism to rescue native women from the practice of Hindu widow sacrifice in nineteenth-century India. The point of this juxtaposition is to emphasize how the benevolent, radical Western intellectual can paradoxically silence the subaltern by claiming to represent and speak for their experience, in the same way, that the benevolent colonialist silenced the voice of the widow, who 'chooses' to die on her husband's funeral pyre... 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' has been read as illustrating Spivak's own position as a postcolonial intellectual, who is concerned to excavate the disempowered and silenced voices of the past from the material and political context of the present. Unlike Spivak's reading of the Subaltern Studies historical work, this essay combines Spivak's political re-formulation of western poststructuralist methodologies with a reading of the nineteenth-century colonial archives in India. What is more, the essay signals a departure from the historical work of the Subaltern Studies group in that Spivak focuses on the historical experiences of subaltern women, a constituency whose voices and social locations have generally been ignored by the Subaltern Studies collective, as well as by colonial and elite historical scholarship. (Morton and Eaglestone 56–58)

Thus, it is evident that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was instrumental in reshaping an important concept that became the backbone of post-colonial studies and added new insights to the existing theory of subalternity. Though, Spivak is an Indian-born, Western citizen, she has contributed remarkably to the education of her homeland. Since 1986, she has been teaching poor and illiterate children and adults in the Indian states of Bengal/Bihar. She has been one of the pioneers when it comes to literary theories and is amongst the few non-western women to do so. Spivak has also vehemently spoken about the dubious application of the term 'subaltern.' She states that not anyone who belongs to a minority community can be hailed as a subaltern. She was worried that the term 'subaltern' could be used carelessly and for one's vested interests. She believed in giving voice to the subaltern and doing groundwork for the marginalized so as to make them independent. As she mentions, "Who the hell wants to protect subalternity? Only extremely reactionary, dubious anthropologic museumizers. No activist wants to keep the subaltern in the space of difference. You don't give the subaltern voice. You work for the bloody subaltern, you work against subalternity." (De Kock)

Nikita Dhawan, an academician based in Germany draws an insightful study about Spivak's notion of subaltern. She supports Spivak's claim that merely by being a postcolonial or by being someone hailing from a marginalized community does not make one subaltern. It is easy to shout from the rooftops and become a victim. However, in reality, a subaltern either does not have the privilege to talk about his/her subalternity or they feel it is normal to have no agency and they do not question the fact that they are hindered from participating in the functioning of society as an equal. Thus, Spivak despises the idea of the elitist class purporting to be subaltern and defeating the very purpose of the concept of subaltern. As a post-colonial migrant herself Dhawan mentions that she does not intend to deny the fact that migrant post-colonials face multiple issues be it discrimination or exploitation. Yet she agrees with Spivak's viewpoint and declares, "What might the postcolonial feminist do to watch out for the continuing construction of the subaltern? And I answer with Spivak: We the non-subalterns have to unlearn our privilege as our loss." (Dhawan)

The theory of subalternity though propounded years ago and initially employed for the peasant movement remains relevant even today. Dr. Yogesh Kashikar mentions in his paper:

In, "Can the Subaltern Speak", Spivak puts forth her theory of subalternity. The crux of her theory is that the subaltern cannot speak. The tenets of the theory became controversial as they were interpreted with false conviction. Spivak's theory of subalternity does not admit the concept that subaltern cannot talk. Spivak has attached a special significance to the term 'speak' in her essay. By speaking Spivak means transaction between speaker and receiver. When the subalterns try to speak, the message they try to communicate becomes totally distorted. (Kashikar)

In his essay *Conceptualizing Subaltern Studies with Special reference to Spivak's "CAN THE SUBALTERN SPEAK?"* the researcher elucidates further the concept of subaltern with reference to Spivak's essay. He goes on to discuss as to how the notion of subaltern is ambiguous and it can represent a number of groups namely, those who are marginalized, suppressed, oppressed, women and children, Dalits, refugee, migrant, peasant community, LGBTQ, proletariat, and other such groups which are exempted from having an agency and are shoved at the edges by the hegemonic power. He further mentions how Spivak has criticized Western academicians as they cannot truly portray the lived experiences of oppression faced by the subaltern communities. He elaborates on this by rendering an analogy of how a natural calamity in a faraway country is being reported all around the world and is more often than not misunderstood. Similarly, when Western scholars make an attempt to write about the subaltern groups, they tend to fail miserably as they are putting out their assumptions of experiences not lived by them. And it is in this regard subaltern studies are vital as they aid in doing away with elitest bias and adopt a better understanding of the subaltern and realizing what systemic imperialism did to the colonies in the long run. (Barla)

As expressed above, it is clear, that though subalterns make an endeavour to speak, their voice is not heard and it is often misconstrued by those in power. The theory of subalternity in this regard becomes an important tool as it puts forth the notion that

the voiceless and marginalized subalterns are not speaking per se and even if they do, they are not heard. In the current area of research, we would employ this theory in the context of the works of Khaled Hosseini. Hosseini has delved into the political, cultural, and social fabric of Afghanistan to create literature that depicts many such subaltern characters who stand at the fringes and suffer owing to their social and economic standing. He describes their struggle with the elite class and thereby gives the rest of the world a peek into the war-trodden land of his homeland. The theory of subalternity thereby becomes a pivotal tool in the analysis of Hosseini's work as it would help gauge the psyche of the many-layered characters which appear in Hosseini's novels. Afghanistan has been a witness to rampant bloodshed and insurgency. Various powers ruled over the country and impacted its growth as a nation. Be it the Russian forces or the American intervention, the Afghan soil has seen it all. When a foreign power takes the reigns of governance in a country, the aftermaths are deep. They get ingrained in the very fabric of the country. Just as the colonial rule in India changed the country, the imperialist powers rustled the Afghan land and brought about memories which would be imprinted in the minds of the Afghan people for posterity. Post colonial literature stems out of the colonies as an outcome of the colonizer's reign. Post colonial literature makes an earnest endeavour to put forth the experiences of the colonized and tell the world their story. Various aspects are thus put into fore namely racism, gender bias, class-dynamics, and an account of how the natives were exploited. As already discussed, subaltern identity is a vital factor when studying post-colonial literature. In all the three novels of Hosseini namely *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed*, we witness subaltern identities in the various characters. Hosseini brings to life subaltern characters who navigate through marginalization, oppression and isolation and make an attempt to resist those in places of power. In this regard the works of Khaled Hosseini though fiction offer a glimpse of an Afghanistan which is trapped in the clutches of oppression. Being an exile writer, by depicting the travesties of his homeland he also in a way making an unconscious attempt to get a sense of closure. Also, it made the world see Afghanistan in a different light as his characters are not mere caricatures but stand out as real people with real sufferings. He yearned for people to see the real Afghanistan and not just a country wracked with violence and

wars. In etching out realistic characters amidst the backdrop of the erstwhile political milieu of Afghanistan, Hosseini was able to mirror the trials and tribulations faced by the people. These people were inhabitants of a country forever embroiled in the terror caused by belligerent forces. Yet, as we see in his novels, the characters though subaltern at many levels, do not succumb to the violent forces but show resistance and try and forge their way towards freedom and peace.

The study of subaltern identity is quite relevant and one cannot attempt to analyse Khaled Hosseini's works in isolation with the post-colonial undercurrents and more specifically without drawing parallels with the subaltern theory.

