

Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns as a Child-Rescue and Neo-Orientalist Narrative

Abdullah M. Al-Dagamseh
Yarmouk University

Olga Golubeva
Yarmouk University

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Abdullah Mohammad Dagamseh and Olga Golubeva,
"Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as a Child-Rescue and Neo-Orientalist Narrative"

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Abstract: In their article "Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as a Child-Rescue and Neo-Orientalist Narrative" Abdullah Mohammad Dagamseh and Olga Golubeva argue that the novel contributes to hegemonic Eurocentric discourse by showing the superiority and benevolence of the West. In contrast to existing scholarly focus on Hosseini's portrayal of female characters, this article highlights how children of both sexes are represented. The authors' aim is to show how Hosseini's picture of children affected by war contributes to the neo-Orientalist and child-rescue discourses, justifying the foreign involvement in Afghanistan's internal affairs. Moreover, Dagamseh and Golubeva argue that the use of universal values and the seemingly noble cause of bettering the lives of children in Afghanistan contribute to the stereotypical discourse of a "progressive" West and an "underdeveloped" East.

Abdullah Mohammad DAGAMSEH and Olga GOLUBEVA

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as a Child-Rescue and Neo-Orientalist Narrative

In speeches, in the media, and in various narratives, public figures claim that every child has to be protected from hardships and given any opportunity in life. In recent years, for example, some celebrated literary texts such as Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*; Loung Ung's *First They Killed my Father*; and Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* highlight suffering and pain children encounter in war regions. They seem to promote the idea that protecting children should be a priority. However, when we examine such narratives closely, we find out that these narratives contribute to maintaining the status quo where children continue to suffer, especially when it comes to the peoples of the global South.

This contradiction becomes even more starkly evident when we look at the involvement of the dominant powers into the internal affairs of other countries—the involvement which adds to the suffering of children and which is more often than not supported by the majority in the global North. Public opinion has been manipulated by narratives that justify the use of military force and other kinds of interference with the internal affairs of other states. Often this is done under the banner of caring for helpless children, with the proclaimed aim of rescuing them from the unjust local regime or from the ambitions of another powerful state. Such narratives feed the fantasy of rescue and contribute to stereotypical images of helplessness and backwardness of the global South. One of the clearest displays of such a disguise of imperial discourse is the growing number of popular literature issuing from the global South and oriented towards the Western public. Often such works are promoted as the voice of the minorities by celebrities ranging from the First Lady to talk show hosts. For example, in the year 2008 *Time* magazine named Khaled Hosseini among the most influential people in the world. The then First Lady of the USA Laura Bush, who profiled Hosseini for this list, claims that this author "change[d] the world with [his] writing" (Bush <http://content.time.com/time/specials/2007/article/0,28804,1733748_1733752_1735971,00.html>). This article attempts to explore how one of these narratives, Hosseini's 2007 novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, contributes to the hegemonic discourse which promotes the dichotomy of a superior and benevolent West versus the weak and backward East.

A Thousand Splendid Suns is set in Afghanistan, with a time span stretching from the second half of the twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty first century. During this time Afghanistan was tormented by the civil war in which the main participants changed several times, causing terrible political and economic instability, poverty, injuries, and violent death of hundreds of citizens. Land mines, genocide, and fierce politics of gender inequality affected thousands of people. It comes as no surprise then that all characters in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* are affected by war. Readers are presented with stories of child soldiers, victims of landmines and bombs, youngsters growing up in a household which has become unstable due to the armed conflict, orphans, and abused teenagers. The most detailed account of how war affects a child is found in the story of Laila, who was born in 1978 at the time of the communist coup. This coup signals the start of a civil war which lasts until the present day. Thus, all of Laila's childhood was marked by the consequences of war. During her childhood and teenage years, Laila spends years in the shadow of her mother's depression and she experiences her family being destroyed by war. Some of Lila's best friends relocate in search of a safer place, while others are injured or killed. Laila's boyfriend, Tariq, is maimed for life by a landmine. Later, Laila's suffering from war is aggravated by her inability to maintain a safe and happy environment for her two children.

While most researchers focus on how Hosseini portrays female characters under the Mujahideen and the Taliban, this essay tries to highlight how children of both sexes are represented. This paper argues that Hosseini appeals in his narrative to the so-called universal values, which, in theory, are good for everyone and cannot be contested. This article attempts to challenge the use of universal values in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and critically looks at how the seemingly noble cause of bettering lives contributes to the stereotypical discourse which opposes the "progressive" West where everything is done for the better of humans to the "underdeveloped" East which destroys lives of its people and has no future without the Western paradigm of development. Our aim is to show that even though Hosseini paints a thorough picture of children affected by war, the way he does so contributes to the neo-Orientalist and child-rescue discourses, justifying the foreign involvement in Afghanistan's internal affairs.

