

A Study of Ethnicism in Afghanistan in Light of “*The Kite Runner*”

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Abstract

*The study is an attempt to explore the issue of ethnicism in Afghanistan with reference to Khaled Hosseini's (2003) *The Kite Runner* which is a rich source of the constructed ethnicism between a group of the so-called extremist Pashtuns, i.e. the Taliban and a group of the Hazaras. The novel under study is a historical and political depiction of the past of Afghanistan and its natives. The ethnicist and exclusionary practices and encounters between major characters are viewed from the perspective of critical discourse studies. Moreover, it systematically applies Norman Fairclough's (1989, 1995, 2018) critical discourse analysis as a theory and a research method on the selected data for analyzing the issue under study. As a novel is more or less fictitious and constructed work, so the discourse-producer and his stance regarding the constructed ethnicism are challengeable. The study not only unveils the Taliban's ethnicist mindset and practices that targeted and harmed the Hazaras severely, but also exposes the way the discourse-producer has manipulated language and some historical events of ethnicism for building a certain image of the Taliban as characters into the readers' minds. The issue of ethnicism exists in almost all the ethnic groups of Afghanistan with varying intensities, and choosing the extremist Pashtuns, like the Taliban, as ethnicists and exclusionists, and sidelining or ignoring the other ethnic groups' ethnicism raise a question mark at the discourse-producer's realistic and unbiased depiction of the Taliban.*

Introduction

There are many discriminatory and exclusionary attitudes, beliefs, ideologies and practices. However, ‘racism’ or ‘racist discrimination’ is interchangeably used for ‘ethnicism’ or ‘ethnic discrimination’ in this study because van Dijk argues that “many forms of contemporary racism focus on cultural rather than on ‘racial’ differences, a more adequate term might be ‘ethnicism’” (2005, p. 2). Racism is one of the many discriminatory and exclusionary social practices and ideologies which manifest themselves discursively. Racist opinions and beliefs are not only produced and reproduced, but also propagated and legitimized through discourse. Racism, according to van Dijk (2005), has not only discursive, but also socio-cultural, historical and economic dimensions. He also argues that ‘ethnicism’ would be a

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more adequate term for 'racism' because many forms of contemporary racism are more focused on cultural differences, rather than on 'racial' differences. According to van Dijk, "racism is based on constructed differences of ethnicity, appearance, origin, culture and/or language" (2005, p. 2). He discusses racism multi-dimensionally as he defines it as discourse, as domination, as discrimination, as racist beliefs and as institution.

Jiwani and Richardson (2011) have discussed 'racism' in various forms of socio-political text and talk. They regard language as a co-constitutive and dialectical social practice which reproduces and contributes to social realities and racist social inequalities. For them, racism can be explored and examined at all three levels of discourse – discourse as text, discourse as discursive practice of text consumption and production and discourse as socio-cultural practice. Racism, for them, is a prejudice and domination expressed in language by the elites to(re)present themselves positively and others negatively, and to marginalize and inferiorize others. A more adequate definition of racism is presented by Every and Augoustinos(2007, p. 429) in terms of the numerous "ways in which they marginalize, demean, threaten, exclude, discriminate against and dehumanize others on the basis of the other's appearance . . . and on a de-valorization of the other's religious, cultural and ethnic group identity."

Research Question

How does the discourse-producer manipulate language and some historical events to construct the issue of ethnicism in his novel?

Review of Literature

The concept of 'racism' has been extensively elaborated in a multitude of works which relate 'racism' primarily with people's judgments and representations of other people based on biological and/or physical differences, and secondarily with cultural differences, including differences in language, ethnicity, history and origin. However, many forms of contemporary racism, according to van Dijk (2005), largely focus on cultural differences, rather than 'racial' differences. Racism is not only an ideology, but also a discriminatory discursive practice which is aimed at dominating, dehumanizing, devaluing, excluding and discriminating against the minority or weaker social groups by the elites or dominant social groups. Van Dijk (2008) discusses racism, especially "new racism" (denial of racism through various strategies like disclaimer) in multiple forms of discourse like socio-political texts and

talks. Racism as system comprises two subsystems – social and cognitive. The social subsystem consists of discriminatory social practices at the micro level and relationships of power abuse by symbolic elites, including their institutions and organizations at the macro level.

