

The Transformative Subaltern in Afghanistan with  
reference to Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner & A  
Thousand Splendid Suns

المهمشون النشطاء في افغانستان بالإشارة إلى روايتي خالد حسيني:  
"ألف شمس ساطعة" و"عداء الطائرة الورقية"

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## The Transformative Subaltern in Afghanistan with reference to Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* & *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

### Abstract

The concept of the subaltern is pivotal in the novels of Khaled Hosseini (b. 1965). In his two selected texts- *The Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) Hosseini depicts the conditions of Afghani in general and the subaltern in particular, during the tremulous era (1973 - 2004). In *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini focuses on the conditions of Hazaras as a subaltern marginalized minority, oppressed by the Pashtun majority. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the poor, villagers, women and children are portrayed as additional examples of the subaltern groups in the Afghani restrictive patriarchal classist society. Some of these groups work industriously to promote their conditions, and therefore they are called transformative subaltern, in Gramsci's terms. The paper aims to present a total picture of the subaltern groups in the country, elucidating their relative transformation. The paper adopts a Marxist subaltern approach according to Gramsci's views.

**Keywords:** Transformative Subaltern- dominant- marginalized- hegemony- Marxism

### المهمشون النشطاء في افغانستان بالإشارة إلى روايتي خالد حسيني: "ألف شمس ساطعة" و"عداء الطائرة الورقية"

ولد الروائي خالد حسيني في عام ١٩٧٥ وهو يجمع بين الجنسية الافغانية والامريكية ودائما ما يقدم في رواياته حالة المجتمع الأفغاني والتي ترتبط ارتباطا وثيقا بالأحداث السياسية بدءا من سقوط الملكية في افغانستان عام ١٩٧٣ وحتى تدخل القوات الامريكية في ٢٠٠٤ بعد هجمات الحادي عشر من سبتمبر والقضاء علي طالبان ، وهي ما يطلق عليها فترة الاضطرابات نظرا لشدة الصراعات التي شهدتها. ومن هنا بدا من الواضح اهتمام الكاتب بأحوال افغانستان بصفة عامة ولكنه ركز بشكل خاص على احوال الطبقات المهمشة أثناء تلك الفترة ، ويتضح ذلك في روايتي "ألف شمس ساطعة" و"عداء الطائرة الورقية". ومن أبرز الطبقات المهمشة التي تناولها الكاتب: طائفة الهزارة، والمرأة الأفغانية، والطفل الأفغاني، والفقراء، والريفيين. وأوضح الكاتب كيف تعاني هذه الطبقات من القهر الطائفي، والطبقي، والنوعي. ويهدف البحث إلى توضيح احوال هذه الطبقات ومدى اجتهادهم لتحسين احوالهم، والتفاوت فيما بينهم في تحقيق ذلك. ينتهج البحث منهج الماركسية بالتركيز على مفهوم المهمشين النشطاء للمفكر الإيطالي انطونيو جرامشي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المهمشين النشطاء – الهيمنة - الخضوع- التحول- الماركسية

## **The Transformative Subaltern in Afghanistan with reference to Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner & A Thousand Splendid Suns**

### **1. General Introduction**

The concept of the subaltern is pivotal in a number of schools of literary criticism such as post-colonialism, Marxism, and feminism. In his novels, *The Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), Khaled Hosseini (b. 1965) utilizes the concept in his depiction of the conditions of the subaltern groups in Afghanistan during the tremulous era<sup>1</sup> (1973 - 2004). In *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini focuses on the conditions of the Hazara as a subaltern marginalized minority, oppressed by the Pashtun majority. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, on the other hand, the poor, villagers, women and children are portrayed as additional examples of the subaltern groups in the Afghani patriarchal, sectarian, classist social structure. Some of these groups work industriously to transform their conditions, and therefore they are called transformative subaltern, in Gramsci's terms. The two selected texts integrate to present a total picture of the subaltern groups in the country, elucidating their relative transformation.

