IQAS Vol. 56 / 2025 1, pp. 43–63

Fiction and Fracture: Literary Tropes and the Representation of Afghan Women

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Abstract

For more than two decades, literature on Afghanistan has evolved around a similar axis of the literary imagination. Works of fiction, in particular, consistently convey an Afghan female archetype whose significance is defined by her struggle against the oppressive patriarchal values of Afghan culture and society. From Khaled Hosseini's storied *A Thousand Splendid Suns* to Deborah Ellis's *The Breadwinner*, Afghan women and girls are closely associated with narratives of war, violence and an equally unforgiving socio-cultural landscape. This article examines the representation of Afghan women in two successful novels of contemporary English-language fiction by Afghan-American authors: Khalid Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl that Broke Her Shell*. The analysis intends to unpack the tropes and narratives that have come to embody Afghan femininity in the American imagination. Grounded in literary criticism, the article will discuss a selection of prominent works to analyse the effects of textual nuances, narrative structures and character development in producing a characteristic image of "the Afghan woman". By identifying recurring tropes, stereotypes and other literary devices, the research aims to contribute to ongoing conversations about the limitations of knowledge production on Afghanistan and its people, particularly as such narratives are drawn into the world of politics and policymaking.

Keywords: Afghanistan, knowledge production, Afghan women, literary fiction, narratives, U.S. perception, Khaled Hosseini, Nadia Hashimi

While works of creative fiction in the West are treated as works of art and imagination, a perceptible shift appears when such books are about Afghanistan or Afghan women. They tend to be accepted as replications of reality rather than ingenuity. Just as it would have been inaccurate to generalise about young men in nineteenth-century France from Stendhal's *Le Rouge et Le Noir*, it is equally problematic to extend sensationalised or romanticising accounts of fiction to the collective ethos of Afghan women. This paper concerns the production

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DOI 10.11588/iqas.2025.1.27412

of knowledge about Afghan women in the United States in English-language novels by Afghan-American authors. The argument is situated in the wider context of knowledge production generated by the 20-year U.S.-led war against the Taliban in Afghanistan. As I have argued elsewhere, the push for cultural intelligence to serve U.S. foreign policy and military objectives created a vast market for Afghan diasporic expertise (Zafar 2017).

When Khalid Hosseini, an Afghan-American novelist, released his debut novel, *The Kite Runner*, in 2003, the book spent more than two years on the coveted *New York Times* Bestseller list and was adapted into a play.[1] As an Afghan voice among an American audience, Hosseini's book was treated as more fact than fiction. In fact, in 2006, when former United States First Lady Laura Bush[2] introduced Khaled Hosseini at the National Book Festival Gala, her speech demonstrated how politics blurs the line between fiction and reality (Pailey 2021):

> We'll also hear from a writer who has introduced America and the world to Afghanistan, an Afghanistan beyond the Taliban, beyond the Soviets, beyond the warlords. Through his novel, The Kite Runner, this book paints a fascinating portrait of Afghan life over the last 30 years, and it tells a compelling story of how wounded people and wounded societies seek redemption and renewal. (White House Archives 2006)

Her speech validates the novel as a source of expertise, as though it were an ethnography, empirically rooted in the author's fieldwork rather than his imagination. She invites the audience to engage with the novel as a testimony of "Afghan life". Not only is this assertion problematic, but she uses the narrative to draw an unequivocal distinction between America and the "wounded societies" – the latter portrayed by Hosseini's characters, which will be further described in this article. Bush and Hosseini converge on the narrative that Afghan women are thus simply threads in an already damaged social tapestry. The source of the injuries is implicit. No mention is made of the effects of American political realism; nothing of the scars of generational trauma, excused as collateral damage. Bush's statement reduces Afghanistan political crises to something cultural and internecine, and renders Afghans as incorrigible "Others" – a conclusion drawn and validated by literary art. More problematically, *The Kite Runner* appears as a beneficiary of the "White Gaze", the racialised perspective of neo-colonial efforts that aim to "develop" subaltern communities, while paradoxically deepening power inequities (Pailey 2021).

This paper will examine the representation of Afghan women across two exemplary works of literary fiction by ethnic Afghan authors in the Afghan-American diaspora, namely Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and

1 The adaptation can be found here https://thekiterunnerbroadway.com (accessed January 2024).

2 Laura Bush, the wife of then-President George W. Bush, who launched the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, still serves as the honorary co-chair of the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council; see https://usawc.georgetown.edu/members/# (accessed January 2024).

Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke its Shell*. These texts will subsequently be compared to other works of fiction produced by Afghan authors in the diaspora, highlighting the one-sidedness of themes and archetypes in the American-produced literature. For my primary analysis, I wanted to select fiction books by Afghan-American novelists, of which few exist in the United States: Hosseini and Hashimi are the leading Afghan-American novelists[3] and have been extensively published by international publishers, thereby gaining a wide readership. Furthermore, I wanted to focus on books initially published for the U.S. market and audience, particularly encompassing the period of the U.S. Afghan war from 2001–2021. My focus on fiction, for this paper, is because the genre affords the opportunity to imagine different circumstances, places and people – and yet the selected works track closely to the justificative tropes that supported America's footprint in Afghanistan. Given the limits of a research paper, the selected novels are merely examples and I make no claim, under any pretence, that they exhaust the wide array of literature available on Afghanistan. Moreover, I concede that the non-American fiction on which I draw for comparison was originally published in the United Kingdom by MacLehose Press (February 2022),[4] but my aim is to show the shifts in tropes and themes and to consider the possibility that they may encourage a broader perspective on Afghan women – or, at minimum, to distinguish fact from fiction.

The topics at the core of this paper are informed by my own positionality as an Afghan-American woman and an applied anthropologist, whose research has centred on the intersection of U.S. militarism and American communities. I was a second-year college student when the 9/11 terrorist attacks on America occurred and the U.S. military subsequently invaded Afghanistan in 2001. Overnight, I, along with many Afghans in the diaspora, became the object of scrutiny and fascination; the latter became all the more apparent with the publication of novels and books on Afghanistan. For more than two decades, I have contended with questions about the proximity of stories, plucked from literature, to the reality of Afghan women's lives in Afghanistan – and by extension, my own life in America. The disparity speaks to engrained biases that affect how audiences receive and relate to the information about a place and a people. In fact, the original inspiration for this article stemmed from a *Forbes* magazine series entitled "Courageous Voices". The author, Joan Michelson, an American entrepreneur of Anglo-European heritage, recounted her experience watching the theatrical adaptation of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, in Washington, D.C.:

> As I watched "A Thousand Splendid Suns" at the Arena Stage this weekend about the lives of women in war torn, misogynistic Afghanistan, I thought first about how fortunate I am to have been born in the United States. Even with all our problems, unlike

3 I exclude creative nonfiction diaspora writers, such as Tamim Ansary.

4 The copy of the anthology used for reference in this paper is the version published by Grand Central Publishing in New York (see works cited).

> women in Afghanistan in the 1980s to 9-11-2001 where the play takes place, American women have rights and freedoms that women in Afghanistan do not have. We are educated, can work, can vote […], can freely marry and divorce, and can sue to protect our rights, including from abusive men. (Michelson 2020)

The jarring binaries boldly omit the aftermath of the U.S.-Soviet proxy war in degrading and extinguishing Afghan women's rights. The lines between fact and fiction are so skewed that Afghanistan's historiography follows the play's timeline. Ironically, irrespective of how novels about Afghanistan construe women's rights, all Afghan women were de facto given the right to vote when Afghanistan's political system shifted to a constitutional monarchy in 1964. In the American republic, women could vote in 1920, but the right only extended to White women – Native Americans, African-Americans and other minorities continued to be disenfranchised until years later. Such historical nuances also seem to elude Hashimi, who was born in the United States, and expressed a similar sentiment in a promotional clip for *The Pearl that Broke its Shell*. In the interview, Hashimi said:

> When readers finish the story, what I'd like for them to take away from it is a shared struggle that all women around the world have […] that the struggle that women are facing could be happening here. It's just a matter of where we have the good fortune of being born. But I also want them to know that there is hope, that change can come to any of these places. (Hashimi cited in Morrow 2014)

Hashimi supports the false premise that being born in America automatically affords every woman a safe and equitable existence – and it categorically ignores the challenges that people of colour and/or minority groups continue to face across the United States. My concern is that in American society and politics, in which imperial mythologies still define countries like Afghanistan, what is the life of such narratives outside the pages of a book? How do audiences take fiction as a factual representation of Afghan women's lives?

My reading of the two books will employ Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "dialogic imagination" to demonstrate the dialectal relationship between the texts themselves and the contexts they represent (Bakhtin 1981). I draw on Bakhtin's idea that the "dialogics" of a novel – the multitude of voices and characters – are not static words on pages, but rather an interactive experience through which knowledge is negotiated among the author, the reader and the text itself (ibid.; see also Frank 2006). For Bakhtin, the "novel has become the leading hero in the drama of literary development in our time, precisely because it best of all reflects the tendency of a New World still in the making; it is after all the only genre born of this New World, and in total affinity with it" (ibid.: 351). Viewed through Bakhtin's lens, a novel is a dynamic epistemological mechanism that at once reflects a version of a reality and is consistently reshaped and re-interpreted by its environment or audience. While Bakhtin's focus is primarily on the linguistic elements of discourse, his analytical frame-

work nonetheless lends itself to a study of the evolution of fictional works about Afghan women becoming referential objects for both Afghanistan and its communities. The idea of the dialogic imagination, thus, allows an understanding of how audiences take fiction as a factual representation of Afghan women's lives. Bakhtin's more romantic flourishes on the genre notwithstanding, his idea of a dialogic imagination is central to understanding the relationship of novels, such as The Pearl that Broke its Shell, and the epistemological roots of policies and perceptions towards Afghanistan in general and Afghan women in particular.