3.2 Subaltern Ethos in the Kite Runner

The Kite Runner was published in 2003 to wide acclaim as it brought alive the Afghan soil and depicted the people of Afghanistan as real living people. Afghanistan which had hitherto been sidelined by the West and perceived with disbelief post 9/11 was looked at with a new perspective owing to Hosseini's poignant story-telling. *The Kite Runner* tells the story of two Afghan boys Amir and Hassan and the bond they share amidst the backdrop of a war-trodden Afghanistan. It is a story of love and has a relationship saga at the core, yet it is hard to miss that Hosseini's characters are impacted severely by the socio-political conditions of Afghanistan. They are not presented in isolation with their environment. As a matter of fact, it is the belligerent forces and the political strife that remarkably mark the course of their lives. One aspect that significantly stands out is the class dynamics in the erstwhile Afghan society. Khaled Hosseini makes a deliberate attempt to make a commentary of sorts on the so-called inferior clan namely the Hazara clan which was looked down upon by the elitists. Hosseini, a postcolonial exile writer, has made a conscious attempt to delineate how class dynamics governed the political and social setup of the erstwhile Afghan society. In an interview, he says, "One example that I highlight in my book is the mistreatment of the Hazara people, who were all but banned from the higher appointments of society and forced to play a second-class citizen role. A critical eye toward that era is, I believe, as important as a loving eye because there are lessons to be learned from our own past." (Hosseini, *Dialogue with Khaled Hosseini*)

Thus, Hosseini wanted to address an important aspect of the Afghan society and as someone with privilege in terms of economic standing, social stature as well as class, he wanted to portray how those from the inferior class were treated unfairly. We therefore find undercurrents of class scuffle and a depiction of the injustice meted out to the Hazara clan. This delineation of the subaltern is evident in *The Kite Runner* and it is what makes the book an important post-colonial text as it goes above and beyond the task of mere story-telling. It brings to light the plight of a downtrodden class, a class with more or less no voice and a class which is suppressed on account of their economic and social stature.

In *The Kite Runner* Hosseini tells the tale of the coming of age of two boys Amir and Hassan with disparate ethnic and social stature. Amir hails from the Pashtun clan which is a superior ethnic group having a stranglehold over top positions in the country. Hasan on the other hand is a Hazara which is a minority ethnic group pushed on the fringes of the social circle by the Pashtuns. They are pushed away from society and are now at the lowest rung in the social ladder. While telling the story of the love and brotherhood between these two boys Khaled Hosseini puts forth the plight of the economically inferior Hazara clan. He portrays the exploitation and suppression faced by the Hazara community. This acknowledgment of the subaltern is remarkably credible coming from someone from a post-colonial writer and someone who himself hails from the Pashtun community. In his paper, *Methods of Domination: Towards a Theory of Domestic Colonialism in Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner*, Duke analyses the epistemic violence that colonies and predominantly subalterns face owing to the imperialistic reign and consequent oppression. He traces the history of the Hazara clan and how they were shoved away to Hazarajat, a geographical region where ethnic minorities were systematically displaced. He further delves into the concept of Hazarajat and delineates how the Hazara characters in *The Kite Runner* are pushed into the periphery and how their own people are instrumental in the propagation of their subalternity:

Hazarajat is a region within the highlands of Afghanistan where the Hazara ethnic group was displaced after facing persecution from majority groups, primarily the Pashtuns. Hazaras migrated out of Hazarajat into Iran following an unsuccessful revolt at the end of the nineteenth century, but “colonies

remain in these two areas...many north of Hindu Kush, where they were granted land.... In Hosseini's depictions of Hazarjat, as well as Hassan's place in the geographies of Afghanistan, situations of the colonized are present... In *The Kite Runner*, the Hazaras are confined within a space that creates these colonial situations. The region of Hazarajat functions as a "settlement" of the Hazara people within Afghanistan who have been displaced and forced to settle within a periphery constructed by dominant groups... In addition, the psychological relationship between the Hazaras and the Pashtuns closely parallels relationships that emerge in colonial situations. Hosseini's representation of the geographic and social boundaries regulating the lives of Hazaras and Pashtuns serves as an indication of dominant and subordinate relationships in Afghanistan ripe for postcolonial analysis. (E. Duke)

In *The Kite Runner*, Amir is taken aback to learn about the tragic history of the Hazaras which is kept in covers and hardly talked about or recorded in books. Having found a rare book that recounts the violence targeted towards the clan, Amir becomes cognizant of the atrocities faced by Hassan's Hazara ancestors:

It said the Hazaras had tried to rise against the Pashtuns in the nineteenth century, but the Pashtuns had "quelled them with unspeakable violence." The book said that my people had killed the Hazaras, driven them from their lands, burned their homes, and sold their women. The book said part of the reason Pashtuns had oppressed the Hazaras was that Pashtuns were Sunni Muslims, while Hazaras were Shi'a. The book said a lot of things I didn't know, things my teachers hadn't mentioned. Things Baba hadn't mentioned either. It also said some things I did know, like that people called Hazaras mice-eating, flat-nosed, load-carrying donkeys. I had heard some of the kids in the neighbourhood yell those names to Hassan. (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 9)

Through the above lines, Amir acts as a mouthpiece of Hosseini and throws light on the fact that Hazaras were not only oppressed by the elite class but they also fell prey to epistemic violence. By obliterating the violence and suppression meted out to them from history and by doing away with any such records, they further marginalize the Hazaras. In the absence of any historical accuracy, they made sure that the Hazara

community was devoid of any roots to fall back on and gradually the voice of the elites would become representative of the subaltern group. This is epistemic violence which robs a subaltern of his voice and is instrumental in 'othering' them from the mainstream. Allie Bunch extensively elaborates upon the different kinds of epistemic violence and how it pushes the subalterns to the fringes and leaves them powerless. She enumerates three kinds of epistemic violence that are instrumental in muting the subaltern groups and ousting them from their place of power. Discriminatory epistemic violence occurs when the 'other' group is dehumanized and is put into an inferior bracket as was the case with the Indian Dalits. The second kind of epistemic violence that Bunch delves into is the loss of credibility and an act of silencing a group according them the sorry status of a subaltern. This is termed as Testimonial epistemic violence. The concept of silencing is touched upon by Spivak which has already been analysed at length. A glaring example of testimonial violence is when an artist belonging to a certain community is not credited enough and is barred from performing further. Since the members of this said group is not allowed to participate in the decision-making aspects, he/she is at a loss to raise their heads against the unjust action or hegemony of those in the seat of power. Bunch also calls it the 'denial of linguistic reciprocity.' The third kind of epistemic violence is called distributive. It can be explained as the kind of violence which has a far-reaching impact as it is not merely left confined to a specific aspect and affects the entire out-group population. For instance, denying education to a certain group would in turn push away the entire community and they would be further exempted from being part of governing bodies on account of their ignorance. Bunch thus throws considerable light on the various aspects of epistemic violence and drives home the point that epistemic violence acts as a tool that leads a community or a person to become a subaltern. It wipes away the foundation of the subaltern group gradually but with a studied certainty. (Bunch)

In a country where a foreign reign has prevailed for several years, the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized goes through a gradual shift. Indian scholar and a prominent post-colonial theorist Homi K Bhabha introduced the concept of ambivalence and mimicry to further understand the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer. In his book, 'The Location of Culture,' he elucidates further about the relevance of ambivalence and mimicry in a colonial set-up. He says:

The discourse of mimicry is constructed around ambivalence; in order to be effective mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power...the effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing. (Bhabha 122)

Afghanistan was controlled by Soviet Union and was for a long time stuck between tension that drew out of the Cold War between USA and Soviet Union. Hosseini in this novel depicts the impact of imperialistic powers on Afghanistan and its people by touching upon the mayhem caused by the intervention of power blocks Russia and America. But, he also at length brings to the fore the domestic colonialism which was existent in Afghanistan at that time. The conscious suppression and subjugation of the Hazara tribe by the Pashtuns was at the core of this book. It is what brings about the central conflict in the book as Hassan is targeted, bullied, and molested owing the fact that he is a Hazara boy. One can say that imperialism works at dual levels. On one front the Afghan population bears the strife caused by the various external belligerent forces. On the other front internal forces too wreak havoc on the people, predominantly on the weaker subaltern section of the society. Afghanistan was never a colony of Britain per se but there were constant battles during the 19th century when Britain looked to annex Afghanistan. But the scuffles ended after the Anglo-Afghan War of 1919 resulting in the Treaty of Rawalpindi which gave Afghanistan complete freedom from the British. (Atif Raza)

Khaled Hosseini in his novel *The Kite Runner* has focussed on the time period in Afghanistan from the 1960s to the early 2000s era wherein he touched upon the fall of monarchy, the Russian stranglehold, emergence of the Taliban and the consequent intervention of the US forces following 9/11. He has explored the hegemony of the Russians and the chaotic and despotic reign of the Taliban. The internal forces within Afghanistan were too remarkably instrumental in pushing the Afghan people into becoming subalterns who have zilch autonomy and rights.