The research question(s) are: 1. What are the various subaltern groups in Afghanistan during the tremulous era according to the fictional presentation of Hosseini's texts and the historical documentation? 2. How far could these groups challenge their subaltern statuses and how far did they succeed? The research hypothesis is that the Hazara, women and children are the most suffering subaltern groups in Afghanistan. The objective of the study is to unravel the subaltern Afghan groups in Khaled Hosseini's novels: *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, during the tremulous era, and to elucidate how far these groups attempt to promote their positions, and to what extent have they succeeded. Further the paper compares the fictional presentation to the historical reality of the subaltern in Afghanistan. The research contribution is to bring the conditions of the third world subaltern groups into global attention, and to highlight the agency of these groups. Some other studies discuss the

subaltern in Hosseini's novels. Some of these studies are Sundaresan's "Afghan Female Characters' Resistance in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*" (2017), Shabanirad's "Postcolonial Feminist reading of Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*" (2015), Islam's "Voices from the Subaltern: Challenges of Reconstructing Women Identity in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*" (2014), and Joyia's "Courageous Women: A Study of Resilience of Women in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*" (2017), and Suhana's "Endurance and Resilience: A Study of the subaltern voice in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*" (2017). However, these studies have utilized either a postcolonial or a feminist approach, based on the views of Spivak, highlighting only the roles of two female characters in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*: Mariam and Layla, overlooking other subaltern groups inside the selected text and in Hosseini's body of works in general.

## 2. Methodology and Theoretical Background

*The Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) are the primary sources of this study. The discussion relies mainly on the Marxist approach of the transformative subaltern, with central focus on the views of the Italian thinker, Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks* (1971). In-text and end-text citations are presented in accordance to MLA Referencing Style, 8<sup>th</sup> edition (2016).

Recently, subaltern studies have become popular enterprise among a large number of critics. The most prominent views and complete theoretical foundation maintained by Gramsci in his *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1971). Gramsci's interest in the subaltern is a part of his inquiry into "history, politics, culture, and the relation between state and civil society" (Green 1). In his *Notebooks*, Gramsci elucidates the two senses of the subaltern: the denotative and the connotative. Literally, the term subaltern, refers to "noncommissioned military troops who are subordinate to the authority of lieutenants, colonels, and generals" (54). Figuratively, the term refers to "positions of subordination or lower status" (139). Green points out that Gramsci metaphorically uses the subaltern in reference to any "subordinate social groups" (2). In 1934, Gramsci wrote his "Notebook 25", which was thematically devoted to the

subaltern, entitled “On the Margins of History: The History of Subaltern Social Groups”. He identifies “slaves, peasants, religious groups, women, different races, and the proletariat as subaltern social groups” (Green 2). Thus, the subaltern are those powerless or marginalized groups in a society<sup>2</sup>.

Gramsci examines the conditions of the subaltern in relation to history, society, politics, culture, economy, and literary criticism. In modern societies:

political domination is a necessary requirement for ruling social groups to maintain power, but it is not sufficient. Ruling groups that control political society, according to Gramsci, must also exercise a degree of hegemony in civil society in order for subaltern groups to consent to their own subordinate position and to the authority of the ruling groups. (Green 6-7)

Buttigieg maintains that Gramsci views the civil society, as not liberal, but as “a realm of hegemony”, and “conformity”, in which “a dominant group’s values and ideology become the predominant values throughout society”(22). Therefore class structure is intertwined with political hegemony. Further, Gramsci writes “civil society operates without ‘sanctions’ or compulsory ‘obligations,’ but nevertheless exerts a collective pressure and obtains objective results in the form of an evolution of customs, ways of thinking and acting, morality, etc.”(*Notebook* 13, 242-3). Social structure and political hegemony affects the dominant culture of a given society. Both civil and political society support , enforce and protect each other.

Gramsci examines the subaltern within a particular historical context to provide evidence to his theory. In his “*Notebook* 25”, Gramsci lays out six steps as methodological criteria to the study of the subaltern in a given society: a. the formation of the subaltern group through the developments and changes occurring in the economic sphere, the extent of their diffusion; and their descent from other preceding classes; b. their passive or active adherence to the dominant class; c. the birth of new parties of the dominant class to maintain control of the subaltern; d. the formation of the subaltern class as limited and partial; e. the political

formation that asserts the autonomy of the subaltern group within the old framework; f. the political formations that confirm complete autonomy (52).

In his literary criticism, Gramsci criticized the literary works that depict the subaltern in passive, humble, or subordinated positions. He maintains that such work actually “reinforces the positions of the subaltern and contributes to their further subordination. The dissemination of such views contributes to the consciousness and common sense of the masses to an extent that they do not question such views and accept them as facts rather than opinions” (Green 15).