Discourse is a social means of reproducing racism at the individual and institutional levels. The cognitive subsystem is related to racists' attitudes, beliefs and prejudices which are formed and expressed through racist discourses. Reisigl and Wodak (2001) point out several discursive strategies being manipulated by racists for doing racism. According to them, discourse and society are co-constitutive and dialectical. They assume racism as an ideology and as a social (including discursive) practice of discrimination. Unequal social hierarchy is the base of racism. Certain collective and naturalized traits, which are almost fixed, are attributed to the victims of racism. However, these "traits are primarily related to biological features, appearance, cultural practices, customs, traditions, language, or socially stigmatized ancestors"(Reisigl&Wodak, 2001, p. 10). Such traits represent others negatively in direct or indirect and explicit and implicit ways, and manifest the way the dominant social groups judge the represented others. In terms of ideological fusion, racism is a combination of several different "doctrines, religious beliefs and stereotypes, thereby constructing an almost invariable pseudo causal connection between possibly fictitious – biological . . . and social, cultural and mental, traits" (Reisigl&Wodak, 2001, p. 10).

Stephenson (2004) discusses a typology of racism which consists of individual, institutional and cultural racisms. Individual racism refers to the whites' belief that the blacks are inferior to them because of physical traits. Overt forms of individual racism, according to Stephenson (2004), were the result of the whites' desire to keep social distance from the blacks. Moreover, the "blacks were perceived in negative stereotypical terms: as hyper aggressive, hypersexual, superstitious, lazy, happy-go-lucky, ignorant, and musical" (Stephenson, 2004, p. 99). Institutional racism refers to the policies and procedures which are aimed at excluding the blacks from full participation in various institutional fields of society. Cultural racism refers to those expressions of the individuals and institutions which manifest the superiority of one race's cultural heritage over another race's cultural heritage. This form of racism influences life of the blacks who are judged and represented as unattractive, socially inferior, ineffective, less successful, stereotypically aggressive and sexually impulsive and unruly.

Racism, for Essed (1991), is not only an ideology and structure, but also a process in which social inequalities in the larger “social structure are related, in a deterministic way, to biological and cultural factors attributed to those who are seen as a different ‘race’ or ‘ethnic group’” (Essed, 1991, cited in Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 6). Miles (1993) views the concept of ‘race’ as a belief used by both the hegemonic and the affected groups to construct Self and Other in ways that demonstrate the former’s exclusion and domination and the latter’s resistance to that exclusion. Racism is a matter of hierarchy for social groups of common descent who are attributed by “specific collective, naturalized or biologically labeled traits that are considered to be almost invariable” and that “are primarily related to biological features, appearance, cultural practices, customs, traditions, language, or socially stigmatized ancestors” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 10).

Wetherell and Potter emphasize the need to see and study racism in discourse which is manifested “through discursive patterns of signification and representation” (1992, p. 3). They state that racism is not simply a “matter of linguistic practice,” and that enquiries of “racism must also focus on institutional practices, on discriminatory actions and on social structures and social divisions” (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 3). Van Dijk (2005) elaborates ‘racism’ or ‘racist discrimination’ as discourse, as domination (a certain form of power (abuse) of one group over the other), as discrimination, as racist beliefs and as institution. However, it has a ‘socio cognitive’ dimension when the others are mentally represented in negative terms through prejudices (a form of discrimination), stereotypes, racist beliefs and ideologies. These prejudices and racist beliefs are not only formed, but also manifested and reproduced through discourse. Moreover, racism is also manifest in self (‘Us’) and other (‘Them’) representation when “our good things tend to be emphasized, and our bad things (like racism) deemphasized – and the converse for the Others, whose bad things are stressed, and whose good things ignored” (van Dijk, 2005, p. 10). Allen (2009) argues that the Foucaultian notion of subjection, which is fundamentally ambivalent or paradoxical in nature, is insightfully central to Butler’s works. For Foucault, ‘subjection’ implies that “individuals are constituted as subjects in and through their subjection to power relations” (Allen, 2009, p. 299). Subjection is a form of power synthesized by domination and subordination as elements. Power not only produces reality, but it also forms the subject – the prime effect of power.

