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Institutional Racism in Sultanzadah's Novel Sham-e Akhir-e Afghani (2021)

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ABSTRACT

This research addresses institutional racism in Afghanistan, focusing on Mohammad Asif Sultanzadah's novel entitled Sham-e Akhir-e Afghani (2021). Utilizing the theoretical framework of institutional racism from Carmichael and Hamilton (1967), this study employs a qualitative approach with textual analysis as the primary tool. In the novel, Sultanzadah's narrative highlights institutional racism perpetrated by extremist Pashtuns (Taliban) and Afghan government against Hazaras. Findings indicate that racism persists in Afghan society, with Hazaras that differ in ethnicity, religion, and culture, experiencing significant discrimination, particularly in various social settings. While Pashtuns are seen as a superior democratic power condemning individual racism, Hazaras face systemic racial discrimination in education, relationships, housing, and the economic system. This study underscores the urgent need to address institutional racism in Afghanistan.

Key words: Afghanistan, institutional racism, Pashtuns, Hazaras

INTRODUCTION

Societies shape the way individuals live their lives. When actions are evaluated based on equality and fairness, people perform better. Historically, humans have been divided into groups differing by race, ethnicity, social status, wealth, and religion, often resulting in perceived superiority or inferiority. Intellectuals and societies have repeatedly criticized these notions of superiority, advocating for equality and human justice.

Discriminatory beliefs, ideologies, and behaviors persist, with racial discrimination being one of the most severe social issues today. It is particularly prevalent in developing countries with diverse social, ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. The more religiously diverse a country's population, the more violent its internal conflicts tend to be. Afghanistan, a developing country with a history of conflict and war, exemplifies this despite being an Islamic nation that values kinship ties.

Racism has been a constant throughout history and across all civilizations. Ethnicity, a concept often paralleled with race, denotes a collective of individuals sharing common "ancestry, background, values, attitudes, and behaviors" (Yetman 1999). Ethnicity encompasses the diverse cultural aspects within a nation's populace, often referred to as cultural identity. Romero defines ethnicity as "a shared heritage defined by shared characteristics such as language, religion, cultural practices, and nationality that distinguish one group from other groups" (O'Dell 2014).

Race is often defined by biological heritage, evident through "physical traits, genetic makeup, and behavioral characteristics" (Spickard 2004) passed down through generations. Despite community and cultural diversity, the consequences of racism—such as oppression, repression, discrimination, and exclusion—remain consistent. As Wright states, "Race is a social category, not a biological one. While racial classifications generally use inherited biological characteristics as a criterion of classification, how these characteristics are treated and how they are translated

into the categories we call 'race' is defined by social conventions, not biology" (Wright 2009).

Racism in Afghanistan has a long history, particularly affecting the Hazaras who have fought for their rights since the 19th century. They have faced persecution from the government, Kochi groups, ISIS, and the Taliban, with their homes and lands unlawfully seized and innocent passengers held hostage and killed. The government has consistently failed to support the Hazaras meaningfully. Victims of overt acts of individual racism are often condemned, with society either ignoring or lacking the means to address the underlying institutional racism that has marginalized the Hazaras for centuries.

Disparities systematically favor some groups over others. Discrimination refers to unwarranted differential treatment based on group membership. In 1971, the Supreme Court expanded this definition to include practices neutral on their face but with an unjustified disparate impact. Thus, discrimination is increasingly seen as either intentional or automatic disparate treatment as well as unjustified disparate impact (Reskin 2012).

Discrimination based on racism has always characterized human societies. Its origin predates Islam, exemplified by the pride white Arabs had over Abyssinian cobs. Such institutionally sanctioned discriminatory practices persist in countries like Afghanistan, marked by continuous struggles of different ethnicities and races for basic human rights. The Tabassum Movement in 2015 demonstrated against the violence and lack of justice for decapitated Hazara travelers and the systematic killing of Hazaras (Alizada 2016).

Mohammad Asif Sultanzadah, an Afghan novelist, critically views racism in Afghanistan in his novel, supporting Hazara empowerment and pride in their origins. Racism in Afghanistan is often criticized individually, but institutional racist policies, such as fewer Hazaras in official positions, fewer seats for Hazara students in public universities, and lack of social infrastructure in Hazara areas, are rarely questioned. The government regularly ignores the systematic killing of Hazaras. Sultanzadah confronts these hidden policies, fostering self-awareness in Hazara society. This study aims to reveal institutional racism often unnoticed by society and examines the effects of overt and covert racism on Hazaras, highlighting obstacles in their fight for equality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Afghans, including Pashtuns, generally do not easily accept the notion of racial prejudice. Many believe that Afghanistan's core values support principles of equality and fairness, reflecting the essence of Islamic brotherhood. Islam considers piety as the sole criterion for an individual's superiority, treating people equally regardless of race. Those who acknowledge racism often deny the existence of institutional racism. However, no research has definitively shown that institutional racism exists within Afghan society. Researchers typically attribute racism in Afghanistan to the Taliban and Pashtuns, overlooking the role of the government and its institutions in reinforcing and supporting institutional racism.

