

# Carnavalesque and Subversion of Grotesque Power Structure through Resistance: A Bakhtinian Dissection of Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

**K. NEVEDHA LIZ GLORIA**

Assistant Professor of English  
Nazareth Margoschis College, Pillaiyanmanai

**S. GARRET RAJA IMMANUEL**

Assistant Professor of English  
Nazareth Margoschis College, Pillaiyanmanai

## Abstract

The paper attempts to have a Bakhtinian reading of the novel, *The Kite Runner* by Afghan writer, Khaled Hosseini. The author's attitude of resistance is, here, seen through the subversion of power structures. The paper also endeavours to have Bakhtinian perception of the novel with the application of the concept, Carnavalesque and Grotesque. Based on the theory of Carnavalesque, the researchers attempt to delineate the work with the notion of subversion. The author's resistance is elaborated through his application of Carnavalesque elements. Thus, subversion of the power is scrutinized. Moreover, the researchers tend to identify postcolonial concepts such as, Ambivalence, Mimicry and Hybridity in the novel. The researchers, furthermore, negotiate that in which manner the characters are suppressed by the colonizers and discriminated as 'other'. The paper also deals with the colonial issue between the natives and the colonizer. Various conflicts, such as, Pashtun and Hazara conflict, Amir's cultural identity crisis and Rahim Khan's colonial attitude, are focused.

**Keywords:** *carnavalesque, subversion, resistance, grotesque, and power.*

Every author has an ideology which he tries to promote through his work. The context influences the authors and shapes their ideology. Khaled Hosseini is not an exception. Being an Afghan-American writer, Hosseini reveals his 'otherness', ambivalence and his search for identity in all his three novels. *The Kite Runner* deals with issue of colonialism in three grounds. Primarily, the novel deals with the issue between, once colonized Pashtuns and now Colonized Hazaras. Secondly, The internal colonization of Russian Army and Taliban are focused. Thirdly, The main character, Amir's migration to America also provides a postcolonial discourse. Every postcolonial literature has a kind of resistance. The resistance, here, is seen with the lens of Bakhtin's theory of *Carnavalesque* which provides a subversion of Power structure, against superpowers such as, Pashtuns, Soviet Army and American Culture. The subversion of power is seen as resistance.

The author's ideology is internalized on the reader through the words.

Racism is evident from the beginning of the novel, which provides a way to analyse the novel from a postcolonial perspective. The first victims are Hazaras, a tribe from Mongolia who are residing in Kabul. Pashtuns consider themselves higher than the Hazara, and as a ruler community, they discriminate the poor Hazara. Hazara people are not given respect even by the Pashtun Children. Hazara are seen as 'Others' and obviously becomes *subaltern* in the hands of Pashtuns. The binary opposition is evident even among the children of Kabul. In the beginning of the novel, Hassan, a Hazara is discriminated by Pashtun children, especially, Assef, because of his race. The racial discrimination is evident through Assef's words who says,

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. (Hosseini 38).

Moreover, by describing the Hazaras as "mice-eating, flat-nosed, load-carrying donkeys." (9), Pashtuns define themselves as civilized and Hazaras as uncivilized. Another instance which exemplifies the colonial struggle is, Pashtun soldiers' discrimination of Hassan. Hassan is mocked by the Pashtun Soldiers who use ill-mannered words. This reveals Pashtun's colonial attitude. Not only the children are suppressed, even Ali an old servant also is suppressed by the children of Pashtun Community. The history book which Amir reads also states that the Hazaras were oppressed and killed by Pashtuns. The author elucidates his ideology through the disguise of the history book which says,

Hazarashad tried to rise against the Pashtuns in the nineteenth century, but the Pashtuns had "quelled them with unspeakable violence." The book said that my people had killed the Hazaras, driven them from their lands, burned their homes, and sold their women. The book said part of the reason Pashtuns had oppressed the Hazaras was that Pashtuns were Sunni Muslims, while Hazaras were Shi'a (9).

Thus, The conflict between the colonizer and colonized starts even from children of Kabul. The novel is an attempt of the author to represent the reality through a fictional framework. Khaled Hosseini, though a Pashtun, as an author explains the plight of Hazaras with a postcolonial sense. In this way, those who are in power try to manipulate the powerless.