In *The Kite Runner* we have a number of subaltern characters who are rendered subalterns owing to their ethnic and economic status. Ali, who is a servant in protagonist Amir's house is someone who has grown up with Amir's Baba. Baba loves him and looks after the well-being of him and his son Hassan. Yet there is an invisible line which is never crossed. Ali is never considered a friend by Baba. This behaviour comes from years of conscious and unconscious conditioning which makes even Baba, an otherwise righteous and liberal man treat Ali as someone beneath him:

Ali and Baba grew up together as childhood playmates- at least until polio crippled Ali's leg- just like Hassan and I grew up a generation later. Baba was always telling us about the mischief he and Ali used to cause, and Ali would shake his head and say, "But Agha sahib, tell them who was the architect of the mischief and who the poor labourer?" Baba would laugh and throw his arm around Ali. But in none of his stories did Baba ever refer Ali as his friend. (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 21)

Though Ali and Hassan are treated with love and affection, they are always made to realize that they are inferior and ought to lead a life of servitude. Despite Baba's liberal thinking, Hassan never gets to go to school and has no exposure to education. He sees the world through the stories of Amir though he has a sharp mind. This belief that people from a certain ethnic group are bound to stand in the fringes makes them subaltern. The lack of education further pushes them in the periphery as devoid of education they are in no position to participate in the affairs of the state and thus they can never question the authority. This also gives rise to a vicious cycle wherein generations go on assuming that it is in their lot to quietly serve the upper-class elitists. Not just Baba, Amir too feels that strangely he never regards Hassan as his friend. Hassan who is his sole companion and confidante is never put into the category of that of a friend. Such is the hold of years of religious bias and ethnicity that one is grappled by discrimination leading him/her to follow the age-old customs of institutionalised bigotry against a sect. It is made evident in the book in these lines- "Never mind any of those things. 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." (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 20) In any society enlightenment occurs aided by education. It is education

which brings the poor inferior clan to stand up for their rights and speak up against any kind of injustice. Hosseini in this book also drives home the point that both the subaltern characters Ali and Hassan are illiterate. Hassan is a bright boy who could have risen had he been given the opportunity to study. Yet he remains a servant following the footsteps of his equally subaltern father. Amir states with nonchalance that Hassan being a Hazara marked his fate as an illiterate:

That Hassan would grow up illiterate like Ali and most Hazaras had been decided the minute he had been born, perhaps even the moments he had been conceived in Sanuabar's unwelcoming womb- after all what use did a servant have for the written word? But despite his illiteracy, or maybe because of it, Hassan was drawn to the mystery of words, seduced by a secret world forbidden to him. I read him poems and stories, sometimes riddles- though I stopped reading those when I saw he was far better at solving them than I was. (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 24)

Hassan's ethnicity not just robs him of his right to education but it also leads to everyday oppression and stigma. Assef who is his nemesis hurls abuses at him and leaves no opportunity to put him down. "Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns, it always has been, always will be. We are the true Afghans, the pure Afghans, not this Flat-Nose here. His people pollute our homeland, our Watan. They dirty our blood." (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 35). Assef is portrayed as a staunch Afghani who is later the preparator of a crime that changes the life of the two boys Amir and Hassan forever. He molests and rapes Hassan and breaks the Hazara boy. Despite the trauma that follows the molestation, Hassan remains quiet as he is also conditioned to suffer in silence whatever the circumstances be. This makes us again question if subalterns do speak. Most of the time they are silent sufferers of the violence, injustice, and hegemony of the elite class.

Hosseini further delineates how imperialistic forces and the political upheaval that followed in the years 1978- 79. It not just instilled fear in the hearts of the subaltern population but also the so-called elite class of Afghans like Baba. As Amir points out, "The end the official end would come first in 1978 with the communist coup d'etat, and then in December 1979, when Russian tanks would roll into the very same 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, *The Kite Runner* 32). Hosseini made an endeavour to depict a parallel between internal and external 'othering' in Afghanistan. While the Hazaras were oppressed by internal forces, the advent of Russians led to the loss of governance which affected not just the Hazaras but also the elite Pashtuns. And consequently, Baba and Amir were forced to flee their homeland, leaving all their riches behind. Earning the status of homeless refugees Baba and Amir would cease to enjoy their elite status. Hosseini subtly delves into the atrocities of Russian soldiers and broods at the price people pay in a country wrecked with wars. Baba who is a righteous man objects to a Russian soldier's attempt to rape a fellow Afghan woman. But the Russian soldier is quick to answer that, "There is no shame in war." (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 100) One can see the futility of war through the many instances narrated in the book. Hosseini also does not present a lopsided view of things. He wants to tell the readers that even the warring forces are humans and like anybody they too are puppets in the hands of a power-drunk governance. One of the Russian soldiers says, "Russia sends them here to fight...But they are just boys, and when they come here, they find the pleasure of drug." (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 102)

In America Baba and Amir start their lives afresh. Baba has a hard time adjusting to an alien country, moving away from his culture, and most importantly accepting the fact that he is no more an affluent elite. Amir on the other hand finds solace in America as for him it is "Someplace with no ghosts, no memories, and no sins. If for nothing else, for that, I embraced America." (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 119) Baba who was a revered and imposing personality in Afghanistan, is dwindled and becomes powerless. He is agitated when he is asked to show his ID card at a shop- "He wants to see my license...Almost two years we've bought his damn fruits and put money in his damn pocket and the son of a dog wants to see my license...What kind of country is this? No one trusts anybody." (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 111) Separated from his Afghan roots and away from his homeland Baba is almost bereft of his identity and grapples to find an agency in America where he is merely a refugee. It is not that he has migrated from Afghanistan willingly but it is the belligerent Russian forces that led him to abandon his motherland much to his dismay. His angst is visible when he

refuses to see a doctor who is of Russian descent stating vehemently, "I don't care where he was born, he's *Roussi*...His parents were *Roussi*, his grandparents were *Roussi*. I swear on your mother's face I'll break his arm if he tries to touch me." (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 135) Baba who represented power and masculinity in Afghanistan is distressed in his new identity as an expatriate. He refuses to accept government support in the form of food stamps. It is beneath him to take favours and he blatantly refuses- "I work always. In Afghanistan I work. In America I work. Thank you very much...but I don't like it free money." (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 114)

Thus, though Amir warms up to life as an expatriate, Baba struggles. Hosseini has attempted to showcase the plight of the refugees through Baba's American way of life. Baba's identity is hampered as a refugee and he spends the rest of his life living his life away from his motherland. Refugees like Baba are rendered as subalterns when they are coerced to move away from their homelands. We are therefore made privy to differing categories of subalterns. The former was Ali and Hassan who were subalterns owing to their ethnicity and economic status. Then there is Baba who is a subaltern as he is a refugee- a victim of imperialism. As is mentioned in the paper, 'Subaltern Pedagogy: A Critical Theorizing of Pedagogical Practices for Marginalized Border-Crossers':

A social group who has been rendered dispossessed and marginalized, having often crossed political or natural borders and inhabiting and dwelling, sometimes forcefully, within the social, cultural, and economic margins outside of the hegemonic power structure. The subaltern are refugees, asylum seekers, and migrant workers; they are internally displaced persons or internally colonized; they flee the violent conflict of their homelands or natural disasters or economic despair; and they often experience in their daily lives the threat of violence, poverty, illness, hunger, prejudice, racism, and xenophobia. This subaltern group's shared "culture" is not defined by a common language, nor similar social mores, but rather, a shared space of struggle, of survival, and of interstitiality, or "inbetween-ness" to achieve a shared resistance of hope and prosperity in oppressive and often racist societies. (Keyl 177)