Al Ramadhan (2021), in his article entitled Rasisme dalam Novel The Kite Runner, thoroughly examines the racism depicted in novel, set in Afghanistan during a time of war and tribal conflicts. The author traces the roots of racism back to the colonial era when colonizers viewed their race as superior, leading to social inequality. Al Ramadhan (2021) analyzes racism in Afghanistan from the 1970s to 2001, focusing on discrimination, segregation, slavery, prejudice, and stereotypes. He highlights these elements in character interactions and emphasizes the dynamic between the Pashtuns and the persecuted Hazaras.

Hazar (2010), in Hazaras Are Victims of the Blame Game in Afghanistan, highlights the persecution of Hazaras by the Taliban and notes that the United States often ignores this issue due to narratives presented by Afghan officials. The report cites false accusations against Hazaras, such as a man wrongly labeled as a suicide bomber in 2006. Most international news outlets reported the story without noting how unlikely it was for an ethnic Hazara, widely despised by fundamentalists, to be involved. Mir Hazar states: "Such assertions are merely ethnic propaganda, a regular ploy used by Afghan officials to turn international forces against the Hazara people. You cannot find any statement by the general or other Afghan officials that is so quick to identify a terrorist as Pashtun. All of Afghanistan knows that 99% of the Taliban are Pashtun. But when it comes to terrorist ethnic labeling, it is the Hazara who are specifically named by government officials. How fair is that?" He concludes by recalling an incident where the Taliban targeted and killed nine Hazaras in Uruzgan province, challenging the misconception that Hazaras would be welcomed or protected by the Taliban (Hazar 2010).

Kumar (2018), in his article *Racial Dehumanization of Hazaras in* The Kite Runner *by Khaled Hosseini*, examines emerging forms of racism. He explains why many Pashtuns regard the Hazara population as a threat to their way of life and discusses the lack of equality for the Hazara community. Kumar notes that dehumanization based on race can harm individuals physically and psychologically and potentially devastate an entire nation. The Kite Runner provides several examples of racial discrimination and ethnic grudges held by Pashtuns against Hazaras in Afghanistan during the late twentieth century. However, recent developments show the Hazara community achieving progress, with various campaigns, groups, and societies working for Hazara rights. This new movement within the Hazara community challenges long-held prejudices (Kumar 2018).

UNDERLYING THEORY

This study examines the concept of institutional racism, developed by Carmichael and Hamilton (1967), as its theoretical framework. The term was first introduced in Black Power: The Politics of Freedom. This framework is utilized to demonstrate the racial discrimination by the Taliban and the Pashtuns against the Hazaras. In Afghan society, the pervasive notion that Pashtuns are superior to Hazaras is deeply rooted and often ignored. While individual acts of racism are condemned, the systematic oppression of Hazaras by social institutions is rarely questioned. To illustrate institutional racism and distinguish it from individual racism, Carmichael and Hamilton provide the following example:

When white terrorists bomb a black church and kill five black children that is an act of individual racism, widely deployed by most segments of the society. But when in the same city— Birmingham, Alabama—five hundred black babies die each year because of the lack of proper food, shelter and medical facilities, and thousands more are destroyed and maimed physically, emotionally, and intellectually because of conditions of poverty and discrimination in the black community, that is a function of institutional racism (Carmichael 1967).

One of the core principles of Critical Race Theory (CRT) posits that society is inherently structured along racial lines, resulting in fundamental racial stratification and inequality, with power dynamics systematically marginalizing racially oppressed individuals (Hylton 2012). Therefore, the amalgamation of

racism and inequality within social practices and institutions is commonly known as institutional racism.

Sir William MacPherson, in the 1999 Lawrence Report (UK), defined institutional racism as: "the collective failure of an organization to provide appropriate and professional services to people of color, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or discovered in the processes of attitudes and behaviors that lead to discrimination against ethnic minorities through relentless prejudice, thinking, ignorance, and racist stereotypes" (Javed, Batool, and Fatima 2021).

