



‘Quiescence’ and ‘Consented Coercion’: An Analysis of Dynamics of Power Politics in Khaled Husseini’s The Kite Runner.

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Abstract

In Asian countries specifically, it is always miss-conceived that the ruling elite controls the ruled or the public by making use of coercive powers like political society- the State. The civil society which has greater role to play in formation of building “common sense” reality, is underestimated in the game of power politics. This research paper on Khaled Husseini’s The Kite Runner reiterates the aforementioned role of the civil society for building peace by critiquing Gramsci’s theory of Cultural Hegemony and Gaventa’s theory of Quiescence. Gramsci emphasizes that the civil society through non-political institutions like religious and educational institutions and ideological hegemony through building “common sense” reality, fatalistic thinking, “consented coercion”, suppression of alternative way of thinking and language grant “hegemony” to the Ruling Elite. Gaventa’s notion of Quiescence lays stress on the inactivity or quiet submission of the ruled which indirectly empowers the ruling class. Through elaboration of role of cultural and ideological hegemony, the paper pinpoints how the characters are unable to shed the ‘common sense’ reality even when displaced in liberated land like America. The paper employs textual analysis as a methodology to critic the characters, cultural practices, the ever changing masters and the oft repeated indigenous words as part of common day language. The purpose of the research is to construct the counter-discourse that would shift the perspective about dynamics of power politics hence how to establish peace in a society like Afghanistan or even Pakistan.

Keywords: Khaled husseini; Cultural hegemony; Quiescence; Common sense; Civil society; Consented coercion

Introduction

According to Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony, culture or ideology rather than coercive powers like ‘political society’ played greater role in establishing the power of the dominant class. Gramsci introduced the use of the term “hegemony” in the Quaderni del Carcere or Prison Notebooks. He was popularly known for the theory of Cultural Hegemony which sets up the idea how cultural institutions were used for upholding power in society. He was proponent of the idea that hegemony could not be established merely with force rather it entails a complete process in which culture and ideology play the most crucial role. The process works through ages to establish the favorable hegemony as the only “common sense” which cannot be done without the ability of the ruling class to ascertain “consent” from the dominated

classes. In order to challenge the established hegemony, a counter hegemony was required to surmount the existent one. It would be possible only if the ruled class endorsed formation of a new culture or alternative “common sense”. Which is a daunting task keeping in view the domination through reiteration of desired cultural values was made sure through discouragement of emergence of alternative values. For Gramsci, language and civil society specifically educative projects had crucial role to play in establishing power over other people. Where other thinkers like Marxist Vladimir Ilyich Lenin believed that the political leadership alone upholds power, Gramsci emphasized the importance of cultural hegemony according to which, the superstructure- the State and the civil society- executed the dominance [1-8].

However, Gramsci believed that: Every philosophical current leaves behind it a sediment of “common sense”; this is the

document of its historical effectiveness. Common sense is not rigid and immobile but is continually transforming itself, enriching itself with scientific ideas and with philosophical opinions which have entered ordinary life. Common sense creates the folklore of the future, that is as a relatively rigid phase of popular knowledge at a given place and time.

