

# Hazara Representation in Popular Culture

*This post explores the representation of the Hazara community in popular culture, using the examples of a novel *The Kite Runner*, a TV talent show *Sitara-e Afghan* (Afghan Star), and a documentary *Laila at the Bridge*. Rabia Khan discusses the gradual change in perceptions about Hazara identity, especially in terms of community consciousness and individual agency, and highlights the manner in which contemporary depictions of the Hazaras reflect more intricate forms of engagement with the historical, political and social realities of the community.*

In July 2020, Netflix released *Stateless*, a six-part series focusing on Australia's immigration detention system, starring and co-produced by the award-winning actress Cate Blanchett. The show's sub-plot delves into the lives of a predominantly Hazara family smuggled from Indonesia to Australia, depicting a lesser known refugee community and their journey. Hazara characters are portrayed by Hazara actors, including Soraya Heidari, Saajeda Samaa and Ilaha Rahemi; [Muzaffar Ali](#), a former Hazara refugee from Afghanistan now based in Australia, [was a cultural consultant on the show](#). The explicit focus on Hazaras and their persecution meant that international audiences became aware of a community and its history which they may otherwise not have known. Given the prominence of Hazara characters in the series whose story highlights realities in contemporary Hazara life, this post explores Hazara representation in popular culture through 3 examples — the novel *The Kite Runner*, a TV talent show *Sitara-e Afghan* (Afghan Star), and a documentary *Laila at the Bridge*.

## **The Historical Context of Hazaras**

The Hazara community is one of many ethnic groups from Afghanistan, but there are differences of opinion about whether they are of Turko-Mongol heritage, or are an indigenous community from central Afghanistan, an area known locally as Hazarajat. The late 1800s was a particularly turbulent period in Hazara history which saw the community [massacred and enslaved](#) at the behest of Abdur Rahman Khan, the Pashtun king at the time, who sought to conquer Hazarajat in order to consolidate his power. He did so by [instigating a jihad against Hazaras](#) who were perceived as 'infidels', due to their Shia beliefs in a predominately Sunni Muslim state. The insurrection of Hazarajat resulted in Hazaras being at the bottom of the country's social hierarchy, and [they were subsequently sold as the cheapest slaves at the time](#).

Discrimination against the community continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century; however, the 1980s saw a significant reconfiguration of Hazara self-perception and community consciousness in Afghanistan. This was mainly due to the *Hizb-e Wahdat-e Islami Afghanistan* (Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan), which was formed in the late 1980s and was led by Abdul Ali Mazari with the aim of representing Hazara political aspirations, resulting in a shift in Hazara visibility in Afghanistan. The first 2 decades of this century have also been pivotal in the community's history, with their earlier status as peripheral subjects changing markedly in recent years, particularly since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001. The Hazaras have since made great strides in the fields of politics, sports and music, with the country's first female provincial governor [Dr Habiba Sarabi](#) being Hazara, as is Afghanistan's first Olympic medalist [Rohullah Nikpai](#), and the renowned singer [Elaha Soroor](#).

## **Hazaras in Popular Culture**

Both prior to and during my doctoral research with the Hazara community in England, it became apparent, in casual conversations, that the visibility and representation of Hazaras in the media was a topic that elicited impassioned responses, something that has not been analysed in depth in academic research on Hazaras. The three case studies analysed here in relation to Hazara representation in popular culture examine different forms of media: literature, television and film, starting with the critically acclaimed book *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini (2003); the television show *Sitara-e Afghan* (Afghan Star), broadcast since 2005 by the TOLO television network in Afghanistan; and finally, the 2018 documentary *Laila at the Bridge*, co-directed by Elizabeth and Gulistan Mirzaei. They have been chosen because of the international reach they have had since their release; in the case of *Laila at the Bridge* the film's protagonist Laila Haidari has garnered the attention of various international news outlets since 2018, having been written about in [The Guardian](#), the [Independent](#), and the [New York Times](#).

### *The Kite Runner*

An international bestseller, [The Kite Runner](#), which was released in 2003, spent over 100 weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list. It was subsequently adapted into a film in 2007. Alongside the book's positive reception, [it has received some criticism, namely for its portrayal of ethnic Pashtuns](#): here, I focus on the portrayal of Hassan, and ethnic Hazara, and the second most prominent character in the book. Unlike the book's central character Amir, who is Pashtun and comes from a middle-class family, Hassan is the son of the household's servant Ali, who works for Amir's father. Throughout the book he is regularly shown to have very little agency: at one point Amir plants a wrist-watch in Hassan's room only for him to confess to a theft which he did not commit. Hassan's continuous submissiveness, portrayed as trustworthiness and loyalty, appears odd given that he is viewed favourably by Amir's father and is never reprimanded by him. Yet young Hassan is not shown to look out for his own self-interest and constantly does whatever Amir asks of him. Whether intentional or not, Hassan is routinely portrayed as docile and passive, and is ultimately humiliated after being raped by a local boy (Assef) who often taunts Hassan for being Hazara, and who he once refers to as being as 'loyal as a dog'. This portrayal of Hassan and his lowly societal status is attributed to his being a Hazara.