In his writings, Hosseini adjusts to the tastes of Western audiences both by using English (which is not Hosseini's native language) and by using conventional narrative techniques. As a result, his novels enjoy a considerable amount of success among a large English-speaking audience. On the cover, the

Penguin Random House publisher claims that *A Thousand Splendid Suns* "shipped more than three million copies ... [and it] spent fifteen weeks at #1 on the New York Times bestseller list and remained on the list for an impressive forty-nine weeks" (Hosseini, *A Thousand Cover*). The problem arises from the fact that while critics like Rebecca Stuhr read this text as a text of resistance raising consciousness about the suffering of people, especially women in "a country shattered by a series of ideological leaders and wars" ("A Thousand" 53), the ideology it adopts is fundamentally Eurocentric. Hosseini rightly shows the harm done by the Mujahidin, Taliban, and the Soviet army. But in doing so, he also underrepresents the contributions of Western participants to the sufferings of Afghan children. By confirming Western stereotypes about the rest of the world, Hosseini's text feeds the fantasy of Western superiority even though "Western civilization" is nothing but ideological fiction characterized by "detached superiority for a handful of values and ideas (Said 349). Furthermore, this narrative perpetuates the view of Afghanistan as a part of the Third World, as well as the concept of world division into the already civilized, beneficiary, possessing the universal human values First World of the masters (who speak understandable English) and the still developing, barbaric, dark, and savage Third world of subjects (speaking native languages). This outlook ultimately assures the people in the global North that they have the right (or even the mission) of bettering the lives of people in the global South. The general public, thus, more often than not agrees with their leaders when they decide positively upon the next interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, bringing about new sufferings for children.

In this article, we demonstrate that Hosseini's representation of children of war in Afghanistan contributes to the proliferation of neocolonial discourse by asserting the right of the Western states to impose their values on the rest of the world. The neocolonial world order is characterized by the situation where "the third world remains caught within a transnational communications structure which has inherited the values and powers of the colonial past" ("Information Traps" <[dx.doi.org/10.1080/10714839.1982.11723628](https://doi.org/10.1080/10714839.1982.11723628)>) and is sustained by neo-orientalist rhetoric. As a variety of the phenomenon described by Edward Said, neo-orientalism shares its fundamental ideas with Orientalism, while adapting to the contemporary rhetoric of the global world. This means that cultural diversity is celebrated outwardly and the readiness to listen to what the marginalized have to say is proclaimed, but in fact "Orientalist stereotypes pervade everyday journalism about the [Middle East] region" (Behdad and Williams, "Neo-Orientalism" 283). Just like classical Orientalism, this refurbished form of dividing the nations into civilized and backward deals primarily with the Muslim states, particularly with the Middle East. One of the distinctive traits of both discourses is that "the narrative constructs the identity of 'Muslim' in certain ways, for example, as people who are brutal, unthinkingly bound to their religion, irrational, etc." (Fitzpatrick, "New Orientalism" 253). Both of these worldviews draw their strengths from "cultural hegemony at work": just as its prototype neo-Orientalism accepts Western civilization as the yard-stick against which all other cultures are measured (Said 7).

While neo-Orientalism inherits its prejudice from its classical predecessor, there are some differences between these two forms of the imperialist rhetoric. Behdad and Williams point out several distinctive features of neo-Orientalism. For example, they draw attention to the "active and significant role" played by the Middle Eastern authors in perpetuating the Orientalist stereotypes. Thus, this time around the Orientalist attitude is fueled by the accounts of the insiders regarded in the West as experts in the affairs of their homeland. Another shift is seen in neo-Orientalism's "unapologetic investment in and engagement with the politics of the Middle East" in contrast to Orientalism's focus on culture (Behdad and Williams 285). At the same time, neo-Orientalists "[w]hile claiming to be attentive to historical changes, ...tend to misrepresent important aspects of recent events in the region while denying the neo-imperialist relation of the United States to the Middle East," a practice which Behdad and Williams call the "ahistorical form of historicism" (285). These distinctive features of neo-orientalism are especially significant for our article as we explain how Khaled Hosseini perpetuates neo-oriental frame of thinking while he is considered to be an expert on life in Afghanistan.