Gramsci held the view that the civil society which acted through institutions like, religion, unions, and educational institutions the ruling class derived its cultural values mainly from folklore, popular culture and religion. For example, in the novella *Cat and Mouse*, Grass depicted how a particular class sustained domination through propagation of a certain ideology. By attaching brutal act of massacre of the Jews with patriotism and heroism the young boys of schools and colleges were encouraged to enroll themselves in the Nazi Army and the SA troops. Under normal circumstances, collective extermination of particular ethnic class was considered a brutal and unacceptable act. But Nazi party held power by making anti-Semitism a cultural reality through embedding anti-Semitic values in people's mind. It could not be done with force. The announcement of medals for killing of a certain number of Jews could be called one way of promulgation of anti-Semitic values to naive German students. For instance, a lieutenant (senior student) was brought in front of the college students to deliver an inspiring speech about his heroic act of killing more than forty Jews. He said, "... That was my ninth to seventeenth; but it wasn't until... when I had my full forty, and that I was commended by our CO and by the time I was decorated at the Fuhrer's headquarters ...". Enrolment in the SA troops, in the novella, became the most cherished culture and an emblem of patriotism and heroism. Hence, through ideological campaign run by the Nazi party anti-Semitism became "common sense" reality for the German population. Likewise, Khaled Hosseini depicted Pashtun dominance in Afghanistan as a result of age long ideology building process which endorsed once for all that Pashtuns were ever dominating and superior to other castes like Hazaras. Whereas the Hazaras were usually attached with derogatory terms like "flat nosed", "mice eating" and "load carrying donkeys". These terms transmitted from generation to generation in Afghanistan legitimized the unfair treatment of Hazaras. It was quite noteworthy how Amir despite spending much of his time with Hassan playing, sharing stories and family activities could not bring himself to admit that they were friends. He also did not include him in games with guest kids from family relatives or acquaintances. When the bullying boy Assef asked him "How can you call him your 'friend'?" Amir almost blurted: "but...He's my servant!". He went on to ponder why not he could think of Hassan as his friend where, "I treated Hassan well, just like a friend, better even, more like a brother". Amir never placed Hassan on position of a friend was because his Baba could never place Ali on place of friend. Hassan was all the way

more intelligent, courageous and able than Amir but his caste not only led to the most shattering incident like rape but also towards his killing. Amir himself admitted the fact when he and Hassan encountered Assef in the street. He said, "It also occurred to me how lucky I was to have Baba as my father, the sole reason, I believe, Assef had mostly refrained from harassing me too much". He being a son of a Pashtun father went to school. His literacy always gave him a chance to ridicule otherwise more able Hassan. He once said, "I thought of how I had used my literacy to ridicule Hassan. How I had teased him about big words he didn't know". Irony was that the same big house which always protected the weak self of Amir became reason for the murder of Hassan. He was shot dead right in front of the house accentuating the fact that it did not and could not belong to him. This is how the civil society through different institutions and through ages infused an ideology in minds of mainstream society that it became only 'common sense' reality. Moreover, the fact that Hazaras could never be placed on equal terms with Pashtuns came from the religious institutions also. Hazaras being Shi'a and Pashtuns being Sunni could never put up with each other. Sunni being in majority always ruled supreme. Hosseini also put forth the notion that the ruling elite promulgated its favorable ideology or cultural values by promoting its own image and values among different factions of the society in the novel. The superiority of the Pashtuns in Afghanistan was also enforced by its clear majority in the society. Hence, the Pashtun idiom was more acknowledged and followed which indirectly put lower factions of the society in a less favorable position. For example, the notion that Pashtuns were always sincere, proud and brave hence superior permeated in Afghanistan society. It obliquely meant that other factions or castes of the society were less reliable, brave and lower in status. As Baba said at one occasion, "We may be hardheaded and I know we're far too proud, but, in the hour of need, believe me that there's no one you'd rather have at your side than a Pashtun". Hence, the Pashtun's sense of superiority had been transmitting from generation to generation through informal education so much so that it became a common sense to hold Pashtuns superior than others. Thus, when Hassan and his wife were being shot dead at the street by the Taliban, people avoided to talk about the incident because "... But no one was going to risk anything for a pair of Hazara servants". On the other hand ideology of serving unconditionally the Pashtun masters had been ingrained in Hassan so much so that he went to any extent to please his master. His recurring phrase, "For you a thousand times over" explained the whole philosophy of servitude of Hazaras. Hassan was the one who was betrayed but he thought it out of the common sense way to punish Amir for this even if Amir invited him to take revenge on him or express anger on him [9-16]. One of the most influential institutions of the civil society in propagating ruling elite's ideology was held to be educational