In fact, though, the lack of agency attributed to Hassan does not adequately capture the changing circumstances of Hazaras in Afghanistan at the time, especially if Hassan's character is seen to embody Afghanistan's Hazaras. This period saw the Hazara community successfully liberate their region from the control of the country's Communist party, [the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, in 1979, and saw multiple Hazara political movements emerge both before and during the Soviet war such as the Sazman-e Javanan-e Mutarraqi \(Progressive Youth Organisation\) and Nahzat-i Islami-yi Afghanistan \(Islamic Movement of Afghanistan\)](#). Consequently, the portrayal of Hassan in the book parallels the late 19th century to mid-20th century history of the community, a time in which they were subjugated and marginalised, without accounting for their emerging political clout during the Soviet war period.

### *Sitara-e Afghan/Afghan Star*

Since 2005, a popular music talent show titled *Sitara-e Afghan (Afghan Star)* has been airing in Afghanistan. It not only acts as a catalyst for the careers of aspiring musicians in the country but also allows communities who may not frequently interact in daily life to connect through the medium of television, as it would be rare for a Hazara to meet a Pashtun in [Daikundi](#) or a Pashtun to meet a Hazara in [Nangarhar](#), for instance. The show removes these provincial borders and distances, and the historic Other is now present in one's living room where different local cultures, languages and dialects can be seen, heard and embraced.

*Sitara-e Afghan* has been a launching pad for several Hazara musicians including Elaha Soroor, Hamid Sakhizada and Zahra Elham. In the case of Sakhizada, Hazaragi (a dialect of Persian native to Hazaras) songs were a key part of his sets, which gave greater visibility to Hazara culture; Zahra Elham became the first female winner of the show in 2019. Elham's win, alongside that of other Hazara contestants such as Reza Rezai and Jamal Mubarez, are significant to note as it shows shifting attitudes in how people are engaging with the Hazara community, the show and its contestants, as a community who are generally perceived as a minority in the country are able to garner widespread support beyond ethnic lines.

Similarly, during my research one participant-interviewee noted that non-Hazara singers like Aryana Sayeed and Farhad Darya are now also singing in Hazaragi, given the prevalence of Hazara singers choosing to sing in Hazaragi, which further demonstrates how the presence of Hazara contestants and Hazara culture within the show is having an impact on non-Hazara Afghans. Additionally, the show is also a space where contestants can tailor messages for their audiences through their performances, as the classicist [Llewellyn Morgan](#) notes: '[a]n especially powerful moment in [a 2009 documentary film about *Sitara-e Afghan*] is when the Hazara finalist Hamid Sakhizada sings the composition of another Hazara [musician], Safdar Tawakoli, which begins, [Whether we are from Bamiyan' or Qandahar, we are all one brother...](#)'; this was also visible in the raps of [Jamal Mubarez](#) in the 12<sup>th</sup> series of the show. However, although the show has propelled the careers of several Hazara musicians, appearing on the show has not been without risk, as both [Sakhizada](#) and [Soroor](#) now live in Europe, having received countless death threats for performing on *Afghan Star*.

### *Laila at the Bridge*

The documentary *Laila at the Bridge* (2018) follows Laila Haidari, who runs a Drugs Rehabilitation Centre in Kabul. Over the course of the film, the audience is told about Haidari's past: that she was married as a child, is now a divorcee, and does not have custody of her children who live with their father in Iran. Haidari encounters endless hurdles in her quest to help Kabul's drug addicts, but government red tape and apathy means that she has to maintain the Rehabilitation Centre through personal funds. At one point in the film we see Haidari admonish a government official for failing to support her initiative, and this is just one of many instances in the film where Haidari's resilience and agency is on display for viewers. Haidari's portrayal in the film showcases a formidable Hazara woman who is, literally, fearless — fearless of the government, fearless of the addicts (many of whom appear to be mentally unstable), and fearless of men who chastise her for managing a restaurant where gender segregation is not enforced.

The fortitude displayed by Haidari throughout the film is in itself a novel portrayal of Hazaras, as the protagonist of the film is confident and assertive. This is a considerable departure from Hazara representation in Iranian cinema for example, [where Afghans \(who are predominately Hazara\) are portrayed in relation to their status as immigrants, labourers or 'undesirable'](#). While the film's directors may not have considered Hazara representation when embarking on this project it is hard to ignore, when the film's narrative revolves around a self-reliant Hazara woman. Haidari as a maverick and agent of change is a welcome departure from Hazara representation of the past, which usually takes as its focus the late 19<sup>th</sup> century subjugation of the community, as opposed to the 21<sup>st</sup> century gains of the community and the recent timeline of Hazara community achievements in Afghanistan.

### **Conclusion**

The three examples of Hazara representation in popular culture discussed here show the shift that is now occurring in how the community is being portrayed in various media: they show how depictions of Hazaras were previously paralleled with Hazara history and now relate to the growth in Hazara consciousness that has taken place recently. The year 2021 marks 20 years of the fall of the Taliban regime, and two decades since the formation of a modern Hazara history centred around a burgeoning community consciousness, greater visibility and individual agency. Therefore, now more than ever it is pertinent to critically engage with Hazara representation in popular culture to ensure that the community is not portrayed just as victims but also as agents of change with increasing social capital.

© Photograph: The Chuqur Studio, 'Hazara boys, Afghanistan', [Unsplash](#).

*This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor the London School of Economics and Political Science.*