Hosseini mostly draws a rosy picture of life in America and does not depict any interaction with the local population in the US. Yet one can reach to a conjecture that despite being in a prosperous country, Baba struggles because he is no more the powerful businessman as he was in Afghanistan where he wielded respect and where servants were available at his beck and call. On this account, he fringes towards being a subaltern as he is devoid of agency in a foreign land. Immigrants have social groups but for people like Baba who have spent their entire life in their homeland, it becomes difficult to come to terms with life in a new country with different culture and beliefs. To add to it, after 9/11, Afghan immigrants had to face discrimination and xenophobia. In *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini has touched upon the 9/11 incident in passing. The story almost ends in 2001, so we do not particularly see the aftermath of 9/11 on Baba and Amir. Moreover, people have different lived experiences even in the same country. In another prominent book called *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* where an Afghan immigrant is depicted residing in post 9/11, we witness a different perspective. It is evident in the following lines when Afghans were looked at with disbelief. It was a nasty aftermath of the 9/11 attack and the brunt of it was shared by Afghans in the US. This sidelined them, isolated them making them subalterns:

When we arrived, I was separated from my team at immigration. They joined the queue for American citizens; I joined the one for foreigners. The officer who inspected my passport was a solidly built woman with a pistol at her hip and a mastery of English inferior to mine; I attempted to disarm her with a smile. 'What is the purpose of your trip to the United States?' she asked me. 'I live here,' I replied. 'That is not what I asked you, sir,' she said. 'What is the purpose of your trip to the United States?' (Hamid 86)

This discrimination is seen in many of the post-9/11 Afghan texts and makes one ponder over the consequences of an attack on the people of same ethnicity. There are multiple forces that are at play when living as a refugee and everyone responds to the socio-cultural differences in their own way. Grant Andrews in his thesis points out Baba's struggles and hints at his subaltern status:

Although Amir views America as a place of redemption, there are hints of a barrier to full inclusion into American society. These barriers are mostly

shown in how Amir's father, simply referred to as Baba in the novel, is actively resistant to accepting his position as a disempowered immigrant...Baba's refusal to accept financial assistance is one of the ways in which he resists an identity of dependence and powerlessness. Indeed, Baba becomes the embodiment of power through his association with what the novel constructs as masculine symbols of power while living in Afghanistan, symbols which are idealised in Amir's experience of America. However, despite his ability to enact these masculine ideals, Baba is not able to maintain his power in America. I argue that even though Baba maintains the national myth of the American dream and embodies the images of masculine power, his loss of power in the US is due to the ethnocultural boundary which encircles American identity as it is constructed in the novel. Baba does not identify as an American but maintains his identity as Afghan. (Andrews 17)

Hassan's son Sohrab is another pivotal character who is markedly subaltern. He is a Hazara who suffers physical and mental abuse in a country that become a place wreaked with violence and bloodshed. Being from a lowly community of Hazara which has always been shoved to the fringes, he is further more susceptible to all sorts of atrocities by the belligerent forces in Afghanistan. Sohrab's parents Hassan and Farzana are killed by the Talibanis leaving him an orphan. He is thereafter led to an orphanage from where he is taken away by a Talib officer who abuses him. It is later revealed that the Talib officer is none other than Assef, Hassan, and Amir's nemesis from the past. Sohrab is shown in a wretched state as he is not only a victim of militancy and ethnic bias, but also a victim of sexual harassment. He dances to the tunes of the menacing Assef and suffers in silence as he is voiceless in a country where a poor Hazara has no place but to be shoved into a corner. It is only when Amir rescues him and brings him back to America that he is finally free from his subaltern status. Though the wounds of violence would have never healed fully, he finds a home and a right to be free.

3.3 Subaltern Ethos in A Thousand Splendid Suns

Khaled Hosseini's second novel which was published in the year 2007 tells the story of a war-ravaged Afghanistan through the eyes of two women Mariam and Laila. The trials and tribulations faced by both these women characters unveil the plight of

women in Afghanistan. In this novel Hosseini traces the suffering and discrimination women face and how patriarchy and war alienate them, eventually breaking them. Set against the backdrop of the Soviet revolution of 1978 and then the autocratic Taliban reign, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has brought forth the helplessness of women who are rendered subaltern by war, patriarchy, and subjugation. It is interesting to gauge that in this novel the two protagonists that Hosseini presents are disparate by nature, having brought up in contrasting environment. Yet owing to the common denominators of patriarchy, domestic violence, and oppression they come together to form a sisterhood of sorts. For years Afghanistan was controlled by various warring forces disrupting the peace and imposing unfair laws on its people. The brunt of the constant encroachment was borne by the women of Afghanistan. Through this novel, Hosseini intends to bring to the world the story of two such women who are victims of colonialism and patriarchy. Though fiction, the realistic depiction of the plight of these women touches a chord and makes one take a hard look at the aftermaths of war on women.

Mariam lives in a *kolba* on the outskirts of the city with her mother. From the very beginning of her existence, Mariam is made brutally aware that she is a 'harami' (bastard). Her mother Nana does not mince any words and out of her bitterness and insecurity vents her anger on her daughter. Thus, even before an external force comes into play Mariam is made subaltern by her illegitimate status. Her living on the outskirts, away from the society, is symbolic of her subaltern status. She is robbed of her rights to mingle in the society and is shoved to the fringes. She craves for her father's attention who is conditioned to walk the path laid down by a patriarchal society. Honor plays a vital role here and women are made to believe by the age-old archaic dogmas that they are the inferior sex.

Gerda Lerner, the prominent historian, and a feminist writer investigates the how patriarchy was created. She argues as to how even inferior groups like peasants, proletarians and even slaves have at some point risen and found a place in history. Yet women have mostly been excluded. She questions, "the long delay (over 3500 years) in women's coming to consciousness of their own subordinate position in society. What could explain it? What could explain women's historical "complicity" in upholding the patriarchal system that subordinated them and in transmitting that

system that subordinated them and in transmitting that system, generation after generation, to their children of both sexes?" She states that patriarchy as a system is historical in nature. It has been there since the beginning and is not the outcome of any 'biological determinism.' (Lerner 5–6) Afghan society was steeped in patriarchy and the onus of it is borne by women who are forced to live under the shadows of menfolk.

Nana is a victim of patriarchy and as a result, she is left to be a single mother. She consequently becomes a cynic who despises men. Her bitterness is evident when she tells her daughter, "Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam." (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 7) Endurance is another aspect of being a subaltern which is deftly exemplified in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Nana bears the injustice meted out to her and lives away from the city in a secluded hut. Another thing that is to be observed is that she is conditioned to think that it is women's lot to suffer. And though Nana blatantly criticizes Jalil so much so that she even vents out her anger on his sons, she is never directly shown to spew venom on Jalil. She probably realizes that she has no means to fend for herself and Mariam and so she lives a life drawn out by Jalil in a tiny *kolba* away from Jalil's family. Jalil harbors some guilt for impregnating Nana and for abandoning his daughter Mariam yet Jalil himself is born and brought up in a society where he has been conditioned to blindly follow the diktats of patriarchy. Thus, Nana is a subaltern on account of her inferior status and then further when she is marginalized and ousted from society to raise her daughter alone.