institution by Gramsci. Hosseini while referring to the position of Hazaras in Afghanistan held educational institution one of the most influential factors. Hosseini pointed out two kinds of educational institutions, the first being schools – formal education and the second being family institution by informally educating people about certain cultural values which supported and consolidated position of the ruling elite. The Kite Runner reflected how the history of Hazaras had been suppressed and excluded from the school history syllabus in schools which kept the younger generations unaware of the denied rights of Hazaras. For example, Amir learned about the history of Hazaras from his mother's collection of history books. He wondered how his school syllabus mentioned about Hazara ancestry 'only in passing'. His school history book only mentioned that Hazaras were Mogul descendants; hence, outsiders in Afghanistan. It also justified the second rate citizen treatment that they were met with by majority Pashtuns. Amir was also stunned to find that many things that he learnt from that old history books were not told by even his teacher. The formal educational institution in this way became one important factor in hiding Hazara ancestry and Pashtun savagery which resulted into ultimate dominance of the Pashtuns through centuries. He also learned that apparently Pashtuns like Baba and his father seemed benevolent enough to shelter Hazaras like Baba but in reality they suppressed their right to be equal to the Pashtuns by keeping them unaware of their ancestral past, keeping them illiterate, by denying them right to justice and by confining them to only profession of servants. Hence, three different forms of the civil society like educational institutions, family institutions and religious institutions passively or aggressively but consistently had been infusing pro Pashtun ideology among the Afghanistan people. Gramsci introduced the term "consented" coercion which meant that the ruled classes willingly endorsed hegemony by accepting ruling class's culture and ideology as "natural" and "normal" for the whole society. For Gramsci this "consent" neither could be because of narrow economic interests of the ruling class nor due to force and coercion of the ruling class. Rather, it must entail intellectual leadership making coalition with other social classes. Gramsci called this unification of social classes to put it in George Sorel's words "historic bloc". As in words of Eaglton, "Culture for both [Gramsci and Freud] is an amalgam of coercive and consensual mechanisms for reconciling human subjects to their unwelcome fate as laboring animals in oppressive conditions". Gramsci also said this consent might be due to fatalistic feelings. For example, the subordinate classes gave consent to the bourgeois hegemony on the basis that it could not do anything to prevent it. As he put it quite rightly, "Indeed fatalism is nothing other than the clothing worn by real and active will when in a weak position". In other words Hegemony on the one hand produced bourgeois' definition of reality and on the other hand established other social

classes' acceptance of this reality as 'common sense' or only sagacious way of perceiving reality. Whoever attempted to disagree with this reality was marginalized. In words of Gramsci, "the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as 'domination' and as 'intellectual and moral leadership'" and "The 'normal' exercise of hegemony on the now classical terrain of the parliamentary regime is characterized by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent". Therefore hegemony presupposed that the interests of the dominated classes were to be taken care of in order to create certain level of symmetry. Gaventa's theory of Quiescence laid weight on the fact that the ruled class put itself forward with quiet submission. For example, Hassan was brave enough to scare Assef from doing any harm to Amir on the street by targeting slingshot on his left eye although his tone was apologetic and preventive not that of threatening. He kept on calling him 'Agha' the title of respect to refer to elder or respectable people. This fatalistic feeling to always consent to the dominant was more striking when Hassan after being raped by Assef served drinks to him and his gang in birthday party of Amir. His downcast eyes and title 'Agha' reflected how callously the dominated had to accept the domination. Also in the Doll's House Nora's husband's domination came from quiet submission of Nora. She accepted to be over powered by Torvald Helmer. Ibsen quite interestingly projected husband's tricks to overpower her. He did not determine his power through force and fear rather through sweet and luring compliments like "sparrow" and "doll". The end of the play justifies Gaventa's phenomenon of Quiescence that Nora deliberately put herself forward to submit to Helmer's commands. Gramsci also believed that the ruled classes deliberately nurtured the interests of the ruling classes. Hence, Hassan's pet phrase "For you a thousand times over" reiterates the same point. Although Amir was the master of Hassan but Amir did not have even a single quality to make him better than Hassan in ability and intelligence. Baba and Amir himself were conscious of this very fact. Hassan was more intelligent in solving riddles, in winning games and he was even brave enough to stand for him against bullies like Assef. As Baba said while expressing his concerns for Amir, 'I see him playing on the street with the neighborhood boys. I see how they push him around, take his toys from him, give him a shove here, a whack there... he never fights back... Hassan steps in and fends them off'. But it was Hassan's unconditional loyalty which rendered Amir more powerful in front of him. Hassan took Amir's coercion as natural for himself. Hassan would always abide by Amir's orders be it teasing neighbors with mirrors or "... shooting walnuts at the neighbor's dog' even though he himself never wanted to do it. Moreover, he never told his father who was the mastermind behind these mischievous acts. Hassan never wanted to, but if I asked, _really_