Gramsci concluded that “the liberation of the subaltern groups necessarily requires a transformation of the state and its oppressive social relations, since subaltern groups can only cease being “subaltern” once they have transformed the relations of subordination that cause their marginalization” (Green 20). The subaltern groups have to investigate the causes of their subordination and work hard to promote their status, values, and conditions. Thus, Gramsci’s concept is transformative.

### **3. The Discussion**

One of the major reasons of the strifes in Afghanistan is that it is the land of various ethnic groups. Afghanistan is a “mosaic of ethnicities. The Pashtun comprise the largest group and have traditionally commanded the most power. They are followed by the Tajik, and then the Hazara. Other groups include Uzbek, Turkmen, and Baluch”(Augustina 8). However, the Hazara are the most oppressed minority, or the subaltern group. They were dismissed for their difference in physical appearance as they are the descendants of Mongol Empire, follow the *Shi’a* sect and speak Farsi. Thus, they have distinct religious belief and cultural identity. The Hazara constitute 9% of Afghanistan population and are considered to be on “the lower end of the economic scale” (Shamnad 4). Thus, they are marginalized on social, economic and sectarian bases.

They were pushed to live in mountains in a high land area known as Hazarajat as they were targeted by Taliban fighters and around 4000-6000 Hazara were massacred. Hazarajat is undeveloped rural area, including four provinces, the most famous is Bamian in which there is

Bamian Buddha statues, which the Taliban destroyed in 2001. Today, the Hazara live in Kabul, comprising half of its population (Agustina 8). They are marginalized and oppressed by the Pashtun, the largest ethnic group, following the *Sunni* sect, constituting 42-60% of 32.5 million population. (“Afghanistan” 4). Thus the conflict is prominent between the dominant social and political group – the Pashtun—and the subaltern marginalized minority—the Hazara. This ethnic conflict is embodied in *The Kite Runner*.

*The Kite Runner* is composed of twenty-five chapters and is set in both California and Afghanistan, covering the period from 1975 to 2001. The very title of the novel is symbolic to the ethnic strife in Afghanistan, depicting it as the land of war, even during entertainment peace time. The *Kite* of the title refers to Kite fighting<sup>3</sup> in Afghanistan which is a popular festival as well as wintery tradition that starts in the early morning on the competition day and ends when there is only one kite flying in the sky.

The narrative depicts the sectarian conflict between the Pashtun majority and the Hazara minority. Bloom points out that Hosseini “remembers a family cook he befriended when he was a young boy... the cook could not read or write, as prejudice against the Hazara, left most uneducated, with no access to schooling” (13). In *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini expresses the hatred directed against the Hazaras on the mouth of one of the Pashtun in the novel: “Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns. It always will be. We are the true Afghans...not this Flat-Nose here. His people polluted our homeland, our *watan*. They dirty our blood” (*KR* 40). Further, the Pashtuns call Hazaras “mice eating, flat nosed load carrying donkeys” (*KR* 8). In another context, the Taliban refers to Hazaras as dogs “we left them for the dogs. Dog meat for the dogs” (*KR* 243). Animal imagery is manipulated in reference to Hazara to stress their subjugation and inferiority in relation to the Pashtun, the dominant social and political group.

The ethnic strife between the Pashtun majority and the Hazara minority is exemplified through the great deal of oppression directed against Hassan, a Hazara servant at the hands of the Pashtuns even his own master. Assef blames Amir for socializing with a Hazara, an inferior



race. Whenever Assef encounters Hassan, he mocks and abuses him out of his hatred. In one occasion, after the end of the contest in which Amir is the winner of the kite, Assef, Wali, and Kamal hinder Hassan from returning home with the winning kite unless he gives them the kite, but Hassan refuses. Assef asserts to Hassan his inferiority because he is a Hazara, expressing his astonishment of Hassan's blind trust in and willingness to sacrifice for Amir's sake, despite the latter's contempt to Hazaras:

But before you sacrifice yourself for him, think about this: would he do the same for you? Have you ever wondered why he never includes you in the games when he has guests? Why he only plays with you when no one else is around? I'll tell you why, Hazara. Because to him, you're nothing but an ugly pet. Something he can play with when he's bored, something he can kick when he's angry. Don't ever fool yourself and think you're something more. (72)

As a kind of punishment for Hassan for his transgression by disobeying the commands of one of the Pashtuns, Assef rapes Hassan. Hassan is psychologically devastated after this experience, as he "doesn't talk any more...just stares" (105). The Pashtuns practise both physical and verbal violence against the Hazaras.

