



Literature and Human Rights: The Case of the Hazaras in Afghanistan

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Abstract: Victims of human rights violations are often reduced to numbers while their pain and suffering remain unreflected. Novels such as *The Kite Runner* resist against this treason to truth. Through a generalisable example, real or fictitious storytelling brings to the reader the mostly unrecognised identity of victims as well as the experience of their challenges.

Literature can be seen as resistance against reduction. For the victims of human rights violations, especially the groups that have neither the ability to defend their fundamental rights nor the opportunity to express their pains and sufferings, being heard and seen is an important means of support against such violations. As written by [James Dawes](#), 'The use of individual narratives depicting inhuman treatment is important in supporting the human rights regime, which in the long run may limit suffering'. Sometimes narrating the victims' stories is the only remaining hope. Victims of human rights violations can either be buried in silence or denied and ignored. Large amounts of contradictory news with journalistic

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narratives can reduce the victims to numbers. Storytelling can resist turning the victim's suffering into a meaningless number, devoid of any human quality. Violations of human rights of the people in Afghanistan have a long history of being ignored. The Hazaras, specifically, have suffered violations of their very fundamental rights, such as the right to life, which has been taken arbitrarily. Now that the Taliban are back in power in Afghanistan, it is helpful to reread some stories written in literature for a better understanding of the victims of human rights violations under such a regime as well as their ideological and practical capacity and will to violate human rights.

***The Kite Runner*, a historic depiction of human rights violations**

The novel [*The Kite Runner*](#) by Khaled Hosseini is a clear example of narration of victims' suffering. By means of storytelling, it provides a brilliant depiction of how an ethnic group is on the verge of being massacred. It highlights how, historically, the Hazaras have suffered systematic marginalisation and demonisation entailing the violation of their fundamental human rights.

History books and official or journalistic reports can risk reducing victims to [numbers](#). Nonetheless, novels and storytelling can resist this risk. For example, in Barfield's [study](#) we read that a large number of Hazaras have been massacred and enslaved. While a small number could escape their homeland, Hazaras' lands have been occupied by invaders. This kind of report and related numbers are devoid of a human quality and a personal connection. Readers cannot feel the atrocities of violators and the quality of sufferings of victims. However, novels or storytelling can resist this level of superficiality by deeply narrating the different aspects of life and relevant facts in a way that readers can feel the pain and sorrow of victims of human rights.

The Kite Runner narrates the criminalisation of belonging to an ethnic group. By telling a story, it is successful in conveying a personal connection. This book illustrates how being a Hazara has been deemed to be a crime and punishable, making no meaningful difference whether the Taliban are in power or there is a stable pre-Taliban regime. For example, during the reign of Zahir Shah (King Zahir), in which there was a powerful and stable central government, being a Hazara was socially insulting, and the author [Hosseini](#) highlights that Hazaras were called 'flat nosed', 'load carrying donkey', and 'mice eater' (p. 9).

In order to show how the Hazaras have been socially considered as outsiders, never been integrated into society, marginalised to its lowest level, Hosseini creates the character of Ali. A respected judge raised a Hazara, Ali, whose parents were killed. However, Ali never became a member of the family, and ended up being a home worker for the judge's family in return for food needs and a place to live.

In showing the social role ascribed to the Hazaras, Ali's character is a powerful alternative to the reports most readers are more familiar with. Ali is depicted as a '*jowali*' (a Farsi/Dari word used in Afghanistan markets for a load carrier and has a sarcastic meaning that the person is a competitor of donkeys), and he is often depicted as a worker who is carrying something.

In representing how deeply victims suffer from inequality, the narrator Hosseini does not reduce the story to a simplistic number but, for example, compares how two murders from two different ethnic groups are treated. Precisely, two drunken young men from wealthy families kill a Hazara couple (Ali's parents) while driving. The judge, who is an honest and fair man, finally sentences the two men to one year of forced labour as they must join the army as punishment. The punishment is severe in the eyes of society (p. 23). Regarding the other murder, the grandfather of Amir (the Pashtun main character) is killed by a thief who stabbed him in the throat. In this case, the victim is not Hazara. As a result, the murderer is arrested and hanged in less than half a day (p. 18).

Storytelling and the accumulation of pain

Literature, especially storytelling, can represent the accumulation of suffering and transmit it to the next generation. Pain and suffering can pass from one generation to another, and generations of traumatic memory are accumulated and passed to the next. Storytelling is more effective to understand the victims' life in depth.

History — which seeks to understand the past through a study of recorded accounts, documents and artifacts — says that the Hazaras in Afghanistan have been excluded physically, socially and culturally. However, the human quality of such exclusion and how a certain victim of related human rights violations could go through all this suffering and pain can remain absent from history.

Hosseini's novel is a good example of literature revealing human rights issues.

The Kite Runner depicts four generations of the Hazaras. The killing of Ali's parents by two drunk drivers symbolically mirrors the [massacre](#) of the Hazaras by King Abdur Rahman Khan in the 1890s, who was drunk with power. A friend of Ali, who is like a brother to him, betrays him and slept with Ali's wife, and finally Ali is murdered. Hassan (Ali's son) is raped and eventually is killed too. Sohrab (Ali's grandson) is constantly raped. Symbolically, Sohrab represents the last remaining generation of the Hazaras and is never happy. He cannot smile while he only remembers rape, massacre and slavery.

Overall, literature can be powerful and result in lasting effects against violations of human rights. Storytelling can steal others' voices, or, as in the case of *The Kite Runner*, can be a confession from a painful conscience but can be very efficacious in illuminating the human rights discourse or at least avoid lessening humans to numbers.