Finally, this article looks for the signs of child rescue discourse in Hosseini's text. The child rescue discourse promotes the idea of a responsibility to "save" the world's children from any environment which does not fit into a picture of what it means to be "civilized". The pretext of children's welfare was and is used repeatedly to justify the world powers' involvement into the affairs of independent states. According to Emily S. Rosenberg, "the trope of rescuing ... children may be viewed as emerging from a social imaginary dominated by a masculinized national state that casts itself in a paternal role, saving those who are abused by rival... nations" ("Rescuing Women" 457). Here, just like in the discourse of Orientalism, the West sees itself as a protector, focusing specifically on the children of the so-called underdeveloped world.

One of the most serious problems associated with the child rescue discourse is its foundation on the Western vision of children as passive subjects of the adult's world, ignoring the fact "that children are understood in different ways in time and place" (Lund, "At the Interface" 134). In many countries children are expected to be active participants in family and social life. For example, Nicola Ansell's research supports the idea of children as able citizens whose conscious decisions affect their nations' state of affairs. Thus, among the reasons for joining one or another warring sides, Ansell cites "a political cause" (*Children* 199). Child rescue ideologists, however, dismiss such conscious involvement of children in armed conflicts.

Despite the success of Hosseini's novel in the market, the body of critical literature on this narrative seems to be limited to praising reviews with occasional studies of how Afghan females are represented by Hosseini. Authors such as Azam Kazemiyan, Jessie M. Nixon, and Eman Ahmad Khamas examine such issues as representation of burqa, modernity, and feminism in Hosseini's novel. Thus, the depiction of Afghan women in Hosseini's novel has received a fair share of analysis from different angles. However, the question of child rescue discourse, as promoted by Hosseini, has been so far left without the attention it deserves even though one of the major characters is Laila, a teenager, whose life was changed forever by war. Perhaps, this blind spot can be explained by the controversial nature of this topic, as shown above. To fill this gap, the objective of this article is to look at the ways how children of war are represented for the Western audience in Hosseini's text. We read the text closely to uncover patterns in representation of children of war and their environment.

The researcher whose work most closely approaches the topic of this article is Coeli Fitzpatrick who analyzes Hosseini's novel as a text contributing to the New Orientalist discourse. There are two major points of difference between Fitzpatrick's work and this essay. First, Fitzpatrick—as the majority of the researchers—focuses on Hosseini's depiction of females and draws the readers' attention to the elements of the novel which contribute to the negative image of Muslim men. By contrast, our aim is to show the destructive attitude of Afghan leaders towards the country's children of both genders, as is shown in the novel. Second, Fitzpatrick deems (with minor reservations) that the portrayal of the Soviet invasion is done in a similar positive way as the intervention of the Western allies. While we agree with Fitzpatrick on her notion that any foreign presence is depicted as more beneficial for Afghanistan than local governments, we demonstrate how Hosseini draws a sharp distinction between the unwanted Soviet presence and the welcomed American one.

For the purpose of this article, certain elements of Hosseini's narrative are selected for a closer analysis. We start with an overview of Hosseini's style and examine how it contributes to the novel's popularity. Then, we examine how the historical context is represented in the novel. Furthermore, coming to the heart of the issue, we look at how the major participants are portrayed, while trying to determine whether the author attempts to challenge the dominant discourse on civil war in Afghanistan. We analyze how Hosseini deals with the widespread stereotypes about the East, and with the author's representation of treatment of children by various political powers in Afghanistan. Finally, we examine Hosseini's representation of education in the novel.

Hosseini paints a vivid and comprehensive picture of children of war in Afghanistan. The author's talent is evident from his ability to narrate events and feelings he never experienced firsthand in such a way that readers are able to sense the pain of the novel's characters. Hosseini tells stories of the children of war in a way which provokes an emotional response from almost all of the readers. By creating a picture which is both quantitatively (in the number of children described) and qualitatively (in the ways in which children suffer from the war) diverse, Hosseini reminds his readers that even though the ways in which children are affected by war might be different, the extent of damage is always horrifying. At the same time, the array of details provided by Hosseini seems to contribute to establishing his authority on the subject of contemporary Afghanistan. This authority is largely recognized by the readers and critics alike. For example, Mary F. Agnello, Reese H. Todd, Bolanle Olaniran, and Thomas A. Lucey give credit to Hosseini for allowing Western readers to gain knowledge about Afghanistan: "The horrors of living in this place are present in Hosseini's works and become lenses through which we can better understand the children who live in fear and abhorrent conditions" ("*Afghanistan and Multiculturalism*" 101).