Ironically, Hassan sacrifices himself for rescuing the kite of Amir, his Pashtun master, while Amir abandons Hassan in the alleyway, seeing him being raped. Amir confesses: "Hassan knew I'd seen everything in that alley, that I stood there and done nothing" (105). Amir confirms "I watched Hassan get raped" (*KR* 86). The only thing Amir did was to avoid seeing him: "I'd hear Hassan shuffling around the kitchen in the morning, hear the clinking of silverware, the whistle of the teapot. I'd wait to hear the door shut and only then I would walk down to eat" (*KR* 87). He remains a loyal servant, ready to expose his life to danger to satisfy Amir and keep his safety. Hassan tells Amir, "I'd sooner eat dirt...If you asked, I would ... But I wonder... would you ever ask me to do such a thing Amir agha?" (54). Hassan is depicted as a docile subaltern who is contended with his condition.

Symbolically, Hassan's physical description manifests his social inferiority, as he has cleft lip and he cannot afford to fix this deformity. In spite of the fact that Amir and Hassan live together in the same house for twelve years, Amir never tried to teach Hassan literacy. Instead, Amir mocks Hassan for not being able to read<sup>4</sup>. Further, Amir betrays Hassan by stealing into Hassan's room and hiding a new watch and some banknotes under the mattress, and urging his father to expel Hassan for his theft. It is a symbolic to the unjustified oppression of the Hazara. By confronting Hassan, he confesses to be the thief only to save Amir's face. As a Hazara, Hassan has an inherent sense of subjugation. He believes it is his duty to take the blame instead of his Pashtun master.

Eventually, Hassan died defending Amir's house in Wazir Akbar Khan from Taliban, while Amir was in Peshawar, Pakistan. He is the lamb figure who sacrifices his life for securing the property of his master. After Hassan's death, Rahim Khan reveals the truth to Amir that Hassan is the half- brother of Amir. Baba had an illicit relationship with Sanaubar (Ali's wife) and she delivered Hassan in 1990, five days later she eloped, but to his benefit, Hassan was not acknowledged that he was an illegitimate son. Hassan was not only victimized by Amir, but also by his father, who denies him all his lifetime, leaving him to lead a life of servitude and injustice. Perhaps Hassan's death is an indicator of his passive subaltern status. However, Hassan's tolerance and fidelity are the two faces of his agency to transform the conditions of Hazaras. Hassan is the one who, even in death, "calls Amir to redemption" (Augstina 5). Hassan's death is a transformative force which urges the Pashtun to reconsider the Hazara condition. As a sign of gratitude and apology for Hassan's sacrifice, Amir decides to adopt his son, Sohrab, to raise him in America, to enjoy better opportunities as a member of the family, not as subaltern servant.

In the subplot, there is another instance of the ethnic strife between Pashtuns and Hazaras, manifested in the reaction of Rahim's family when he fell in love with a poor Hazara young woman called Homaira. All his family members rejected the match and threatened to kill Rahim (99). Homaira was the daughter of a servant in the neighborhood, so that her family was banished from the city. Rahim told

Amir “she would have suffered. My family would have never accepted her as an equal. You don’t order someone to polish your shoes one day and call them sister the next” (99). Khan maintains that “*The Kite Runner* has been interpreted... as exploring the ethnic and ideological realities of Afghanistan” (165). In this classist society, the Pashtuns possess hegemony on both the social and political levels, while the Hazaras are the silent subaltern.