Research Methodology

The current study uses Norman Fairclough's (1989, 1995, 2018) critical discourse analysis for the analysis of the selected data. It comprises three stages/steps of discourse analysis: descriptive analysis, interpretive analysis and explanatory analysis. These levels of analysis have been combined in this study. Descriptive analysis deals with the identification and labeling of formal textual/linguistic forms and features. Interpretive analysis sheds light on the cognitive aspects of members' resources in interpreting the textual/linguistic choices/uses. It is also related to the analysis of presuppositions and speech acts. Likewise, explanatory analysis is the social analysis of the topic under study. This stage links the descriptive analysis at the micro level with the social analysis of the topic under study at the macro level in a wider socio-cultural context.

Discourse on Ethnicism and Exclusion

The lines under study are a collection of various dialogic engagements between characters and the narrator's personal and judgmental views on the constructed issue of ethnicism.

"But you have to read books they don't give out in school," Assef said. "I have. And my eyes have been opened. Now I have a vision, and I'm going to share it with our new president. Do you know what it is?" I shook my head. He'd tell me anyway; Assef always answered his own questions. His blue eyes flicked to Hassan. "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." He made a sweeping, grandiose gesture with his hands. "Afghanistan for Pashtuns, I say. That's my vision." Assef shifted his gaze to me again. He looked like someone coming out of a good dream. "Too late for Hitler," he said. "But not for us." He reached for something from the back pocket of his jeans. "I'll ask the president to do what the king didn't have the *quwatto* do. To rid Afghanistan of all the dirty, *kasseef* Hazaras." "Just let us go, Assef," I said, hating the way my voice trembled. "We're not bothering you." "Oh, you're bothering me," Assef said. And I saw with a sinking heart what he had fished out of his pocket. Of course. His stainless-steel brass knuckles sparkled in the sun. "You're bothering me very much. In fact, you bother me more than this Hazara here. How can you talk to him, play with him, let him touch you?" he said, his voice dripping with disgust. . . . When he spoke again, he sounded as baffled as he looked.

“How can you call him your ‘friend’?” *But he’s not my friend!* I almost blurted. *He’s my servant!* Had I really thought that? Of course I hadn’t. I hadn’t. I treated Hassan well, just like a friend, better even, more like a brother. But if so, then why, when Baba’s friends came to visit with their kids, didn’t I ever include Hassan in our games? Why did I play with Hassan only when no one else was around? Assef slipped on the brass knuckles. Gave me an icy look. “You’re part of the problem, Amir. If idiots like you and your father didn’t take these people in, we’d be rid of them by now. They’d all just go rot in Hazarajat where they belong. You’re a disgrace to Afghanistan” (Hosseini, 2003, pp. 38-39; italics in original; ellipsis mine).

Descriptive, Interpretive and Explanatory Analysis

The lines under study are the discourse-producer’s discourse on ethnic identity, ethnicism (or racism) and ethnic exclusion. Assef, a bad Pashtun, discriminates against and excludes the Hazaras, like Hassan with the vision to have a nation-state of Afghanistan for the Pashtuns only. Assef’s voice is manipulated by the discourse-producer to represent the extremist and fundamentalist Pashtuns, like Assef as ethnicists and ethnic exclusionists. Hassan as an out group member of the Hazara community is represented as a victim of ethnicism and ethnic exclusion. Hassan’s Hazara identity is an issue in the lines under study because his identity is not recognized and acknowledged. Assef argues that Amir and Hassan (including other people) will have to read other books preferentially, which are not provided to them at schools, for discovering the truth about Hitler. The logical connector “But” indicates Assef’s point of disagreement with the truth discursively constructed and represented in the available books at schools. He voices to have such books which have opened his eyes to see a different reality.