Mariam's life topples when Nana commits suicide and she is forced to marry a man old enough to be her father. She has no say in the decision and no one to fall back on. She accepts her destiny as, "She, Mariam, was an illegitimate person who would never have a legitimate claim to the things other people had, things such as love, family, home, acceptance." (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 6)

Feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir spells out in her book, *The Second Sex* as to how marriage as an institution affects women in more ways than one and often cripples them thereby rendering them a subaltern of sorts:

In marrying, the woman receives a piece of the world as property; legal guaranties protect her from man's caprices; but she becomes his vassal. He is economically the head of the community, and he thus embodies it in society's eyes. She takes his name; she joins his religion, integrates into his class, his world; she belongs to his family, she becomes his other "half." She follows him where his work calls him: where he works essentially determines where they live; she breaks with her past brutally, she is annexed to her husband's universe." (Beauvoir 506)

Mariam's trauma and institutionalized abuse begin when she marries Rashid. From a child, she is suddenly transformed into a married yet marginalized subaltern who is wed against her will to a man who perceives her as a commodity. Hosseini explicitly depicts how women are treated in a patriarchal Afghan society. He does not shy away from writing about the atrocities faced by women in a society plagued by both patriarchy and then war. Women are made subalterns not just by patriarchy but they also suffer at the hands of despotic leadership and perpetual scuffles. United Nations Development Funds for Women (UNIFEM) puts across in their paper:

Women are victims of unbelievably horrific atrocities and injustices in conflict situations; this is indisputable. As refugees, internally displaced persons, combatants, heads of household, and community leaders, as activists and peace-builders, women, and men experience conflict differently. Women rarely have the same resources, political rights, authority, or control over their environment and needs that men do. In addition, their caretaking responsibilities limit their mobility and ability to protect themselves. (Rehn and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf)

Rasheed imposes his right on Mariam in the very beginning of their relationship when he exclaims, "Where I come from, a woman's face is her husband's business only. I want you to remember that." (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 69) Mariam who had never worn a burqa in her life is made to wear one as Rasheed believes that his 'nang and namoos' lies in the face of his wife. Herein we can gauge how subaltern identity is shaped. It is a gradual process wherein the victim is gaslighted and subjugated. Mariam has no agency in Rasheed's house and is merely treated as

someone who would look after the house, cook, clean, and then warm his bed. Procreation is another duty that is thrust upon women and Mariam too suffers anguish and despair when she is unable to give an offspring, preferably a male offspring to her husband. She suffers multiple miscarriages and with each miscarriage, Rasheed's indifference towards her aggravates. Marital rape and an absence of consent are two other elements that further propel a woman towards misery and make her a subaltern. Rasheed forces himself on Mariam without her consent when she is merely a child. She is though naïve to understand what befell her. Male dominance is established through these acts and is instrumental in defining women as the inferior sex. Derision is another way which is employed to look down upon women and make them a subaltern. Here too Mariam is ridiculed by Rasheed for her ignorance and lack of education- "You don't know what a communist is? Such a simple thing. Everyone knows. Its common knowledge You don't ...Bah. I don't know why I am surprised...You don't know anything, do you? You're like a child. Your brain is empty. There is no information in it." (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 97)

On one hand, Rasheed mocks her for her naivety, and on the other hand he warns her from mingling with neighbours who are spoiling their honour as their wives walk alone in the street and do cover herself properly- "There is a teacher living down the street, Hakim is his name, and I see his wife Fariba all the time walking the streets alone with nothing on her head but a scarf. It embarrasses me, frankly to see a man who's lost control of his wife." (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 69)

The question which is most pondered upon is whether subalterns can speak. And the further we delve into such characters the more we realize that there is no definite answer to this. Mariam is depicted as a meek woman who suffers in silence and stays put in her terrible marriage bearing domestic violence and indifference. Mariam does voice out her opinion when Rasheed is about to marry a young Laila. But Rasheed does not pay heed to her opinion. Laila, the second protagonist is brought up in an enlightened household and is educated enough to stand for her rights. Yet we see that even Laila has to bear Rasheed's persistent mistreatment. But she does resist. She even intends to leave but her impending pregnancy keeps her decision to leave at bay. For the sake of the unborn child, she consents to marry Rasheed. Herein we can gauge that by dint of being raised by a learned and feminist father, Laila dares to speak up

against any kind of injustice. Education plays a vital role in dispelling subalternity as it makes one aware of his/her rights. Babi, Laila's father is a university-educated man. He had "made it clear to a young Laila from a young age that the most important thing in his life, after her safety, was her schooling...For the last two years Laila had received the *awal numra* certificate, given yearly to the top ranked student in each grade (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 114). Later, Hosseini depicts how two women raised in divergent environments form a sisterhood to fight oppression and ill-treatment. Laila not only voices her opinion time and again she even protects Mariam and gives her the agency to become fearless. As is pointed out in the paper, 'Can Subaltern Be Heard: An Analysis of *The Kite Runner* and *The Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khalid Hosseini' in explicit terms:

The subaltern consciousness is constructed through the cultural forces. In the outset of the novels, the subaltern-conscious is fixed in the blood of the subaltern. In the course of the time, the conscious is pricked and punctured and a new conscious develops which motivates the subaltern to act against the hegemonic forces. Gramsci's desire is fulfilled when the subaltern people realize the oppression against them, they join hands, develop understanding, form a state where there was eye for eye, blow for the blow and life for life. (Gafoor and Farooq)

Though both Mariam and Laila are subalterns caged inside the four walls of their misogynist husband, it is the bond that they share against a common enemy that keeps them going. Mariam for the first time in her life finds someone standing up for her. She in turn showers love and affection on Laila's children and treat them as her own. The two women share a mother-daughter relationship which aids them in forging ahead in life. They are first rendered subalterns by Rasheed and later by the outside forces in the form of the Taliban government. While Rasheed is a perpetrator of domestic violence and abuse and treats them as his property, the Taliban forces go a step ahead and impose despotic laws on women and make their lives a living hell. Women during the Taliban reign are completely robbed of their rights and are forced to live under the shadows of their male guardians. After the Taliban takes over, it becomes furthermore difficult for the two women to live a life of dignity. Laila thus endeavours to break free of her subaltern identity by escaping from the clutches of

Rasheed. But her plans turn awry and both she and Mariam are thrown back to the same hell-hole. As mentioned earlier, Hosseini gives an explicit description of the violence and brutality that women during those times faced. He wanted to depict the true picture of Afghan patriarchy so that the world could stand in solidarity with the downtrodden Afghan women. These women have been bereft of their basic rights and are the ones who are the most affected by war and extremism. When these women attempt to flee and look for a better life, they are trampled. Laila and Mariam too face the same horrendous fate when they fail to run away from Kabul:

Laila didn't see the punch coming...It was as if a car had hit her at full-speed, in the tender place between the lower tip of the breastbone and the belly button...There was no cursing, no screaming, no pleading, no surprized yelps, only the systematic business of beating and being beaten, the thump, thump of something solid repeatedly striking flesh, something, someone, hitting a wall with a thud, cloth ripping. Now and then, Laila heard running footsteps, a wordless chase, furniture turning over, glass shattering, then the thumping once more. Laila took Aziza in her arms. A warmth spread down the front of her dress when Aziza's bladder let go. (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 261-262)

Taliban rule made things worse for Afghans and predominantly Afghan women. While it was a despotic reign that made the lives of both men and women miserable, the laws were staunch and unfair for the womenfolk. Hosseini draws a vivid depiction of the plight of women under the Taliban reign. Laila and Mariam were already living a life of oppression owing to Rasheed's vicious treatment. And with the new rules imposed by the Taliban things turned grimmer. Forbidding women of their basic rights is how one indulges in the institutionalized suppression of women thereby making them subalterns. And the Taliban's reign did the same in Afghanistan. The Taliban imposed archaic rules and regulations on the Afghans, most of which adversely affected the women. Some of the rules which women were expected to follow are enumerated in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*:

It is not proper for women to wander aimlessly about the streets. If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a mahram, a male relative. If you are caught alone, you will be beaten and sent home.

You will not under any circumstance, show your face. You will cover with burqa when outside. If you do not, you will be severely beaten.

Cosmetics are forbidden.

Jewellery is forbidden.

You will not wear charming clothes.

You will not speak unless spoken to.

You will not make eye contact with men.

You will not laugh in public. If you do, you will be beaten.

You will not paint your nails. If you do, you will lose a finger.

Girls are forbidden from attending school. All schools for girls will be closed immediately.

Women are forbidden from working.

If you are found guilty of adultery, you will be stoned to death. (Hosseini, A Thousand Splendid Suns 271)

Through a fictional tale, Hosseini has laid bare amidst the world as to how women were bereft of their fundamental rights. From the above excerpt, one can begin to understand how women were treated with utter disrespect and how they were objectified. If women failed to abide by these draconian rules they were subjected to assault, rape, and even put to death. And not just women, men were made subalterns too. Even the vile misogynist Rasheed was a subaltern under the Taliban regime. Men too were made to follow a certain decorum and were expected to follow a certain code of conduct. As mentioned in previous chapters the banning of kite-flying was what triggered Hosseini to take his pen and write about the sad state of affairs of his erstwhile peaceful homeland.