asked, he wouldn't deny me. Hassan never denied me anything." Hassan would let Amir even win games in order to make him look more intelligent to his Baba. 'Hassan and I were skimming stones and Hassan made his stone skip eight times. The most I managed was five. Baba was there, watching, and he patted Hassan on the back. Even put his arm around his shoulder'. Besides, Amir enjoyed teasing Hassan just to assert his superiority over Hassan, to the mental conditioning Hassan accepted this behavior positively. Amir would rather tease him when Hassan being illiterate did not know meaning of a certain word. 'But there was something fascinating--albeit in a sick way--about teasing Hassan. Kind of like when we used to play insect torture. Except now, he was the ant and I was holding the magnifying glass'. Moore validated same point in these words, 'Since mankind's dawn, a handful of oppressors have accepted the responsibility over our lives that we should have accepted for ourselves. By doing so, they took our power. By doing nothing, we gave it away. We've seen where their way leads, through camps and wars, towards the slaughterhouse [17,18].

Gramsci opined that the hegemony also depended on suppression of alternative point of view. As domination of one ideology naturally presupposed suppression of alternate way of looking at the social reality. The dominant ideology included culture's way of envisioning and believing things and institutions like religion, rites or beliefs, education, mass media and family propagate the very ideology that hegemonic class held to be true and 'common sense'. Prevalence of one set of beliefs and reality prevented the dominated classes of the society to believe in alternative ways of perceiving reality. One can see the voice of Martha in Lessing's *Martha Quest* was constantly suppressed because her soft corner for the black natives was unacceptable among the white colonizers. The novelist conveyed the idea from the very start of the novel when Martha was sitting separate from the parents and their family friends. She was talked about by her mother in an unfavorable manner. Aslam in his novel *Maps for Lost Lovers* encapsulated how alternative voice is suppressed through incident of honor-killing of Jugnu and Chanda. Their voice was callously squashed merely because they eloped away to get married. This tradition of suppression of alternative views was carried from the Greek times when Sophocles in his play *Antigone* projected Antigone –the protagonist- as the one representing alternative view. She stood alone to demand the denied burial rights of her deceased brother, Creon. Her voice was treated as rebellion and thus quietened.

Hosseini also reinforced the same view by showing Pashtun's way of life in Afghanistan as the only reasonable and prevalent way of life. Time and again the novel projected that it was less privileged if not sin to be a Hazara. This could be explained from the instances from the text as Assef justified the rape of Hazara to Waleed and Kamal, who were initially afraid and nervous about the act, by

telling them that he was a mere Hazara. Secondly, when Amir enquired a man on the street if he had seen Hassan running for the kite, his prompt response was that why could a Pashtun boy be worried about mere a Hazara. Although this man did not know Amir and Hassan personally, yet he guessed from Amir's western dress. It implied that only Pashtuns could afford western dresses like jeans and being a Pashtun he should not be worried about Hazara. Hosseini also related in the novel that how even female voice was suppressed by chauvinistic Afghani men. Khala Jamila represented the women of Afghanistan who were able to escape Afghanistan but she could not escape chauvinism of her husband General Tahiri. She had the talent to sing ghazals and raga, the suppression of her singing talent by Tahiri was just one example among many how her voice was suppressed by her husband. 'That she never sing in public had been one of the general's conditions when they had married'.