Another instance which reveals the colonial struggle is, Amir's attitude towards Hassan. Amir discriminates Hassan and tries to send him out by saying that Hassan has stolen his watch. As a coloniser, the house belongs to Amir and he sends the native Hassan out of the house. Therefore, again Pashtuns consider themselves as 'civilized' and Hazaras as Barbaric. Another suppression of native can be found when the Russian Army molests native people and controls them. A Russian soldier, as a colonizer compels the women in the truck to have 'thirty minutes' with him. Threatening of her husband with gun

point can be taken as a perfect example of what Louis Althusser calls, Repressive State Apparatus. Thus, the natives are targeted and marginalized by the colonizers. Therefore, The power structure is always above the subaltern.

The second part of the novel shows the resistance of natives towards the colonizer. The resistance can be analogised with Bakhtin's concept of *Carnavalesque*, which appears in his book, *Rabelais and His World* (1965). Ian Baucom defines Carnavalesque as, "a term to characterize the writing that depicts the de-stabilization or reversal of power structure, albeit temporarily, as happens in traditional forms of Carnival" (76). As Baucom says, it subverts the power structure through carnival mode. The style of writing which subverts is called *Carnavalesque*. *The Kite Runner* also has many instances of Carnavalesque in it. Chris Barker also defines Carnavalesque in the following manner:

The carnivalesque involves a temporary reversal of the order of power enacted through the rituals, games, mockeries and profanities in which the polite is overthrown by the vulgar and the king up-ended by the fool. The carnival introduces a topsy-turvy world of reversals of power and authority in tandem with the pleasures of excessive eating, drinking and sexual activity that offend the borders of polite decorum. The contemporary use of the term carnivalesque is a metaphorical one that connotes a form of resistance to power and authority from within popular culture. (34)

As Barker points out, carnival space reverses the power structure and makes the situation upside down. The activities are seen by Barker as a resistance to Power. Bakhtin expresses his views on carnivalesque thus: "Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and every-one participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom" (Bakhtin 7). Thus it is evident that during carnival there is no outside life and everybody, including the elite and mass have to abide by the law of carnival. Julian Wolfrey explains that, "social hierarchies and power structures oriented around

positions of 'high' and 'low' are temporarily inverted, often through forms of parody" (27). Micheal Payne and Jessica Rae define carnivalesque mode of Writing as "thetopsy-turvy realm of meanings, priorities, social distinctions, religious and secular power structures, etc." (332). This shows the list of things that are made upside down in the carnival. Carnavalesque is also associated with grotesque realism as Andrew Robinson mentions in his essay. Bakhtin, in his book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), devises four categories of carnival sense of the world:

- i) New mode of interrelationship between individuals
- ii) Eccentricity
- iii) Carnivalistic mésalliances
- iv) Profanation (65).

The interaction between usually separated people is allowed during the time of carnival. The interaction is "freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions – social estate, rank, age, property" (65). Unusual and strange behaviors are allowed and revealing of human nature is permitted in the carnival space. The third characteristics of carnivalesque reunites everything that is separated usually; as Bakhtin explains, "All things that were once self-enclosed, disunified, distanced from one another by a noncarnivalistic hierarchical worldview are drawn into carnivalistic contacts and combinations. Carnival brings together, unifies, welds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid" (66). The fourth characteristics of carnivalesque is mixing the sacred and profane together: Sacred texts are parodied, blasphemies are allowed, debasing language is allowed and obscenities are permitted. These four categories, according to Bakhtin bring liberation and equality in the society. *The Kite Runner* also possesses all these qualities of Carnavalesque. Therefore, the text can be considered as a carnivalesque literature. Khaled Hosseini, as an anti-establishmentarian writer, uses all these carnival qualities in his writing to bring a sense of liberation and equality in his fictional world. The text, therefore, serves as a carnival space and lets the characters play their dissent role within the realm of text.

Khaled Hosseini has effectively used the first category in his novel to create a friendship between Amir and Hassan. The two extremes kind of people are united in the novel through the bond of friendship. Servant and Master relationship is blurred and friendship is established between Amir and Hassan; as well as between Baba and Ali. Thus the interaction between usually-separated people fills the first quality of being a carnivalesque literature. Not only the people but also several cultures are also mingled. In postcolonial aspect, the mixing of two different culture is called "Hybridity" (Nayar 91). Assef belongs to German and Afghan Race, since his father is a German and Mother is an Afghani. Amir is both Hassan's Master and half-brother. Usually Pashtun and Hazara would never be allowed to be mingled with each other; but, Baba has illicit relationship with a Hazara Woman, Sanabur and Amir is fed by Sanabur, a Hazara woman when he was child. Tradition and Modernisation is usually not allowed to be mixed. In *The Kite Runner* traditional culture of Afghanistan and American culture are allowed to be mixed with one another.