He voices to share his own “vision” made by the read books with Daoud Khan, the new president of Afghanistan. He asks Amir if he knows about his vision, but he gestures his ignorance at his vision. The discourse-producer has discursively constructed and represented Assef’s ethnicism, ethnic nationalism and ethnic exclusion in Assef’s voice. Assef excludes all other Afghan ethnic groups, especially the Hazaras by the expression “Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns.” He voices that it has been and will be the land of Pashtuns forever. The repetition of the word “always” in the same sentence indicates Assef’s exclusionary agenda for making Afghanistan as a nation-state for the Pashtuns only. He attributes the Pashtuns, including himself as “the true Afghans, the

pure Afghans,” and discriminately excludes Hassan and other Hazaras having “Flat-Nose.” The inclusive “We” has been used for the Pashtuns, not for the Hazaras. Looking at the selected lines from critical discourse studies perspective, it can be argued that analysis of the lines confirms van Dijk’s view that “our good things tend to be emphasized, and our bad things (like racism) de-emphasized – and the converse for the Others, whose bad things are stressed, and whose good things ignored” (van Dijk, 2005, p. 10).

Moreover, Assef disgustingly voices that Hassan’s people (“His people”) “pollute” their motherland, and “dirty” their “blood.” The phrase “our homeland, our *watan*” indicates that Assef as a bad Pashtun voices his own view for the Pashtun nationalism, excluding all other ethnic nationalities. Ultimately, he voices that Afghanistan is “for Pashtuns” only, and that is his “vision.” Amir narrates that Assef appeared as if he were “coming out of a good dream.” What Assef says indicates his intention for the ethnic cleansing of the Hazaras because he voices that it was “too late for Hitler,” but not for them to crush the Hazaras. Like Hitler, Assef plans to have Afghanistan as a nation-state for the Pashtuns after entirely eliminating the Hazaras. Further, he voices that he would ask the president to use power (“*quwat*”) in ridding “Afghanistan of all the dirty, *kasseef* Hazaras” – a task the king did not dare to accomplish. He expresses his discrimination against the Hazaras when he attributes them as “dirty.”

Looking at the sentences from critical discourse studies perspective, it can be argued that the words, like “pollute,” “dirty” and “blood” used for the Hazaras, like Hassan, indicate ethnicism as an ideology, social structure and process in which social inequalities are related “to biological and cultural factors attributed to those [like the Hazaras] who are seen as a different ‘race’ or ‘ethnic group’” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 6). Similarly, the phrase “His people” used for the Hassan’s people as an out group and the phrase “our homeland” used exclusively for the Pashtuns’ motherland (Afghanistan) indicate ethnicism in terms of positive self and negative other representation (see van Dijk, 2005 for more details). The interjection “Oh” is indicative of Assef’s emerging anger. Amir’s heart was “sinking” when he saw Assef pulling out his “stainless-steel brass knuckles” – knuckles which shone brightly in sunlight. Assef responds to Amir that he is bothering him severely and more than Hassan, a Hazara. Assef considers the Hazaras as people of inferior race and status. Consequently, he disgustingly asks Amir how he can include Hassan in his talks, games and touching. Assef

inquires Amir how he can call Hassan his friend. In other words, the sentence ironically means that Amir must avoid Hassan as his friend because he is an out group member of the Hazara community. Amir was so frightened of Assef that he had “almost blurted” that Hassan is not his friend, but a servant.