RESEARCH **METHOD**

This study employs qualitative research. According to Creswell (2014), the qualitative approach involves examining interview responses, observations, documents, and audiovisual materials. For this study, data were extracted from Mohammad Asif Sultanzadah's Sham-e Akhir-e Afghani, with a specific focus on male characters. The data collection process involved an in-depth reading of the novel, identifying plots and characters that highlighted the theme of institutional racism.

Qualitative textual analysis was used as the research method. This method encompasses various theoretical traditions, including symbolic interaction, critical theory (e.g. race and feminist theories), and ethnography (Smith 2017). McKee (2004) emphasizes that qualitative textual analysis aims to understand how individuals interpret and engage with texts within specific contexts. This approach focuses on language, symbols, and recurring themes found in texts. To achieve the study's objectives, a detailed analysis of selected texts aligned with the concepts of institutional racism and marginalization was performed.

DISCUSSION

The novel begins with Baba Ramadan and his companions traveling by bus to Kabul for a wedding. Halfway to Kabul, they are stopped at a police checkpoint. When asked about their destination and purpose, Baba Ramzan explains that they are going to his grandson's wedding. The police inquire about the safety of the road and whether they have encountered the Taliban, to which they reply negatively. After the wedding, they take the bride from Kabul to Khishgan. However, on a narrow part of the road, near a government soldiers' base, the Taliban stop their bus. Upon discovering Hazara passengers, the Taliban take the bride and groom hostage. Baba Ramzan chases them to a Pashtun village, but the villagers, displaying racial prejudice, threaten him with guns and prevent him from entering. The Pashtuns cheer the Taliban, greeting them warmly. When Baba Ramadan tries to intervene, the Taliban shoot at him, blocking his entry. The villagers make derogatory remarks about the Hazaras, reflecting deep-seated racism.

And a young villager said: "I have never killed Rafezies, let me do it, and because of his bad behavior, the Taliban took the bride and groom from the Pashtun village to their camp" (Sultanzadah 2021, 72).

Baba Ramzan, a Hazara, faces significant hostility from the Taliban, who are Pashtuns. This ethnic difference results in severe consequences, with the Taliban viewing Hazaras as criminals and kuffar (infidels).

Widespread **Racist Practice**

Racist practices are highlighted throughout the novel, particularly in a conversation between Maulvi and Baba Ramadan:

Maulvi growled: Hazaras are polytheists, Mahdur al-dam and Wajib al-Qatl. Their heads must be cut off and their property be eaten, and their wife must be taken. Hazaras must return to Mongolia, or they will be in the graveyard. In another speech, he reportedly had issued a fatwa that killing Hazaras is legitimate. In contemporary history, Amir Faisal issued a fatwa to kill Shiites. He declared Hazaras and Shias Mahdur al-Dum and said they are impure and should not be associated with them. As they had killed Hazaras in Yakavalang and Mazar. Baba Ramadan remembered the story of young Talib who was looking for Hazaras during the Mazar massacre in the Shadian region of Balkh to kill them and get the reward. And he was willing to pay \$400 to someone who would show him at least one Hazara. (Sultanzadah 2021, 83–108)

When Baba Ramadan pleads for mercy, Maulvi Talib responds:

"With whom should we tolerate Islam, with you who live in Kabul under the support of American infidels? Or with you who have rejected the profession and were born in error and remained in error and will die in error?" (Sultanzadah 2021, 66)

This narrative exposes the systemic racism against Hazaras, illustrated by the Taliban's explicit threats and violence. Maulvi's extremist rhetoric advocating for Hazara extermination reflects deep-seated societal prejudices. The account of the Mazar massacre further underscores the brutality faced by Hazaras.

Injustice Faced by Hazara People

For Hazaras, a woman is a weapon and an honor. They prefer death over dishonor.

If the Taliban had killed all of them on the spot like in other places where they bombed the Hazara passengers, or if this bus had exploded next to the roadside mines that the Taliban had planted, it would have been easier for the bride and groom's convoy sitting on the side of the road. They preferred the bride and groom to have been killed by Taliban, but they would never have been captured by the oppressors Taliban. (Sultanzadah 2021, 80)

Racial profiling is also seen in another scene in which Baba Ramazan and Commander Jahid argue. In the Pashtun village, Baba Ramadan knows the commander of Jahid, they used to fight each other as they were enemies, and when the Russians came, they united for a while and fought against the Russians. Now they are neither enemies nor friends. Ethnic and religious differences created a wall between their friendship and became a reason for their enmity. Although both had retired from the war, they had left these differences to the next generation.