This ethnic conflict is further complicated by the difference among these groups in the religious sects, particularly between the dominant religious group, *Sunni* (Pashtuns) and the subjugated *She’a* (Hazaras). Hosseini depicts the *Sunni* as unfavorable religious fanatics, reducing them to the Taliban version. Hosseini shows that upon rising to power, the Taliban starts imposing strict Islamic or *Shari’a* laws on people. They use religion as an excuse for violence. In his letter to Amir, Hassan told Amir:

I accompanied Farzana Jan (his wife) to the bazaar to buy some potatoes and naan. She asked the vendor how much the potatoes cost, but he did not hear...So she asked louder and suddenly a young Taliban ran over and hit her on the thigh with wooden stick. HE struck her so hard she fell down...If I fought, that dog would have surely put a bullet in me gladly! Then what would happen to my Sohrab? The streets are full enough already of hungry orphans and every day I thank Allah that I am alive, not because I fear death, but because my wife has a husband and my son is not an orphan. (216)

Assef, a Taliban official, stones people to death in a stadium in Kabul, claiming that he is on a mission of God. Amir wonders: “what mission is that?...Stoning adulterers? Raping children? Flogging women for wearing high heels? Massacring Hazaras? All in the name of Islam” (248). When Farid tells Amir that “the only people in Kabul who get to eat lamb now are the Taliban”(247), Amir realizes that the lamb symbolizes the subaltern social groups, those who can be devoured by Taliban which is compared to a fierce tiger. Again, Hosseini manipulates animal imagery with its traditional connotation to manifest the contrast

between Pashtuns and other ethnic minorities. Symbolically, the life in Afghanistan is compared to a tranquil lake which is disturbed by the emergence of a monster standing for Taliban: “We were at Gharga Lake....It was warm and sunny, and the lake was clear like a mirror. But no one was swimming because they said a monster had come to the lake”(52). The novel presents a realistic portrait of the Hazara minority, as exemplified in the character of Hassan who led the life of a contended, not transformative, subaltern. However his death results in transformation. Hassan offers a sharp contrast to other groups of subaltern as is manifested in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

While *The Kite Runner* reflects the conditions of the Hazara as an oppressed minority, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* discusses the status of Afghan women and children as subaltern victims of patriarchy, classicism, and religious extremism. In Afghanistan, the government “still poses challenges for women’s rights” (“Current Situation of Afghan Woman” 1). The current President Hamid Karzai signed a law in March 2018, with article 132 which interferes in the regulation of the intimate relationship between a husband and wife. In under-populated areas and in the countryside, “mistreatment of women is still very prevalent. There is a lack of decent health care for women, many of them dying in childbirth. Women are still forced into marriage, even though they may be too young, even not having reached puberty. Marriages still often lead to domestic violence” (“Current Situation of Afghan Woman” 1). This corresponds to the fictional presentation of women characters in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

The setting of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is in Kabul starting by the Soviet invasion in 1979 and ending by Taliban imposition of power over the country in 1989. The novel consists of 46 chapters divided into four parts. The *suns* of the title refer metaphorically to women in the novel who, like the sun, set and shine again as a symbol for hope. While Hosseini exploits animal imagery in *The Kite Runner*, he employs botanical imagery in this novel to indicate the subalternity of both women and children. Similar to plants, these two groups are unable to alter their assigned positions in society. The story develops through the lives of four women belonging to successive generations and whose lives

elucidate various forms of oppression that can be found in the Afghan society. These women are Nana, Mariam, Laila, and the young girl, Aziza. They narrate their traumatic experience.

Class oppression and patriarchal hegemony is manifested through the ordeal of Nana, a housekeeper, who was put in trouble by her master Jalil, resulting in the birth of Mariam as an illegitimate child. Nana suffers humiliation and degradation as a consequent of this experience. Jalil is depicted as a lusty figure as he has three wives, and yet forces an illicit relationship with his servant. Nana takes all the blame and none condemns Jalil. She points out that Jalil's account is believed because of his class privilege: "you know what he told his wives by way of defence? That I forced myself on him" (7). Jalil's upper class status does not allow him to keep contact with Nana, as she tells Mariam: "It was a relief to your father having me out of sight. It suited him just fine" (9). Nana defies this condition through raising her daughter's awareness to their status. She empowers her daughter through knowledge.

Jalil banishes Nana into a small village as not to remind him with his sin. Jalil considers Nana a mere 'mugwort' (perennial herb), that must be kept a prisoner inside a walled house. Hosseini employs this botanical image to clarify Jalil's reluctance of Nana, as an old poor rustic woman. Jalil and his two sons—Fahad and Mohsin—built the *kolba* (a hut built of mud and straw) in which Mariam lived in confinement for fifteen years with her mother. It has "two sleeping cots, a table made of wood, two straight-backed chairs, a window, and shelves that were nailed to the walls in which Nana kept clay pots and her much-loved Chinese cups and saucers"(10). Nana metaphorically compares this house to "rat-hole"(9), denoting the inhuman and disgusting conditions in which Nana and Mariam live. Nana and Mariam are subaltern because of their class. Nana attempts to challenge this marginalization through empowering her daughter by raising her awareness to their condition.