The italicized expressions in the sentences indicate Amir’s unexpressed mental voice. Amir asks if he had really thought so about Hassan as a servant, not friend. The repeated negatives indicate that Amir had not thought so. He justifies his negations by arguing that he had treated Hassan “just like a friend, better even, more like a brother.” Amir himself feels slightly guilty for not including Hassan in his games with the kids of Baba’s friends as the interrogative indicates. Moreover, he also asks why he played with Hassan when no one was available. Although Amir is a good Pashtun who treated Hassan well, yet he feels ashamed for slightly excluding and considering him as his servant and subordinate. The sentences also indicate Assef’s gestures as a source of fear and threat for Amir. Assef and Amir are Pashtuns, but the former belongs to extremist, ethnic nationalist and ethnic exclusionist Pashtuns such as the Taliban whereas the latter is a representative of good, modern-minded and nationalist Pashtuns. Assef is frustrated and annoyed with Amir and his father who are good with the Hazaras like Ali and Hassan. Assef challenges Amir who is regarded as “part of the problem.” He challengingly voices that people like Amir and his father are “idiots” because if they did not accommodate the Hazaras, they would have got rid of them. Further, he voices that they might have gone “rot in Hazarajat” which is their own territory. He is so furious that he calls Amir as “a disgrace to Afghanistan” because the Pashtuns like Amir are not excluding the Hazaras like Hassan from their soil. Looking at the whole text from critical discourse studies perspective, it can be said that the discourse-producer has isolated anti-racist and good Pashtuns, like Amir, from ethnicists and bad Pashtuns like Assef and the Taliban. Moreover, for the dominant group, like Assef’s, the concept of ‘race’ is “a legitimizing ideological tool to oppress and exploit specific social groups [like the Hazaras] and to deny them access to material, cultural and political resources, to work, welfare services, housing and political rights” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 2).

Discursive Construction of Ethnicism in the Novel under Study

The overall analysis of the discourses on ethnicism, including the given sample analysis, in *The Kite Runner* reveals that the Hazara

minority as an ethnic group was the victim of power abuse and ethnicism by the Taliban, who are the bad Pashtuns in the discourse-producer's view. Assef, who is the villain of *The Kite Runner*, and his voice have been manipulated by the discourse-producer to discursively construct and represent the issue of ethnicism. The sequential and systematic analysis of plot development regarding Assef in the novel under study unfolds the growth of Assef as a stone-hearted and tyrant Talib official who, then, oppresses the Hazaras, like Hassan and Sohrab, and the Afghan women through his power abuse. His roles as a bad character and his nefarious actions have been fore grounded to symbolize Hitler, Mullah Omar and the Taliban in general. Assef never addressed Hassan and Sohrab by their names, but by 'Hazara.' He used to call Hassan "Flat-Nose" and "Babalu" to his (so-called) father. At times of extreme anger, he used to address Hassan discriminatorily as "motherless Hazara." The discourse producer has discursively constructed and represented the Taliban as a militant and guerrilla force of those Pashtuns who are fundamentalists and ethnicists. However, the discourse-producer's representation of Mullah Omar and the Taliban is biased, negative, exaggeratory and discriminatory.

The discourse-producer represents Assef as a tall and "blue-eyed" (2003, p. 35) boy who was notorious for his savagery. In order to resemble him with Hitler, the discourse-producer traces his lineage and links it with German race. He was nicknamed as "the Ear Eater" (2003, p. 36) because he had caused a poor kid loses his right ear in fight. Amir, the narrator and protagonist, contemptuously calls him "sociopath" (2003, p. 36). He exaggerates in misrepresenting the Taliban. However, he challenges the Taliban on account of their brutal and inhuman actions. Islam in itself is perfect and flawless, but the Taliban's adopted procedures to impose it on the Afghans are objectionable and deplorable. The discourse-producer himself is a well-educated and modern-minded Afghan-born American, and his own ideology, moulded in the American environment, clashes with that of the Taliban. The analysis indicates that the narrator has granted voice to his liberal father to speak against the Mullahs and the bearded people including the Taliban. The discourse-producer, through Baba's voice, calls such ideologists as "bearded idiots" and "self-righteous monkeys" who are unable to comprehend the language of the Qur'an, and no learnable thing can be learnt from them. Moreover, they are likened to Genghis Khan who was a savagely tyrant warrior.

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