In addition to the author's perceived authority on the subject, the success and influence enjoyed by *A Thousand Splendid Suns* in the West have a lot to do with Hosseini's style, which makes his stories reachable and understandable to Western readers. The easy-to-digest manner of Hosseini's writing, combined with sensuous details and vivid imagery, facilitates a fast and emotional reading. Even though the characters' lives are fragmented by decades of war, Hosseini's novel has a linear plot and is told from the omniscient narrator point of view. The author often ends his chapters with cliffhangers, uses melodramatic turns, and satisfies his readers with a happy end. For example, chapter 16 of

the novel ends with this dynamic sentence: "Laila turned around and was greeted by the barrel of a gun" (115). This allows Hosseini both to sustain his readers' attention and to set a stage for unfolding love story between two teenagers, in which the featured female is depicted as a damsel in distress and her male counterpart plays a role of a knight in shining armor.

With the aid of vivid imagery, Hosseini succeeds in creating a space where "readers as participants can breathe the dust, smell the sewers, and hear the raucous of military trucks" (Agnello, Todd, Olaniran, and Lucey 97). As a result, the readers get emotionally involved in the story, start to empathize with the characters, and—given the trials the characters go through—become infected with the desire to rescue them. These effects are evident in readers' reviews found in online discussion forums as well as in the opinions of the professional critics. For example, this how one of the readers' expresses her feelings after reading *A Thousand Splendid Suns*: "This book reminded me of how privileged my life here in the US is compared to the women who are living in some other parts of the world. ... I feel grateful to be here. And I am even more grateful for having the ability and the opportunity to do something about what is going on in this world. After reading this book, you too will want to do something [about the situation in Afghanistan]." (Sunkara <https://www.goodreads.com/rview/show/1926425?book_show_action=false>).

Careful reading of the novel exposes Hosseini's biased treating the roles of the regional and foreign powers in the conflict and almost total absence of historical context. As a result, the readers see children of Afghanistan in a universe where different political factions act without any worthy reason. At the same time, there is a clear distinction as to the effect different administrations have on children. In the narrative, it is made clear that while the Afghan powers' regime brings about suffering for children, the rule of foreign agencies is associated with safety, freedom, and possibilities for development.

Hosseini repeatedly places children of war in a context where Afghanistan lacks independence from foreign powers. During the course of narration, the main players in the Afghan war are the Soviet Union and the United States of America whose president "shipped the Mujahideen Stinger Missiles to down the Soviet helicopters," with the aid of "Muslims from all over the world: Egyptians, Pakistanis, even wealthy Saudis, who left their millions behind and came to Afghanistan to fight the jihad" (112). After the withdrawal of the Soviet army from the country, the Afghan armed forces are unable to maintain internal peace: "the Mujahideen, armed to the teeth but now lacking a common enemy, had found the enemy in each other" (169). Even after the allied western forces invade Afghanistan and help establish interim administration, this new government is unable to call the criminals of war to answer, but instead "warlords...live in posh homes with walled gardens" and are "appointed minister of this and deputy minister of that" (398). From the way, Hosseini describes the historical events, it seems that the history of Afghanistan is characterized predominantly by the country's political impotency. Moreover, Hosseini shows that such a state not only fails to provide a safe and nurturing environment for its youth, but it also facilitates turning children into soldiers.

The single regional alternative to the Mujahideen, the Taliban, is associated by Hosseini not only with their strict ruling, but also with such natural phenomena as drought. This allows Hosseini to further promote the reader's dislike of the Taliban by using stories of children suffering from hunger. The author gradually builds up the tension by making several references to danger looming over the lives of the readers' favorite characters. First, Rasheed's suggestion to make a street beggar out of Aziza is met with a point-blank refusal from Laila. Some time after this incident, Rasheed's family is faced with a shortage of food and the readers are presented with a disturbing story of a mother "who had ground some dried bread, laced it with rat poison and fed it to all seven of her children. She had saved the biggest portion for herself" in order to avoid a death from starvation (298-99). The climax of the hunger theme comes when Laila leaves Aziza in an orphanage filled with many children whose parents are unable to provide them with even minimal nutrition. Each of these distressing scenes contributes to the general atmosphere of despair and fear linked to the Taliban rule.

The carefree pastime experienced by the children in the novel is associated with foreign presence and foreign culture. In the novel, when the regional parties come to power, it is either unsafe or outright prohibited to have any form of entertainment. Whereas the foreigners in the novel create opportunities for having fun, the Afghans rob their children of even simplest forms of amusement, be it the time spent with one's family, watching movies, or going on a picnic.