Likewise, when Taliban came to ruling power they came with an ideology and they went on a spree to suppress alternative way of life. There are also some references to how Hazaras were callously killed and extermination in Taliban's campaign of ethnic cleansing. 'A few weeks later, the Taliban banned kite fighting. And two years later, in 1998, they massacred the Hazaras in Mazar-i-Sharif'. The incident of killing of Hassan and his wife also made clear the extent to which Taliban went to suppress other ways of looking at reality. It not only targeted Hazaras but completely changed the culture of Afghanistan through 'cultural Vandalism' to put in words of Hosseini. In one of his interviews he talked about Taliban in this light: 'The Taliban's acts of cultural vandalism—the most infamous being the destruction of the giant Bamiyan Buddhas had a devastating effect on Afghan culture and the artistic scene. The Taliban burned countless films, VCRs, music tapes, books, and paintings. They jailed filmmakers, musicians, painters, and sculptors. These restrictions forced some artists to abandon their craft...' (Hosseini interview). The novel also mentions killing of Hazara villages. Rahim Khan while talking about Taliban confessed that how he was hit brutally for cheering the soccer stadium by a young Taliban. He went to the extent of saying, "They don't let you be human."

Hosseini depicted Taliban's deliberate efforts to suppress alternative view of life from images as well. For example, the conditions of Karteh-Seh when Amir and Farid arrived there were quite appalling. Besides this the image of half buried TV set in rubble and in contrast the words, 'ZENDABAD TALIBAN!' painted on the wall brought forth the idea that the previous way of life which was more liberal and natural was no longer possible with the dominating rule of Taliban. TV here became an emblem of liberalism or free will as earlier enjoyed by the people of Afghanistan. The words painted in black color add to the gravity of the situation- the cultural change was not a positive one since

black color symbolised evil. Moreover, Amir made sure to change his get up and modify it according to expectations of ruling Taliban by wearing Afghani national dress and fake beard also pin pointed how alternative way of life was suppressed in Afghanistan to strengthen their rule.

Gramsci highlights the importance of language in institutionalizing hegemony. In his opinion dominant ideology locked up different classes through language. Language played its role because of the way ideas belonging to one ideology were transmitted. Language became one unified prism through which the whole society-dominant classes as well as dominated classes looked at reality. Thus the words of a language were shaped by the dominant ideology and carried connotations which served cultural meanings that lead us to think within premises of the prevalent ideology. For example, if dominant ideology insisted that divorced woman was always too irresponsible to remain married, the divorced woman, no matter how much responsible, would always be looked at as irresponsible. For example, Hosseini coined the term Toofan Agha for Amir's baba. The words carried the cultural connotation of the character's being dominating and courageous. Ibsen also very tactfully made use of language in inscribing hegemony of Torvald Helmer in *The Doll's House*. For Example, he would address her by titles like, 'sparrow', 'doll', 'little lark', 'squirrel', and 'skylark'. All these titles mirror the fragile, dependent and weak position of Nora in front of him. A language was not only medium of communication it also represented ideology, culture and identity. In the *Tin Drum*, the characters would avoid speaking even native languages with the change of nationalities. For example, when Poland was overtaken, the polish characters would avoid speaking polish language. Thus language was a means of dominance; therefore, it was frequently attacked and suppressed with the change of ideologies and nationalities. The projection of dominant ideology through language was the most vividly depicted in the novel *Grass is singing* by Lessing. The piece of news right at the start of the novel describing murder of Mary Turner from hands of Moses reveal the stereotypes attached with the black. "Mary Turner, wife of Richard Turner ... was found murdered.... The houseboy ... has confessed to the crime.... It is thought he was in search of valuables...." (Lessing, *Grass Is Singing* 9). The news report gave detailed introduction of the white deceased lady but depersonalized native boy's identity by calling him merely house boy. Moreover, the last comment that the boy was in search of values also reflected stereotyping of the African natives. i.e. that natives were brutes enough to murder the white, assumedly always rich people, for mere valuables.