Commander Jahid said: "In these years, the Taliban should not be blamed too much..." Jagran Jahid was angry with the Shia Hazaras, why they did not remove those Sunni slanders and seek forgiveness from them. In his opinion, this had caused the Taliban to kill the Hazaras and the Daesh to carry out terrorist attacks on Shiite circles from time to time. About the Ish Pashte coal mine incident, he said that young Hazara miners were beheaded by the Taliban. Then again, he gave the example of Hazara workers in Nangarhar who were killed by ISIS this spring. Even the extent of this massacre opened the way to the other side of the borders, and you knew that in Pakistan, Hazaras were sometimes killed by Pakistani extremist Sunni groups. (Sultanzadah 2021, 87)

Pashtuns and Tajiks generally deny racial discrimination in Afghanistan, attributing deaths to diseases or natural disasters rather than Taliban actions. According to their point of view, many people die in Afghanistan every year. But they ignore the fact that other people die due to diseases or natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods, not by the Taliban.

As the driver of a bus, Aslam, whose first trip to the Hazara Jat areas was from the Maidan Wardak, and it was the first time he saw the Taliban's confrontation with the Hazaras. He had heard things about the brutal behavior of the Taliban before, but according to his son Nasim, hearing is not like seeing with your own eyes. Just like now, if he went and narrated this incident to his family and relatives, they would also consider this story to be an exaggeration and they did not believe Islam's words. (Sultanzadah 2021, 81)

Travelers feel victimized solely for being Hazaras, leading them to protest against the implicit racism of the Pashtun Taliban. Despite road closures, the government remains indifferent.

The Hazaras never trusted the government to come and attack the Taliban, because in the same area of Maidan, the same Maulvi group or other Taliban groups had killed tens of thousands of Hazara travelers, so that the Maidan Valley was known as the Valley of Death. (Sultanzadah 2021, 100).

Hazaras need to let everyone know how racism has changed over time because the Taliban can release hundreds of imprisoned Taliban if they put pressure on Hazara leaders and the government. And why should the Taliban be in prison and no one from Other relatives should not be harmed. Therefore, these two young men should taste the taste of prison in the Taliban prison so that it becomes a lesson for the rest of the Hazaras. According to the Taliban, the Hazaras must return to Mongolia, otherwise, their place will be in the graveyard. That's why Moulavi Maududi had returned to Pakistan to get the verdict of takfir against Hazaras from the Mufti leader of Daawat Junta and another Mufti from Sahaba Corps, and that was it (Sultanzadah 2021, 94).

The Role of Institution in **Perpetuating** a Sense of Superiority

Referring to institutional racism, in Afghanistan Pashtuns are the beneficiary class. Although they condemn racial discrimination at the individual level, they deny it or sometimes accept that it exists at the institutional level, as Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani support the Taliban because of their ethnic affiliation and if anyone opposes the Taliban or fights against them, he will face the opposition of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani. If that person is a soldier, he will be dismissed from duty, and if he is a civilian, he will be called an irresponsible armed person and arrested.

With the influence and efforts of Hamid Karzai, known as the brother of the Taliban, the night operation of the NATO forces against the Taliban was canceled... (Sultanzadah 2021, 133)

As a responsible government, they target Taliban opponents instead of the Taliban itself.

Ghani himself is a part of the Taliban, people say to him: "Talib wearing a tie" he is part of the emirate or republic or the future interim government in which the Pashtun Taliban rule. For that government to expand, those who opposed the Taliban were destroyed from the very beginning of Karzai's government and then Ashraf Ghani's. Taliban kill innocent people; Ashraf Ghani does not see it. Why Mullah Tarakhil Pashtun, Akhtar Pashtun, and commander Safi Pashtun can be armed, but commanders of other tribes are arrested or killed. (Sultanzadah 2021, 159)

Despite identical crimes, Hazaras and Pashtuns face unequal punishments, questioning the Afghan government's fairness.

The Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's troops were stationed in Maidan Wardak, and it was known that they had a mission to arrest Commander Shamshir, who in the story has the name Commander Delawar. He was previously called an irresponsible armed person in government literature. Ashraf Ghani delegitimized his opponents with such names and labels and removed them, and you could see that he appointed worse people in their place. (Sultanzadah 2021, 160).