Forced marriage is a sign of subjugation of poor women who are denied the right to choose a husband. Due to her poverty, Mariam is forced to marry Rasheed, who is thirty years older than her. Rasheed has brought her from the village, and has compelled her to wear *burqa* which

acted as a burden on her, “the padded headpiece felt tight and substantial on her skull, and it was peculiar seeing the world through a screen”(65). Clothes are functional tools in asserting male domination and women subjugation in the Afghan society. In this context, Rasheed criticizes one of the neighbors because he is more flexible with his wife: “There’s a teacher living down the street, Hakim is his name, and I see his wife Fariba all the time walking the streets with nothing on her head but a scarf. It embarrasses me frankly, to see a man who’s lost control of his wife”(70). Marsden explains that the condition of women who live in Afghanistan countryside is even worse. In addition to being forced to wear *burqa* ... , they help in the crop fields without any payments, thus they are commoditized as they are considered male’s properties (4). The Afghani man manipulates various tools to ascertain the subjugation of the Afghani woman, even practicing violence against her.

Rustic Afghan women are exposed to verbal as well as physical violence. Rasheed dismisses Mariam as *harami* (illegitimate child) and *dehati* (villager). Once, he disliked the rice she has prepared, so he “pushed two fingers in her mouth and pried it open, then constrained the chilly, hard rocks into it. Mariam battled against him, murmuring, however he continued pushing the rocks in her upper lip nestled into scuff”(94). Her mouth bleed heavily as Rasheed was forcing her to chew the stones. Rasheed’s violence escalates after Mariam’s miscarriage and failure to deliver a child. He “shove Mariam into the tool shed....He shut the double doors to the shed, took a key from his pocket, worked the padlock”(405). The image of prison is repeated; for both Nana and Mariam, home is a suffocating prison in which a woman is subjected to various forms of oppression. Rasheed’s decision to marry a second wife as not to live fatherless reflects his egotism and indifference to his spouse’s plight.

Urban middle class women have better opportunities than rustic women in Afghanistan. Laila is Rasheed’s second wife, who was brought up in the city. Being pregnant from her lover Tariq who was falsely reported to be killed in the battle, she had to accept Rasheed’s proposal, although she was only fourteen. Living in the same house, Laila comments on Mariam’s position that she is a “dismal, hopeless

female”(142) who is always beaten by Raheed with his belt. Khatun points out “A poor woman is subject to extreme subalterization since her lack of education severely limits her access to power; male violence is also relatively more common among the poor”(1). Rasheed’s brutality raised Laila’s sympathy towards Mariam and therefore she decides to challenge his tyranny. Upon seeing Rasheed raising his belt to beat Mariam, Laila “thrusted at him. She got his arm and attempted to drag him down, however she could do close to dangle from it. She succeeded in abating Rasheed’s advance toward Mariam”( TSS 146), and the two women decide to elope, searching for their identity, in an attempt to be transformative subalterns who seek to fight their oppressor and liberate themselves from subjugation.

Unfortunately, Laila’s attempt to escape with Mariam was doomed to failure and this exposed her to Rasheed’s violence, and revenge as he gripped her throat, attempting to slaughter her in front of her daughter Aziza:

Laila didn’t see the punch coming. One minute she was talking and the following she was on all fours, wide-looked at and red-confronted, attempting to draw a breath. It was as though an auto had hit her at full speed, in the delicate place between the lower rip of the breastbone and the paunch catch. She understood she had dropped Aziza that Aziza was shouting. She attempted to inhale again and could just make an imposing, gagging sound. (160)

As a sign of an absolute determination to be gain liberation, Mariam decides to get rid of the oppressive figure in her life. Being exposed to a fair amount of violence, Mariam uses the same tool in the process of her liberation. Mariam kills Rasheed when she has seen him getting ready to murder Laila. Mariam passes up a scoop on Rasheed’s head, then she surrenders to the police and is executed. Mariam is proud that she will die heroically:

She thought of her entry into this world, the *harami* child of a lowly villager, and unintended thing, a pitiable regrettable accident. A weed. And yet, she was leaving the world as a woman

who had loved and been loved back. She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian, a mother. No. It was not so bad, Mariam thought, that she should die this way. Not so bad. This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings. (TSS 329)

Mariam's view of herself as a "weed" expresses her awareness of her own subaltern status in society. However, the very manner of her death is different from Hassan in *The Kite Runner*. Mariam chooses to die as a transformative subaltern to raise oppression from Laila and Aziza, at the least. Therefore, death is an indicative of agency in the two narratives.

The third subaltern group is the Afghani child, particularly girls. In one report published by the UNICEF, Afghanistan was described as the "worst place to be born in the world", explaining that those children are "subjected to extreme poverty and violence on a daily basis. Their situation is in fact critical: child mortality, malnutrition, forced marriages, sexual abuse" ("Children of Afghanistan" 1). In addition, the education system lacks infrastructure. The country has the highest number in terrorist attacks aimed at schools. Child labour is serious problem that faces the Afghani children of whom 20% are forced to work in order to provide for themselves and for their families. They work as street vendors, water carriers, cardboard collectors, shoe polishers, taxi solicitors, domestic servants and assistants in boutiques. This in turn leads to their absence from schools, exposure to police violence. They are exposed to sexual abuse. About 1,500 incidents are recorded each year ("Children of Afghanistan" 2-4). Another problem is the child soldier. Before 2011, Afghanistan recruited children under 18, particularly during the rule of Taliban. Many instances are mentioned in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* to trace children's conditions in Afghanistan.

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, children's abuse is presented through the mistreatment of Aziza. Mariam points out "I swear, sometimes I want to put that thing in a box and let her float down Kabul River, like Baby Moses" (212). Mariam never heard Rashid calling his daughter by her name. Instead, "it was always *the baby*, or, when he was really exasperated, that *thing*" (212). Naming is assigning identity.



Rasheed denies Aziza this right by calling her ‘the baby’, and even denies her humanity by calling her a ‘thing’. Further, due to the spread of hunger in the country, Rasheed suggests that Aziza begs on streets to support the family as there is a shortage of food all over the country. Unable to provide for his supposed daughter, Rasheed sends Aziza into an orphanage. This is the case of many parents who are no longer able to rescue their children from starvation.

Further, those children are deprived from seeing their mothers. Laila is tortured whenever she walks down the streets to go to visit Aziza in the orphanage. Laila was beaten by the Taliban for going alone to visit her daughter Aziza in the orphanage: “Sometimes she was caught, questioned, scolded-two, three, even four times in a single day. Then the whips came down and the antennas sliced through the air, and she trudged home, bloodied, without so much as a glimpse of Aziza”(487). This reveals that children in Afghanistan “live in fear and abhorrent conditions”(Agnello 101).

Another sign of children’s abuse is that there is no interest in education. Aziza confesses that in the orphanage, “we have to pull the curtains...so the Taliban don’t see us. Kaka Zaman had knitting needles and balls of yarn ready... in case of a Taliban inspection. We put books away and pretend to knit”(314). Hosseini confirms that the Taliban are not concerned with educating young children although they receive aids from foreign NGOS. They banned elementary education for girls. Under Taliban’s rule, as “young females are illegal from going to schools. All schools for young females will be shut instantly. Females are illegal from working”(166). Although there is no concern with educating children, yet the girls in Afghanistan are more obstructed from education than the boys.

In addition, those children are deprived from all sorts of entertainment. During Taliban rule, all forms of entertainment are forbidden: “singing is forbidden. Dancing is forbidden. Playing cards, playing chess, gambling, and kite flying are forbidden. Writing books, watching films, and painting pictures are forbidden”(270). Repetition here creates monotony to stress the boring life that those children lead as

subaltern. Children's agency is revealed in their decision to have entertainment through watching a smuggled copy of Titanic movie. Aziza watched the film with Laila and Mariam. Providing such fun for a child means the exposure of the parent's life to danger: "the Afghan rob their children of even the simplest forms of amusement, be it the time spent with one's family, watching movies, or going on a picnic" (Dagmseh and Golubeva 5).