Under such extremist reign, women not only suffer mental agony but are also denied medical care. Medical facility is a primary right in any State and yet when Laila is

about to give birth to Rasheed's son, she is denied the same. When she is in labour, Mariam rushes her to a hospital only to be given a blatant reply, "This hospital no longer treats women" (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 278). A 2001 Canadian report states how during the Taliban rule women were robbed of their medical rights. Hosseini therefore states facts and has drawn a realistic picture of the gruesome happenings that occurred post the Taliban takeover:

The idea that health care might be refused based on a person's sex seems preposterous in Canada. Yet that is what many women in Afghanistan face today. The restrictions on women's mobility ordered by the Taliban regime, the edicts against women's rights and freedoms, the denial of education and employment, and even the dress code that is brutally enforced by the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice have had a disastrous effect on the health of the country's women and children. Taliban rule has also created a dire shortage of female physicians, making women's access to health care even more difficult... "If there are no female physicians, women and children are denied help, even if they are dying" ... Reports vary widely across the country, but one theme persists: men should not be looking at women. Even in places where this is tolerated, doctors are barred from examining body parts not directly affected by the ailment. (Mendes)

The above report is a real-time story of the atrocities faced by women and how the healthcare system crumbled under the Taliban's rule. In this book, we witness how Laila delivers a child without anesthetic. Hosseini leaves no stone unturned in portraying how women were mistreated and how gender subalternity made their lives living hells. The female doctors who were educated and had a certain agency were made subalterns too. The female doctor who treats Laila sounds helpless and exclaims, "I have no X-ray either, no suction, no oxygen, not even simple antibiotics. When NGOs offer money, the Taliban turn them away. Or they funnel the money to the places that cater to men." (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 283-284).

It is appalling to see how in the current age and era, women are still treated with such contempt. The Taliban takeover occurred in the 90s era. It was a time when women from all around the world were breaking glass ceilings and achieving path-breaking

milestones. But Hosseini introduces us to the plight of Afghan women who are forced to lead a life of fear and subjugation. These are not merely his figment of imagination but characters taken from real life. Like Mariam and Laila, there were women in flesh and blood who went through a vicious circle of suffering and stigma.

Gender subalternity makes women weak and more often than not they endure having no agency and nothing to fall back on. Yet at times, the agony is so profound that they retaliate. They show their angst and displeasure at being pushed around. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, both Mariam and Laila are subdued and made subalterns by patriarchy and militancy. They are left with no choice but to suffer in silence. But Hosseini depicts that women are no weaklings and when they are pushed to their edges they do react with vengeance. Laila does the same when Rasheed suggests that her daughter Aziza should be sent to beg on the streets. She hits him hard and though Rasheed hits her back, at that juncture, she feels liberated. To her "it seemed worthwhile, if absurdly so, to have endured all they'd endured for this one crowning moment, for this act of defiance that would end the suffering of all indignities." Even a tiny act of defiance elevates a subaltern and fills them with hope.

Hosseini also describes how the Taliban destroyed the Bamiyan Buddha statues. These statues were an intrinsic part of the Afghan fabric, its heritage. By demolishing these statues, the Taliban tried to obliterate Afghan history. Wiping the history and culture of a country is another way the imperialist establishes his stranglehold over the subjugated population. It is a means to wield power and proclaim their hegemony over the subaltern crowd. Laila remembers visiting the Bamiyan Buddhas when she was a young girl with her father. Babi, Laila's father took his daughter to witness the statues as he wanted her to know of her country's rich past- "I also wanted you to see your country's heritage, children, to learn of its rich past. You see, some things I can teach you. Some you learn from books. But there are things that, well, you just have to *see and feel*." (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 147).

We observe that along with Mariam and Laila, the little girl Aziza too falls prey to patriarchy and discrimination. From early on she is subjected to gender subalternity. Her father Rasheed berates her and even thrashes her without batting an eyelid. She grows up without the love and affection of a father figure and only finds solace in the

arms of Mariam and Laila. When things turn awry and the family is financially strained, Rasheed decides to send Aziza off to a dilapidated orphanage. Aziza who is just a little girl bears the brunt of the poverty-stricken family. Rasheed showers all his love and affection to his son Zalmai. He openly discriminates between his children and does not attempt to care for his daughter. Hosseini gives vivid descriptions of Afghanistan which appears gaunt and broken by years of violence and bloodshed. Women and children were most affected by the despotic reign and Hosseini does not mince words to highlight the dire state of the women and children. Poverty was widespread and since women were forbidden to go out and work, they were helpless and could do nothing but watch their children starve. Like Laila many mothers were forced to send away their children to orphanages so that they could eat three meals. These orphanages were run by a few good Samaritans but were always under-resourced due to lack of funds. Aziza too is sent to such an orphanage and at a young age she is separated from her mother. The director of the orphanage makes efforts to educate the girls albeit in a clandestine manner as girls cannot study as per the Taliban law:

Kaka Zaman made it a point to teach them something every day, reading and writing most days, sometimes geography, a bit of history or science, something about plant and animals. But we have to pull the curtains, Aziza said, so the Taliban don't see us. Kaka Zaman had knitting needles and balls of yarn ready, she said, in case of Taliban inspection. We put the books away and pretend to knit. (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 314).

Laila had to make arduous efforts to see her daughter at the orphanage. As per the law, women could not walk the streets without a male escort. Since Rasheed refuses to accompany her, Laila draws the courage to walk to the orphanage on her own. Though a subaltern, Laila stands up to her husband who forbids her from going alone lest she would suffer the Taliban's wrath. And she does get beaten up by the Taliban many times. Yet she persevered as she could not give up on seeing her daughter. Here we see how women had become resilient and despite the fear of the extremists, they did not give up for the sake of their loved ones. As subalterns they lacked support due to which they could not defy the forces if they wanted to live. It was not easy to bear horrific acts of violence that were meted out to them, yet they moved on with their

lives- 'One day a young Talib beat Talib with a radio antenna. When he was done, he gave a final whack to the back of her neck and said, "I see you again I'll beat you until your mother's milk leak out of your bones.'" (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 313).

Aziza, the little girl appears to be strong on the outside. But she was being separated from her family. She developed a stutter which is often a sign of trauma. Gender subalternity ran deep in Afghanistan and it reached its zenith during the Taliban rule. And not just grown women but little girls were victims of it too. They were deprived of a normal and safe childhood. The constant scuffles and power battles led to the birth of a generation of young adults with a traumatic and scarred childhood.

The question which is most asked when discussing subalterns is whether they can speak. They cannot speak as we have already established. The fact that they are deprived of rights and agency is what makes them subalterns in the first place. Yet, in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini shows us how sisterhood aids in breaking the shackles of subalternity. Mariam is depicted as a subdued character, she is portrayed as someone who is cornered right after she is born as an illegitimate child, a *harami*. But when she realizes that Rasheed is going to kill Laila, it becomes the last straw. Laila is like a daughter to a childless Mariam. Laila is like a flicker of hope who fills Mariam's morose existence with joy. Laila and Aziza's companionship warms Mariam's heart. And so, the insurmountable love for Laila drives Mariam to end Rasheed's life. From a feeble woman, who is suppressed and gaslighted by her husband, Mariam transforms into someone who stands against violence. Mariam makes the ultimate sacrifice to save Laila's life and herein we witness how when the going gets tough, even a victimised subaltern woman stands up against injustice. Mariam could not let Rasheed kill Laila and so for the first time in her life she resolves to take things in her hands- "She turned it so the sharp edge was vertical, and, as she did, it occurred to her that that was the first time that *she* was deciding the course of her own life." (Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* 341).