The Afghan political actors are represented as destroyers of families, whereas the Western invasion makes it possible even for orphans to have relationships close to that of children and their parents. Laila treasures her time with her mother and is happy when the two of them "went shopping together to Mandaii Bazaar. ...play[ed] snakes and ladders, and ... ate shavings from blocks of dark chocolate" (118). These precious moments are very rare because Fariba spends most of the time immersed in her depression. The underlying cause of this depression is the politics of the Mujahideen who enlisted

Fariba's sons to fight the Soviets. While Laila as a child is distanced from her mother emotionally, Aziza is faced with physical barriers between herself and her family. Not only do the Taliban make it impossible for Laila to earn livelihood for her children, she is prohibited to walk to the orphanage where she can spend time with her daughter.

In contrast to these heartbreaking pictures, the scene in the orphanage at the end of the novel is charged with positive emotions. In this episode, Laila and Aziza revisit the orphanage together as a happy family, after the Western allies have invaded Afghanistan. This time there is no threat to a mother-daughter relationship as Laila comes not to leave Aziza behind, but to be a teacher in a class full of orphans. Left without parents during the civil war and longing for the warmth of family, "some of them call [Laila] *Mother*. Laila does not correct them" (400). Moreover, Zalmai and Tariq are also involved in the life of this orphanage, contributing to the creation of a family-like atmosphere.

Not only do the Afghan factions' politics have a negative effect on families, the Taliban prohibit practically all forms of entertainment by establishing strict rules: "Singing is forbidden. / Dancing is forbidden. / Playing cards, playing chess, gambling, and kite flying are forbidden. / Writing books, watching films, and painting pictures are forbidden" (270). Citing this list of restrictions in addition to the description of the terror caused by the Taliban's executions contributes to creating an atmosphere of despair in the novel. The single possibility for Aziza and Zalmai to have fun—as represented by Hosseini—is to watch a smuggled copy of *Titanic* movie. To provide this entertainment for their children, parents are willing to risk their lives.

This American love story not only allows Laila's children to experience fun and take their minds off the scary things outside and the hunger inside, but also it becomes a symbol of Kabul's people resistance against the Taliban. This movie is watched by Aziza with the two people she treasures the most: her mother and Mariam. For Zalmai the presence of the television set in their home is a token of his father's love. For both children, the story of Rose and Jack is a chance to create new role games by acting it out in a playful way with loving members of the family. *Titanic* is a source of fun not only for Laila's children, but it gives color to lives of many Kabulis against the background of terror and drought.

While *Titanic* has a positive romantic aura attached to it, a Soviet movie watched by Laila and Tariq has a distinctly different feel. First, the setting is changed from a family living room to a movie theater in which the film is watched by two teenagers who have feelings towards each other which are often considered unacceptable in the Afghan society. Another difference is that the love story in a Soviet movie, unlike that of *Titanic*, leads not to romanticized self-sacrifice, but to a drunken wedding. The kiss shared by the couple in this unnamed Soviet movie makes the young watchers awkward, stirring uncomfortable desires in them and marking the end of their innocent friendship. This discrimination in treatment of the similar material featuring Western and non-Western culture contributes to the promotion of Western values as universally fitting and beneficial for the global community.

As can be noticed from some passages above, this novel's overall dehistoricization is masked by the appearance of some historical content. Here and there Hosseini mentions dates, names of prominent figures, and titles of parties. But this is even more dangerous than outright silencing of historical facts, because it gives the narrative a sense of trustworthiness. Decontextualizing not only alienates historical actors from their actions, but also promotes stereotypes by reducing complex nature of events and tangled relationships between participants to few outwardly prominent characteristics.

Hosseini's depiction of the regional actors in the Afghanistan war, represented by the Mujahideen and the Taliban, leaves no doubt not only in their cruelty but also in their ineffectiveness as political organizations. Both the Mujahideen and the Taliban rely on the help of foreign powers to continue fighting for their cause. For example, in their fight against the Soviets, as mentioned by Hosseini passingly, the Mujahideen rely on the weapons provided by the U.S. Instead of developing the idea of the West's role in empowering the Mujahideen, Hosseini asserts that the insurgents' victory over the Soviets comes not because of their bravery and tactical smartness, but due to the favorable historical circumstances, such as the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Moreover, after failing to mobilize enough adults, the regional powers enlist youngsters as their soldiers.