Another form of oppression against the Afghani children is the phenomenon of the child soldier, or the recruitment of those under 18. The dominant political group of Taliban recruit youngsters by force as they:

force young boys to join....in plain daylight, at gun points. They drag boys right off streets. And when soldiers from a rival militia capture these boys, they torture them. I heard they electrocute them—it's what I heard—that they crush their balls with pliers. They make the boys lead them to their homes. Then they break in, kill their fathers, rape their sisters and mothers. (TSS 248)

Fariba is depressed because the Mujahideen enlisted her sons to fight the Soviet. Hosseini wants to convey the impression that "After failing to mobilize enough adults, the regional powers enlist youngsters as their soldiers" (Dagmseh and Golubeva 6). This ruin the innocence of the Afghani children and installs violence and war as essential components of their lives. Taken together, the two novels complete the picture of the various subaltern groups in Afghanistan.

#### **4. Findings and Conclusion**

The paper focuses mainly on the conditions of three subaltern groups in Afghanistan: the Hazara, women and children. Hosseini uses his fictional texts to present a realistic portrait to those groups and their attempts to improve their conditions.

The result of the study shows that Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* are two complementary texts, reflecting the cultural, social, economic, and political conditions of Afghanistan. Afghanistan is portrayed as a sectarian, racial, and patriarchal society. *The Kite Runner* highlights Afghanistan as the land of ethnic and sectarian

strife between the Hazara minority and the Pashtun majority. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini focuses on the conditions of the Afghan woman as a wife, daughter, a servant within a patriarchal system; women are denied their rights of education, freedom of clothing, consent in marriage, earning a living and even having entertainment. The novel equally depicts the dilemma of the Afghani children who suffer as a result of poverty, poor health care, lack of education infrastructure, in addition to political struggles.

In order to provide credibility to his intricate content, Hosseini manipulates realism, through exploiting the autobiographical form, using the linear plot sequence, providing minute details, using Afghan terms, to provide credibility for his account as being authentic, not fictional. To attain the same end, Hosseini attempts to persuade his readership that his narrators are reliable and objective. Therefore, their accounts are considered a native testimony on the sociopolitical situation in the country. Hosseini employs animal as well as botanical imagery with traditional associations. Animal imagery are often related to men to indicate their brutality, hypocrisy or agency. Botanical imagery, in contrast, are related to women and children to refer to their fixed position in society in reference to the very limited development they witnessed.

To conclude, Hosseini presents a realistic picture of the situation of the subaltern in Afghanistan. In *the Kite Runner*, he introduces the ethnic and sectarian strife between Pashtuns and Hazaras. Yet, he depicts the Hazaras as completely passive subaltern who are unable to transform. In reality, the Hazara are transformative subaltern who manage to promote their conditions. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the author depicts the dilemma of women, particularly the poor villagers, and children. Unfortunately, these groups are not transformative subaltern in reality due to the social restrictions imposed on them. They depend on foreign aid agencies to improve their conditions, because they lack agency. Nevertheless, their conditions are better than before.

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<sup>1</sup> starting from the fall of monarchy in 1973; the establishment of the Afghan Republic, the Saur Revolution in 1978; the Communist Second Republic, the Mujahidin war against the Soviet (1979- 1989) , the Russian withdraw in 1989, Civil War (1989-1992); the establishment of the Islamic State of Afghanistan ; the rise of Taliban regime in 1996, the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, American and British aerial bombing in 2001, the victory over Taliban, and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in 2004, and finally the American war against Taliban.

<sup>2</sup> Gramsci's views influenced other critics such as Ranajit Guha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Guha defines the subaltern group as "non-elite", or the "people", while the elite includes "dominant foreign groups, dominant indigenous groups, and regional and local groups that act on the behalf of the other two groups" (8). Spivak accepts the definition of the subaltern as those differ from the elite. For Spivak, the subaltern does not represent themselves neither textually nor politically. In an interview, Spivak maintains "if the subaltern can speak then, thank God, the subaltern is not a subaltern anymore" (158).

<sup>3</sup> Tarzi points out that "the concept of kite running is aggressively flying your kite and using the glass coated string to cut the strings of your opponent's kites, the last kite in the air is the winner" (4).

<sup>4</sup> In Bamiyan, Hassan was taught literacy by a local preacher.