Mariam is executed as per the Taliban law but she dies knowing that she stood up against a lifetime of violence and subjugation. She dies knowing that through her final act, she could give Laila the freedom to live happily. Laila who was a victim of

oppression and misogyny all her life is no more a subaltern when she lives a life of dignity with Tariq. She not only ceases to be a subaltern; she comes back to Afghanistan to help reinstate her battered homeland. Thus, in *A thousand Splendid Suns* we are given a deep dive into the life of subaltern characters who suffer years of systemic abuse. Yet, Hosseini drives home a point that there is hope. Sisterhood and the right support system can obliterate subalternity. A war-ravaged nation can be rebuilt with the help of natives like Laila and Tariq who work for the upliftment of their erstwhile rich homeland.

3.4 Subaltern Ethos in And the Mountains Echoed

Ranajit Guha, the driving force behind the development of Subaltern Studies, points out that “subaltern is a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian Society, whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way.” (Guha and Spivak 35) The concept of subaltern as already noted prevails in Hosseini’s books as he makes an endeavor to become a mouthpiece of the battered citizens of Afghanistan through his characters. In his third book *And the Mountains Echoed* which was published in 2013, yet again we find myriads of characters that represent subalternity not just in Afghanistan but across continents. Through his characters, Hosseini tries to depict the travesties of people who have been on the fringes of society and who have been constantly robbed of an agency.

And the Mountains Echoed commences with the depiction of a family reeling with abject poverty. The head of the family Saboor narrates a story to his two children- a story which is steeped in symbolism as it mirrors his own plight as a father. Like Baba Ayub in his story, he also is at a crossroads. Poverty and deprivation led him to give away his daughter so that she has a better life- ‘A finger cut to save the hand’ (Hosseini, *And the Mountains Echoed* 4) Like Baba Ayub he also takes solace in the fact that his daughter may be away but she would lead a life of comfort as opposed to the grim life he has to offer. Saboor is a subaltern who is bereft of economic freedom in a country that is affected deeply by the perpetual conquests. The class divide in erstwhile Afghanistan is extreme and it is this divide that segregates the society into two classes, namely the elite class and the labor class which is predominantly affected by subalternity. The act of giving away his daughter also highlights how child trafficking was rampant in the war-ravaged and volatile land of Afghanistan. Children

were dying of hunger and deprivation owing to which parents had to resort to such dire means for the well-being of their children. A survey conducted to ascertain the reality of those times stated that amongst Afghan refugee women and children in Quetta over 80% of children were unregistered and child mortality was 31% (112/366 births). Of those who survived, 67% were severely malnourished, with malnutrition increasing with age. These vulnerable populations remained entirely dependent on assistance from UN agencies and non-governmental organizations. (Bhutta)

Under such circumstances, Pari is given away to the rich Wahdatis. One can realize that it was an outcome of the penury and deprivation the family faced. Subaltern identity is a prime cause of Saboor's act and it is established in the first few chapters itself. Also, it is this act, which leads to the separation of the siblings Abdullah and Pari which in turn sets into motion a lifetime of longing and pain. Owing to the subaltern nature of his family, young Abdullah is not only separated from his sister but he spends the rest of his life pining for her. On the other hand, Pari who is too young to realize what befalls her, is made to spend a life which is luxurious yet a life which is bereft of love.

Pari is affected deeply by the subaltern state of her family so much so that her very identity is transformed. She is never devoid of money but she spends her whole life with a self-absorbed mother Nila Wahdati who is ever so critical of her. The class divide and poverty brought on by incessant conquests destroyed many such families in erstwhile Afghanistan.

Nila Wahdati is another character who on the face of it appears to be liberated and enlightened. Yet despite being a feisty woman who writes bold and amorous poetry and someone who owns her sexuality, she faces gender subalternity. In a country like Afghanistan where women had no agency, Nila Wahdati stands as a threat and her rebellious streak is not accepted by the Afghan society. Suleiman Wahdati's family too does not approve of her because of her bold and feminist pursuits and ideas. As one of the servants mentions, "It was well-known in Kabul that she had no nang and namoos, no honor, and that though she was only twenty she had already been ridden all over town like Mr. Wahdati's car...not only she made no attempt to deny these

allegations, she wrote poems about them...one of the men remarked that in his village they would have slit her throat by now. (Hosseini, *And the Mountains Echoed* 81).

Nila Wahdati is a victim of patriarchy and it is only because of her financial standing that she is able to escape the wrath of the rigid Afghan policing. But we see that eventually she moves to another country and prospers as a poet in a foreign land. Afghan society was not open enough to appreciate a woman who penned verses about women's sexuality. Even her husband who is supposedly a learned man and an artist himself feels ashamed of her illicit poems. Nabi, the driver who is smitten with Nila describes her art vividly:

But Nila's poems defied tradition. They followed no preset meter of rhyming pattern. Nor did they deal with the usual things, trees and spring flowers and bulbul birds. Nila wrote about love, and by love I do not mean the Sufi yearnings of Rumi or Hafez but instead physical love. She wrote about lovers whispering across pillows, touching each other. She wrote about pleasure. I had never heard language such as this spoken by a woman. (Hosseini, *And the Mountains Echoed* 98)

Nila is portrayed as an emancipated woman who is in sync with her sexuality. She is someone who smokes and drinks like the other Afghan men and has no qualms about it. Such a woman was scandalous in the eyes of the patriarchal and misogynist Afghan society. Thus, it is natural that Nila faced gender subalternity. But Hosseini presents Nila Wahdati as a complex character who is not perturbed by what society makes of her. Yet she is a narcissist and for filling in the void of infertility she takes in Pari as her daughter. But she is perpetually critical of Pari and disapproves of her career as a mathematician. Nila's character is flawed and owing to her insecurities she eventually dies by suicide. But it does not take away the fact that she was shunned in her homeland and had a scarred childhood. When her parents divorced, she was left under the custody of her strict Afghan father. Nila's poetry is described as path-breaking by an interviewer from a literary magazine and he goes on to comment that had Nila been born in a richer and more liberal country she would have been celebrated. But Afghanistan was a country where women were subalterns pushed to the fringes and even a woman as strong as Nila could only escape it when she migrated to France.

Her candid conversation with a literary magazine depicts the same- “Noone in Kabul considered me a pioneer of anything but bad taste, debauchery, and immoral character. Not least of all my father. He said my writings were the ramblings of a *whore*. He used that word precisely. He said I’d damaged his family name beyond repair.” (Hosseini, *And the Mountains Echoed* 211)

Suleiman Wahdati is another character whom one would empathize with immensely. Hosseini has deftly portrayed the helplessness of a homosexual man in a country where LGBTQ+ rights did not exist at all. There was no acknowledgment and acceptance of such rights as Afghanistan was a strictly patriarchal country. Owing to this, Suleiman Wahdati is never able to come out of the closet and has a veiled existence. He loves his driver Nabi and till the end of his life, he is in agony owing to his unrequited love for Nabi. Under societal pressure, he marries Nila but the marriage dies a quick death as Suleiman’s sexuality does not allow the marriage to flourish. Suleiman’s only outlet for his sexuality is his paintings wherein he outpours his love for Nabi. His wife Nila can see through him and she feels sorry for him that he was born in a country where he could not find acceptance and the freedom to live as he wished- “I felt sorry for him, mostly. He could not have chosen a worse time or worse place to be born the way he was.” (Hosseini, *And the Mountains Echoed* 215)

Suleiman Wahdati is an affluent and educated man who hails from the so-called elite Pashtun class. Yet he is devoid of the freedom to own his sexuality. Even though he is a privileged man, he too succumbs to the patriarchal society and the taboos of the Afghan milieu. He is thus a subaltern who must hide his identity and abide by the hegemonic rules of the Afghan higher-ups. Subalternity does not always stem out of class divide but even the elite fall prey to discrimination and their voices are constantly suppressed. As the data suggests:

For Afghanistan’s LGBT people, institutionalized discrimination is nothing new; homosexual relations were criminalized by the Taliban the first time they took over and again by the Afghan republic that was formed after the 2001 U.S. invasion. The 2017 penal code mandated jail terms for sodomy and lesbian intimacy. Vague legal language forced LGBT people to live underground. (O’Donnell)

In *And the Mountains Echoed* Hosseini has catapulted a series of events and has presented interconnected individual stories that span across continents. We are told about the story of twin sisters Parwana and Masooma. Parwana in a bout of jealousy leaves her sister Masooma an invalid for life. But her guilt makes her care for her till Masooma herself leads her to abandon her in the desert. Here it is not known whether Masooma is aware of her sister's betrayal. She is pushed to the fringes and is made to live the life of an invalid who is dependent on others. She is a silent subaltern. Though we do see her perspective from a third person omniscient narrator and can only so much as make a conjecture about her silence.