Yesterday's insurgents metamorphose into terrorists who turn their weapons against each other and keep the civilian population in constant fear. The Mujahideen again seek the help of the Western powers, now against their internal enemy, the Taliban: "In Europe, Massoud had warned the West about terrorist camps in Afghanistan, and pleaded with the U.S. to help him fight the Taliban. 'If President Bush doesn't help us,' he had said, 'these terrorists will damage the U.S. and Europe very soon'" (305). This plea not only shows willingness of the Mujahideen to continue—despite their weakness—the struggle for power even if it means more deaths and suffering of the Afghanistan citizens, but also their undiplomatic ways in international relations as Massoud practically blackmails the West

into helping him. Such depiction contributes to the "othering" of the Orient which appears as impotent and brutal.

Another way in which Hosseini makes sure that the readers will remember various Afghan political parties in unfavorable light is the description of the methods by which the Mujahideen and the Taliban increase their numbers. The two accounts that follow are narrated by Rasheed, the cruel and lustful villain of the novel. These new warlords do not waste their time with brainwashing and prefer using violence: "'They're forcing young boys to join,' [Rasheed] said. 'The Mujahideen are. In plain daylight, at gunpoint. They drag boys right off the streets. And when soldiers from a rival militia capture these boys, they torture them. I heard they electrocute them—it's what I heard—that they crush their balls with pliers. They make the boys lead them to their homes. Then they break in, kill their fathers, rape their sisters and mothers'" (248). When it comes to the Taliban, Rasheed mentions the long process of deep indoctrination used to turn boys into fanatical fighters: "They were ... young Pashtun men whose families had fled to Pakistan during the war against the Soviets. Most of them had been raised—some even born—in refugee camps along the Pakistani border, and in Pakistani madrasas, where they were schooled in *Shari'a* by mullahs" (266). Here, religious education becomes associated with brutal violence by tracing the roots of the Taliban to Islamic schools.

Three important observations can be made about these two episodes. First, by making an abominable character voice these accounts, the author steers his readers toward establishing a link between this sadistic man who terrorizes his wives and Afghan political forces unwilling to stop the feud between them while involving reluctant citizens in their war. Second, to intensify the negative emotional response to the Taliban and the Mujahideen actions, Hosseini lets Rasheed narrate brutal details of the new fighters' recruitment and point out how the Taliban use to their advantage the adversity of some of the most vulnerable: refugee children. Finally, and most importantly, the two different Afghan parties are lumped together by such descriptions; there is no difference between their barbaric ways, the history of their appearance, and their attitude towards the citizens of Afghanistan.

In addition to representing Afghan teenagers as either brainwashed or physically forced into supporting any side of the conflict, Hosseini portrays the youth as largely indifferent to what cause is supported by warring parties. When Tariq asks Laila what she thinks about the Mujahideen nearing Kabul, she is only able to repeat her father's ideas "something...about the troublesome marriage of guns and ego" (168). Without a chance for supporters of any of the political parties to voice their reasons and without a critical reflection on teenager's thoughts on the situation, the important political background of the novel's plot becomes oversimplified and deprived of any historical context.

Another characteristic which contributes to the neo-Orientalist discourse in Hosseini's novel is the way the novel depicts the Soviet and the Western invasions and their impact on the lives of Afghan children. While the regional parties are portrayed as cruel and harmful to their own people, "there are few things Hosseini portrays more positively in Afghanistan than foreign occupations, which for all their 'errors' are never as bad as indigenous rule" (Fitzpatrick 249). This contrast is starkly evident in depiction of issues related to children. However, even though the foreign presence in Afghanistan is portrayed in a much better light than the rule of regional parties, Hosseini displays a clear bias towards the Western way of life over the Soviet one.

Another piece of evidence that shows Hosseini's inclination toward Western values is found in his treatment of the education topic in the novel. The accessibility and quality of education are two of the signs by which the well-being and degree of development of a nation are measured. The absence of formal organized schooling is often viewed in the West as an indicator of backwardness. As in the case of security, there are three impressions of education in Kabul as depicted in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

Hosseini acknowledges the Soviet contribution to creating an environment that facilitates education, but at the same time he points out how the classroom is used for propaganda. This duality is highlighted in Hosseini's portrayal of teacher Shanzai. On the one hand, she is a female, teaching in a girl's school, indicating the opportunities for education and work for the segments of society which are often underprivileged in the developing countries; but on the other hand this teacher appears to be brainwashed and oppressive. The biggest problem of Hosseini's representation of education in this period of Afghanistan history is that the only alternative to this unlikable character is Laila's father who is also an educator, but who is consistently pro-American.

A teacher who supports communists is described as stern and unforgiving, which nearly cancels out her likability for the readers despite her advocating the idea of female education and emancipation. Although Shanzai displays what are considered to be progressive views by "sa[y]ing women and men were equal in every way and there was no reason women should cover if men didn't," her authoritarian-

an wish to impose her outlook on the school girls is evident from the fact that she "did not cover and forbade the female students from doing it" (111).