In May, Kuchi-Taliban militants violently assaulted Hazaras in Behsood and Daimirdad districts, displacing thousands. Despite global protests, the US media largely ignored this event, deviating from their Afghan allies' narrative. Sultanzadah's Sham-e Akhir-e Afghani (2021) highlights Hazaras' real challenges. He addresses systematic inequalities through Baba Ramadan:

It started with the wars of the Kuchi-Taliban on Kajab, Behsood, and Khawat, and they burned the villages and killed some of them and took them with them. They looked like Kuchi-Taliban, but they were Taliban, otherwise, who would have seen that nomads came with heavy weapons? Another thing is that nomads came with women and children and with herds and camels, but these were armed men in the nomadic clothes of their relatives. The refugees of Behsood, Kajab and Khawat had reached other villages, and the government turned a deaf ear to their cries. But as the government and the people knew, the situation was the same. Since the time of Abdul Rahman Khan Jaber in the 20th century, there was a small conflict between the people of one or two villages and a nomadic group with the Taliban.

Each year, a government committee investigates Kuchi-Taliban and Hazara issues, consistently favoring nomads.

The government inspectors heard the protests of both factions and then did nothing until the next year when the nomads came again, and those wars started again. It was at such times that the very ethnic people of Afghanistan supported Kochi with the villagers. According to each nation, one of them was innocent and the other was guilty and deserving of blame. (Sultanzadah

Even if the Taliban kill soldiers and destroy villages, blow up electricity poles, etc., they will be forgiven by the government and released with respect because Hamid Karzai considers them his disgruntled brothers. The Taliban's policy appears to be working on several fronts. On the one side, they commit war crimes, killing countless people and opposing international forces. At the same time, they have the backing of Afghanistan's President, Hamid Karzai. Karzai not only addresses their leader as "My dear Mullah Omar," but he also actively seeks to have key Taliban figures off the UN blacklist. Furthermore, he is integrating the Taliban into the Afghan government, giving them control over critical ministries such as finance, defense, interior, parliament, and justice. But if the Hazaras defend their lives and property against the attack of armed nomads and the Taliban, they will be suppressed by the government. Stating the attacks that are carried out by both the Taliban and the government on the Hazaras, Sultanzadah points out the existence of racism on an open and hidden level and says: "Go and build it with your own pain, this geography is not an achievement except to bear the pain. It is an ominous land whose foundation is based on oppression." In this scene, Commander Shamshir's defense against Taliban and nomad attacks leads to government retaliation. Soldiers take Hazara hostages, shooting some to force Shamshir's surrender. Afghan officials conduct massive propaganda against Hazaras, who endure continual Taliban and ally killings.

The soldiers under the command of Wardak Square police commander shot at the people and killed some people, wounded some people, and took many hostages. Confessions are made by hostages and even grenades are put in the pockets of the dead so that they can deceive people in front of the camera. The war continues in those areas... (Sultanzadah 2021, 160)

The Influence of Ideology and Social Institutions in Supporting and **Perpetuating** Racism

Sultanzadah attempts to reconcile characters to transform Afghanistan into a utopia without war. However, his narrative ends openly, reflecting his disappointment. When Pashtuns and Hazaras set aside prejudices, the government and Taliban attack, leaving only Mujahid and Baba Ramadan to realize that tribal prejudices hinder Afghanistan's unity:

Go and build it with your own pain, this geography is not an achievement except to bear the pain. It is an ominous land whose foundation is based on oppression. (Sultanzadah 2021, 161)

Despite government discrimination, Hazaras advocate for human rights and democracy, recognizing education as key to their improvement. They support women's rights, evidenced by the election of female leaders. Notably, about 50% of students in Hazara districts are girls, surpassing participation rates in other Afghan regions. Many Hazara girls attend community-established schools without national assistance.

Sultanzadah wrote this book to reveal hidden manipulations and inspire grace and hope, contrasting their ancestors' lives. However, he expresses pessimism for those who do not read books.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Sultanzadah's novel Sham-e Akhir-e Afghani (2021) provides a comprehensive portrayal of pervasive racist practices in Afghanistan, both overt and covert. The novel illustrates the injustices faced by Hazara citizens, highlighting the unequal punishment for the same crimes based on ethnicity, thereby exposing flaws within the Afghan judicial system. The selected excerpts reveal the role of social institutions in perpetuating and upholding racism, with Pashtun citizens developing a sense of superiority on both conscious and unconscious levels.

Despite the characters' efforts to find compromise and unity, they ultimately realize that ethnic prejudices prevent the desired change. Sultanzadah's work serves as a reminder of the hardships endured by the Hazara people and emphasizes the importance of fostering understanding and empathy to create a more just society.

This study recognizes the struggles faced by the Hazara community. It underscores the importance of acknowledging the plight of marginalized groups and serves as a source of appreciation and motivation. The Hazara community's unwavering commitment to dismantling the ideological roots of oppression and countering the institutional structures that perpetuate manipulation is highlighted throughout the analysis.

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