Hosseini also depicts the lives of Afghan exiles and we witness how they are treated as superiors by the local Afghan crowd. They are Westernized and can at once be spotted by the Indigenous crowd as immigrants. Idris and Timur who were once cornered due to the aggression in their homeland are now rich immigrants. Idris comes across a young girl Roshi who has been inflicted with a horrific head wound. She is being looked after by a Bosnian rescue nurse Amra. Idris initially volunteers to pay for Roshi's surgery but once he is back in the comfort of his sprawling home in America, he no longer has the urge to do so. Here Hosseini makes an endeavour to show how Afghan immigrants feel disillusioned by the war-ravaged terrains of their homeland. Many of them come back only to claim their lost land. Some develop an urge to 'give back' but it often gets fizzled out when they go back to their comfort zone- to the country which is their new home. Here it is to be noted that someone who was a subaltern once can take the role of the elite and vice-versa. Idris and Timur were once subalterns ousted by the belligerent forces in Afghanistan. But later they got back their sense of agency and freedom as exiles in a foreign country. They come back to their homeland as Westernized elites. Idris is an elite who breaks his resolution of helping Roshi as soon as he is surrounded by his mundane yet luxurious life in America. He defines the feeling as:

In the last month, Roshi has become something abstract to him, like a character in a play. Their connection has frayed. The unexpected intimacy he had stumbled upon in the hospital, so urgent and acute, has eroded into something dull. The experience has lost its power. He recognizes the fierce determination that has seized him for what it really was, an illusion, a mirage.
(Hosseini, *And the Mountains Echoed* 170)

Roshi overcomes her trauma with the love and care of nurse Amra and the financial support of Timur. She writes a book about her journey and is supposedly a successful author now. She has the dignity to not name and shame Idris. Here Hosseini gives us a resounding example to show that if a subaltern is offered love and unstinted support, he/she can speak and would no longer be a subaltern. Roshi who was a prey to a horrific crime, comes out of the shackles of oppression and shares her voice with the world through her book. Thus, with the right kind of support, she does speak up breaking away from gender subalternity.

Hosseini has captured the contemporary political undercurrents of Afghanistan to show how volatile those times were. Taliban soldiers had started taking over the Afghan land while also indulging in the illegal opium poppy trade. One such warlord's son is Adel. Adel is a young boy who reveres his father. His father is a powerful man, a former Jihadi with a towering personality. Adel stays within the large walls of a huge mansion away from the city and misses companionship. One fine day, he meets Gholam a poor boy of his age and he at once becomes friends with him. Hosseini here draws a contrast of sorts to delineate two boys, both Afghans but one is a subaltern and the other hails from the elite class. This juxtaposition is intriguing as it gives one a peek into the social fabric of Afghanistan in the 90s era. Adel's father who is addressed as 'Commander Sahib' had usurped the land in Shadbagh that belonged to Gholm's grandfather Saboor. When Adel and his family had to flee Afghanistan due to the constant scuffles, their land was being taken over by the *Talibani* warlord.

By drawing out the characters of Adel and Gholam, Hosseini aims to show how disparate lives can be for two young boys who are citizens of the same country. While Adele leads a life of comfort and luxury owing to his elite status, Gholam has to live in a refugee camp. Gholam was sent away from the Pakistani refugee camp and when he landed in Afghanistan, he is surprised to see that Afghanistan no longer resembles the image his grandfather painted. The two boys though inhabitants of the same country are poles apart. Hosseini portrays the two boys to give us a peek into the dynamics of subaltern and elite class. It is intriguing as to how class and power dynamics come into play and make one subaltern. Adele is fascinated with the kind of life Gholam leads which is very different from his sequestered and protected

existence- "The glimpses Gholam had allowed Adel into his life suggested an existence rife with trouble, unpredictability, hardship, but also adventure, a life far removed from Adel's own, though it unfolded practically within spitting distance of him." (Hosseini, *And the Mountains Echoed* 265)

While we see the conspicuous gap between the elite and the subaltern through Adel and Gholam, we are also made privy to how a subaltern is not always silent. A subaltern may be powerless but he/she also revolts and tries to ask for what is rightfully his/hers. Here too Gholam's father Iqbal does not walk away after learning that his land has been snatched from him. He stands up and is valiant enough to lock horns with a man as powerful as Adel's baba. The act of valour probably cost him his life but he did not bog down. Adel is disillusioned after coming to terms with the true picture of his father. Hosseini underlines how the elite keeps their conscience clean by acting as the saviours of the poor subalterns. Adel's Baba also does charitable acts like opening a school and hospital. He tells his son that the poor are hard to please- "Baba jan had told him once no matter how much you did, sometimes the poor spoke ill of the rich." (Hosseini, *And the Mountains Echoed* 268)

In the paper, 'Subalternity in Khaled Hosseini's *And the Mountains Echoed*' it is argued upon that the seemingly benevolent acts by the elites are further hindering the subalterns. It reflects Spivak's objection of how it is merely the projection of elite saving subalterns. As the researchers put forth in explicit terms:

The statement of the elite saving the subaltern from their deprived condition is laid all over the text by Hosseini in his text. Pari seemed saved by the elite from the uncertain future that her real father could provide. Mrs. Nila felt safe from the Islamic confinement by Western culture and attitude. Roshni the young girl in the hospital is saved by Timur who finances her operation and later helps her with education and book publication...It seems at first justifiable for the elite and the West to rescue them from their suffering, but in doing so these female characters are either silenced or are made to speak the language of the saviour. (Verma and Tshering)

However, it is observed that though Hosseini portrayed subaltern characters whose redemption was many a times facilitated by the elites, the subalterns retained their roots and voice. Nila could survive the atrocities that followed in Afghanistan and

continue to pen poetry in France. Pari becomes a mathematician who lives a full life whereas in Afghanistan women are prohibited from studying. Roshi becomes an author and is able to bring her story of resilience into the world. Interconnected stories are thus deftly woven to delineate the subaltern identity of Afghans spread out across continents.

3.5 Conclusion

Based on textual reading and analysis of the three novels namely, *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed*, it is observed that subaltern ethos prevails in Khaled Hosseini's works. In all his novels he has drawn multiple characters which are subaltern in nature. He has initiated a dialogue about the class dynamics between the Pashtun and Hazara clans in *The Kite Runner* and brought to the fore the stigma faced by the Hazara tribe. The lives of Afghan exiles are also portrayed by Hosseini in both *The Kite Runner* and *And the Mountains Echoed*. Through *A Thousand Splendid Suns* he has delved into gender subalternity by showing the relationship between two oppressed women. The plight of subalterns who are traumatized by the Taliban despotism is brought alive through multiple characters in *And the Mountains Echoed*. Poverty-stricken subalterns with no agency are highlighted too in these novels. As for the question whether subalterns are able to speak or not, we can say that if subalterns have an agency, they would not be in the category of subalterns anymore. Yet the fictional characters sketched by Khaled Hosseini are reflections of the erstwhile Afghan society. And sometimes they have no choice but to suffer the atrocities of the hegemonic power while at other times they attempt to break free through whatever means is available to them. The significant aspect to be noted is that through these stories, Hosseini brought the stories of subalterns on the world stage. By doing so, he facilitated debunking the Afghan myth. Moreover, the global readership received by all his books started a conversation around the rights of the oppressed subalterns. And this is indeed a step in the right direction.

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