To manipulate the reader's opinion of this teacher, Hosseini portrays her not only as a dogmatic follower of communist worldview, but also as an abusive adult. Shanzai's nickname KhalaRangmaal means "Auntie Painter, referring to the motion she favored when she slapped students—palm, then back of the hand, back and forth, like a painter working a brush" points to this teacher's tendency to use corporal punishment (111). For a Western reader this detailed description is very uncomfortable and leads to seeing this communist in a very unfavorable light. In the context of the novel, teacher Shanzai is situated among such abusive characters as Rasheed and the Taliban militiamen, people who would not think twice before hurting a child.

Teacher Shanzai is the only representative of pro-Soviet members of intelligentsia in the novel and her characterization mars positive developments in the field of Afghan education at that time. For example, Hosseini contributes to the stereotype of denunciation practice in the Eastern Bloc, when teacher Shanzai encourages her students to spy on their families and friends (111-12). For Laila, whose brothers joined insurgents, such school environment is not only unhealthy, but alienating. As a result, all of this teacher's positive characteristics, such as her proud posture, her being able to finish her education even though she comes from a poor peasant family, and her advocacy for women's cause are diminished. Moreover, the whole picture of education in Afghanistan during the pro-Soviet rule is tarnished, because the readers have no alternatives to the image of a ruthless teacher.

Even though highly saturated with propaganda, the education during the soviet period of Afghanistan rule was available to the masses. However, with the regional parties gaining control over the country, and Hosseini highlights it several times, most of the children become deprived of schooling. First, during the Mujahideen rule, walking to school turns into a dangerous venture. As a result, Laila involuntarily drops out of school. Next, with the change of the Mujahideen government to that of the Taliban, the political situation and social structure are getting worse and education falls into disgrace.

One of the scenes that contributes to the child rescue discourse takes place at the orphanage where Laila is talking to its overseer. And even though Zaman sees Laila for the first time in his life, he has no reservations in confiding to her that the orphanage "gets little or no support from the Taliban" (311). Later, Aziza remarks that although Zaman made a great effort to provide at least minimal schooling for children, "we have to pull the curtains...so the Taliban don't see us.' Kaka Zaman had knitting needles and balls of yarn ready... in case of a Taliban inspection. 'We put the books away and pretend to knit'" (314). These two scenes leave no doubt about the dire state of education under the Taliban.

As in the case of safety, the educational situation in Afghanistan improves greatly after the Western allies take Afghanistan under their control. Laila has a chance to help the children of war on their path to resilience not only by supporting a family-like atmosphere in the orphanage, as discussed above, but also by establishing a positive school routine. Laila's occupation is associated with her father, in whose memory this young woman decides to become a teacher. To better understand this character whose influence and legacy are linked in the novel only with positive developments in the lives of children of war, be it Laila, Tariq, or the minors in the orphanage, we turn now to a brief analysis of Babi.

At first glance, Laila's father should fit in the same category with teacher Shanzai: intelligent, liberal, and progressive educator. The similarities between Shanzai and Laila's father are striking: they are both teachers, they support equality in education, see no need for a head scarf (an item of clothing that is often perceived as a sign of female oppression), and, most importantly, they both play a significant role in Laila's education. However, the attitudes promoted by the author toward these two characters are starkly different. While teacher Shanzai is shaped up to look almost fanatically pro-Soviet, the character of Babi has a likeable scholarly air about him. A stern, strict teacher who physically punishes her students is contrasted with Laila's father, who is depicted as gentle to the point of meekness. He is described as generous enough to be fair to the communists—notwithstanding the fact that they fired him from his high-school teaching position—concerning their achievements in women's rights. This difference becomes much more important if we look at the ideology expressed by these two characters. While teacher Shanzai drills her students to recognize among the world countries the friends and the enemies of Afghanistan depending on their support of Soviet politics, Laila's father instills in his daughter a belief in the United States as a land of happiness.