Husseini used some indigenous words which reflect upon the essence of thinking patterns of Afghan society. The association of the word *iftikhar* or notion of family honor with the women of Afghan society was also noteworthy in the novel. Many a times

men of Afghan society would dominate the women of their society on the pretext of honor and *iftikhar*. Hence, the notion of honor bounded women with the men despite unequal treatment or double standards in the society. The women were supposed to remain chaste and obedient or otherwise they would damage their family's men's reputation. For example, Khanum Jamila would refrain from singing in the public, even in her daughter's wedding lest it might bring bad reputation to General Tahiri's name. Hence, the notion of honor becomes a binding force between dominating man and obeying women in Afghan community. Secondly, Soraya was defamed for eloping away with a man of her choice whereas her male cousin remained respectful in front of society despite having extramarital affairs with girls. The stigma attached to love marriage for female had still been carried on to liberal country like U.S.A by Afghan people. It was not only General Tahiri who brought Soraya back to home forcefully but the Afghan society generally ostracized her as a 'lochak' woman. Hence, the disparity in treatment of man and woman put the woman on subordinate position and it also held them responsible for fame of the family. Hence, the notion of *iftikhar* becomes a prism for the Afghan society to look at their women. Certain words carried the connotation which represented the mainstream ideology of a society in just single term or word. For example, the repetition of the term *Zendagi migzara*- the life goes on- stood for the fatalistic feelings regarding an unfortunate position. The philosophy behind the term helped Hazaras not retaliate against undue Pashtun dominance, later on Afghan nation's reconciliation with callous rule of not only USSR but also Taliban. It had been transmitting from generation to generation to reconcile with their fortune and not to struggle, this sole reason according to Hosseini kept Afghan nation to stand up for its rights against undue domination of ruling class. Language played its role also because of the way ideas belonging to one ideology were transmitted to younger generations. The status of Hazaras as 'flat nosed' Chinese people like moreover, their *shi'a* sub-caste always rendered them as outsiders in Afghanistan. The Hazaras remained as ostracized or outcaste class in Afghanistan throughout the novel. Hassan and Ali are time and again are treated badly due to their caste. They are referred as Hazaras reproachfully so much so that the word Hazara becomes a derogatory term. Amir while reading about Hazara history discovered, 'It also said some things I did know, like that people called Hazaras _mice eating, flat-nosed, load-carrying donkeys. I had heard some of the kids in the neighborhood yell those names to Hassan'. For example, Amir instantly rebuked or corrected General Tahiri when he called Sohrab a Hazara boy. He said, 'You will never again refer to him as 'Hazara boy' in my presence. He has a name and it's Sohrab'. Moreover, Assef legitimized rape of Hassan on the pretext that he was a Hazara. Hence, in Afghanistan ideology Hazara was not only a caste but a

derogatory term, an outcaste ethnic class. Hassan was also generalized and depersonalized as a mere Hazara than an individual on many occasions.

Conclusion

The common sense ideology in the minds of Afghans had been built through ages that people cherished them irrespective of time and space. Hosseini just like Gramsci quite rightly made his point that political society was always less effective in enforcing certain ideology in society than the civil society. For example, some Afghans were able to escape Taliban ideology which was being enforced through political institution like legal system of code of conduct. Taliban ideology had the limitation of time and space, its ideology only worked in areas of their jurisdiction or where they held the writ but the pre Taliban Pashtun ideology was more lasting and forceful because it had been transmitted from generation to generation through centuries informally and gradually. Afghans followed Taliban ideology as long as they were in Afghanistan but the moment they left the land they were to act in accordance with their interests. Whereas, Pashtun or patriarchal ideology had been ingrained in the mind and spirit so much so that they could not escape no matter where they lived.

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