The second category of Carnavalesque occurs in quite a few places of the text. Amir behaves eccentrically with Hassan after the rape of Hassan. He also reveals his real character in the course of the story. In the beginning of the novel he treats Hassan well, but after the cruel incident, which he witnessed, his behavior becomes eccentric. He begins to get jealous over Hassan and lets his human nature blame Hassan with the accusation of theft. Bhabha also behaved eccentrically and has illegal relationship with his maid. This reveals his human nature and his real character. Though Baba is respected by many in the society still Baba has the guilt in him. This notion of being holy outward and having dirt inside is called by Bakhtin as *Grotesque Realism*. As J.A. Cuddon points out, "Bakhtin discerns [grotesque] a literary mode which mocks and even threatens social hierarchy" (337). Rowland Knowles explicates Grotesque realism as, "Grotesque realism celebrates the grotesque body occluded by the aesthetics of neoclassical beauty, the body with genitals and orifices, a body of organic processes rather than the self-contained body of proportional beauty. (16). Though looks good from the outside, Sanabur, Amir, and Baba are disgusting inside

of them. The eccentric behavior of Baba which is revealed in American shop also exemplifies the second quality of carnivalesque.

The third category, mixing of two extremes is also evident in the novel. Assef is both a religious scholar and a materialistic man, who would like to have homosexual relationship with Haasan's son. Though being servant, Hassan becomes the owner of Amir's house after they left Kabul. America and Kabul mixes with one another through Amir, who in spite of being a Afghani, feels like he is a stranger in his own land. Baba also contributes to this category. Suraiya, Baba, General, Amir, and all the diasporic figures create a kind of hybridness which can be taken as mixing of high culture and low culture. Taliban with Russian guns, American Jeep, and British sun glasses also can be categorized under this category. Intermingling of Pashtun and Hazarqa race is also seen as third category.

Baba perfectly epitomises fourth category. He does not give respect to mullahs; He utters blasphemy and when Amir condemns him for drinking alcohol he says, "but first understand this and understand it now, Amir: You'll never learn anything of value from those bearded idiot" (15). Calling the religious leaders as 'beraded idiots' and 'self-righteous monkies' make Baba an anti-authoritarian and non-confirmist. He has his own morals and definition of sin. After watching the Taliban speaking of sin, Farid ridicules them by saying "And they call themselves Muslims," (238). The mullah says, "Those are not my words, nor the words of my brothers. Those are the words of GOD!" (237), which as actually his own words, thus he blasphemes. Amir's life is not so religious he articulates, "I didn't remember the last time I had laid my forehead to the ground in prayer. Then I did remember: the day Dr. Amani gave Baba his prognosis. I had knelt on the prayer rug, remembering only fragments of verses I had learned in school." (287). Killing is a sin, but killing someone for committing sin is relaxed as God's

punishment. Thus sacred and profane are mixed with one another.

The novel, *The Kite Runner*, thus possesses all the four categories of carnivalesque and grotesque realism in it. Through the carnivalesque set up the author subverts social realities and power structures that hold the state. Class consciousness is broken, institutions such as religion and casteism are thwarted. . Therefore, the text can be considered as a carnivalesque literature.

### References

1. Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1965.
2. --- . *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
3. Barker, Chris. *The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies*. Thousand Oaks, California, Sage Publications, 2004.
4. Buchanan, Ian. *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*. Oxford, UK, Oxford University Press, 2010.
5. Cuddon, John Anthony, et al. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. New Delhi, Penguin Books, 2013.
6. Hosseini, Khaled. *The Kite Runner*. Toronto, Anchor Canada, 2004.
7. Payne, Micheal, and Jessica Rae. *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*. London, Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2010.
8. Robinson, Andrew. "Bakhtin: Carnival against Capital, Carnival against Power".
9. [ceasefiremagazine.co.uk](http://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk), 9 Sept. 2011, [ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-bakhtin-2/](http://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-bakhtin-2/).
10. Wolfreys, Julian. *Critical Keywords in Literary and Cultural Theory*. Houndsmill, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.