The setting Hosseini uses to introduce Babi's thoughts on the United States has a great impact on the readers' emotions and influences the audience's conclusions. Babi shares his dream with Laila and Tariq during their trip to Bamiyan, an Afghan cultural heritage site. For Laila this excursion is a chance to get away from propaganda at school and from troubles at home, as well as an opportunity to spend

quality time with the people whom she admires and who treasure her. On top of the huge Buddha statue, from which they observe breathtaking peaceful landscape of the province, Babi and Laila have a cordial father-daughter moment. Babi opens up to Laila and shares his memories about Mammy when she was still happy and "so *alive*", his pain from losing his sons, and his gratitude for having Laila as his daughter (147). It is in these circumstances Babi relates his wish to leave this country and to relocate to a place where life is good right now, as opposed to Afghanistan, whose days of glory are long past. After initially indicating his destination rather vaguely ("it *is* a big world"), Babi names the USA as a land of realized dreams and opportunities inhabited with "generous people" who "would help [Laila's family] with money and food for a while, until they could get on their feet." Babi plans to open a restaurant and promises that "[it] would be our absolute top priority, to get you a good education, high school then college" (148-49). Later, after the Mujahideen clashes kill Laila's parents and make a refugee out of Tariq, Laila uses the precious memory of this trip to draw strength, magnifying for the readers the importance of this scene.

Hosseini's description of Babi's dream serves as a foil to what happens next to children in Afghanistan. As a contrast to generous Americans, readers of the novel meet the Taliban who would not give money to orphans or hospitals, even though they receive help from foreign NGOs. Instead of receiving food from big-hearted strangers, the audience sees children of Kabul who are starving. The Taliban prohibits even elementary education for girls, as we learn from the novel, let alone an opportunity for females to finish college. Moreover, the Taliban destroy even the very site where Laila experienced one of the happiest days of her life and Babi's dream was articulated. However, Hosseini gives the novel a happy ending, and even though the Mujahideen and the Taliban tried very hard to destroy Laila's dream, the American invasion made it possible for this child of war to do something in her father's memory.

This example highlights a pattern of juxtapositions found in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* which contributes to the neo-Orientalist ideology by creating a picture of Afghanistan as a failed state that can function only when supervised by a foreign power on the one hand and the USA as a symbol of progress and prosperity on the other. When taken by themselves, all of the historical facts used by Hosseini to create a background in his novel are legitimate and cannot be argued against. However, when some bits of reality are skillfully pitted against one another and others are silenced, the whole picture becomes skewed to fit a presenter's agenda. The existence of "likable" characters does not impede the spread of this ideology; on the contrary, it fuels the rescue discourse used by those who have power in their hands to invade other countries.

The responsibility which comes with authority is particularly heavy when describing current events, because there is always a question of how public opinion will resonate with the ongoing political decisions. As John R. Slaughter observes in his article on narratives about suffering, readers of such texts "imagine [themselves] in the place of the humanitarian subject who is ... the best of 'our kind of philanthropic people.'" (102) When talking about *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, elements of the neo-Orientalist and the child rescue discourses influence the Western masses into being more lenient towards the military invasion of Afghanistan. In this novel, the description of children adds to the pattern in the Western media where "Afghan women, portrayed... as oppressed, powerless victims of terrorists who need to be protected" and likewise "serve as a passive vehicle for the legitimization of U.S. military involvement" (Kazemiyan 1-2). This influence is seen, for example, in this passage where one of the reviewers writes about her conclusions made upon reading *A Thousand Splendid Suns*: "even though all of us students have been 'involved' in the war by watching the news once or twice, we never really understood why the US went into Afghanistan and what was actually going on there" (Bunce 833). As the author leaves Laila smiling and looking hopefully in the future, he avoids any attention to the tears and pain of children like Aziza and Zalmay as the world powers—yet again—invade Afghanistan and cause thousands of deaths and considerable amount of destruction. The convenient reticence of the negative role of the Western allies in the lives of Afghan civilians allows Hosseini to avoid troubling his readers' minds with questions that will challenge the widespread paradigm of universality of Western values and of benign nature of the United States' involvement in the affairs of other countries.

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- Author's profile: Abdullah M. Al-Dagamseh teaches World Literature and Literary Criticism at Yarmouk University. His research and teaching interests include contemporary global literature and culture, cultural theory, and Globalization Studies. Al-Dagamseh's publications include a book review of "*Arab Modernities: Islamisms, Nationalism, and Liberalism Arab Modernities: Islamism, Nationalism, and Liberalism in the Post-Colonial Arab World*" in *Socialism and Democracy Journal* (2012), "Adiga's *The White Tiger* as World Bank Literature," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* (2013), and "Neoliberal Economy: Violence of Economic Deregulation in Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke*" *Dirasat: Human & Social Sciences* (2016). Email address: <<http://dagamseh@yu.edu.jo>>
- Author's profile: Olga Golubeva teaches English. Her research interests include World Literature, Post-Colonial Literature and Culture, and Literary Criticism. Email address: <<http://olga.j.golubeva@gmail.com>>