Literature review

The literary world to which contemporary Afghanistan-focused fiction belongs is vast. A comprehensive sweep of Arab or Muslim literature as analogues would test the limits of this paper. However, I highlight several perspectives that provide a contextual framework through which to see and understand the narratives presented in the novels selected for this paper. It is worth noting that the novels by Hosseini and Hashimi, and similar ones in circulation, were published during a two-decade period of war in which U.S. military and coalition forces fought the Taliban regime.[5] The narratives and imagery evolved from a vast canvas of militarism that sought to make Afghanistan knowable to the outside world – primarily the "West". This effort extended from the explicit neoliberal and frequently-biased dimensions of U.S. foreign policymaking (Little 2004). While the material costs of safeguarding U.S. national interests were evident within the military-industrial complex, they also required broader public justification. In this context, literary and cultural portrayals of Afghan society often – perhaps unintentionally – reproduced reductive images of Afghanistan and Islam that resonated with dominant U.S. discourses, thereby lending themselves to narratives that legitimised American intervention.

Processes of colonial knowledge reproduction have been the focus of substantial scholarship, particularly in relation to post-colonial states. Although such perspectives help reveal the interplay of Foucauldian power and discourse, it remains important to examine the specific genres through which these meanings are communicated (Foucault 1980). The conceptual frameworks that buttress studies of culture and imperialism hold formidable theoretical value in studying the novels. The formulaic structure and themes of the novels veer into Orientalism and "geopolitical fetishism" (Said 1993, Bose 2020), mapping onto

5 Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was published in 2007 by Riverhead Press. William Morrow published Hashimi's *The Pearl that Broke her Shell* in 2014. Other titles about the lives of Afghan women include *Under A Secret Sky: A Novel of Forbidden Love* by Atia Abawi, *Dancing in the Mosque* by Homaira Qaderi and *The Swallows of Kabul* by Yasmina Khadra among others.

the post-9/11 imperial imagination defined by the Global War on Terror. While the authors seek to demonstrate the courage of Afghan women against severe adversity, the texts, inadvertently, maintain a more complicated relationship to the country and people they seek to uplift.

Edward Said's seminal work, *Culture and Imperialism* argues that "[w]ithout Empire, there is no European novel as we know it" (Said 1993: 69). The imagined lives of the Other are essential to the creation of both entertainment and knowledge in an ironic attempt to demystify a culture by further exoticising it. Thus, as Said argues, literary fiction as an analogue of a Western imagination is a "far from accidental convergence between the patterns of narrative authority constitutive of the novel on the one hand, and, on the other, a complex ideological configuration underlying the tendency to imperialism" (ibid.: 70). This idea is not without merit, considering that, at the time of this research in the United States, there is not a single novel or memoir in the mainstream market about Afghan women in Afghanistan that deviates from the thematic configurations of war, domestic or structural violence and oppression, combined with acts of defiance, bravery and resistance (often with some support from or connection with America or the West).

Wazhmah Osman is among the earliest Afghan scholars who traced the production of knowledge in film media in relation to Afghanistan. She notes that:

> Afghan women reached the mainstream Western spotlight in popular culture, evident in the proliferation of media such as fiction films, television programs, documentaries, books, and news that focus on their plight under repressive Islamic regimes. The powerful visual imagery that is the legacy of this prolific body of work originates from Afghanistan but is produced in Western institutions. Subsequently, it ricochets and reverberates globally between America, Europe, and other nations, circulating widely through genres as diverse as law, popular culture, and high art. (Osman 2020: 168)

The dialogic elements of the narratives about Afghanistan are evident. Through the discursive practice of representation, Afghanistan and Afghan women are rearticulated as subjects of war, objects of curiosity and victims of their own circumstances. Osman's observation is reflected in ideological arguments that encompass neo-realist reconfigurations of both Afghan and Muslim women's lives. Neo-Orientalism, the residue of classic Orientalism, involves the West's depiction of Eastern societies as exotic, backward, oppressive and/or in need of Western intervention. However, neo-Orientalism is more subtle and nuanced, often manifesting in works that seem to empathise with or advocate for the rights of individuals in these societies while still reinforcing stereotypical and simplistic views.

Theorising on neo-Orientalist projections in Afghan and Iranian novels, Coeli Fitzpatrick (2009: 253) contends that, while it would be problematic, at best, to infer some form of imperial collusion that compels the narratives, they must be interrogated on the basis of the message they choose to convey. She

particularly highlights the voices of native authors and narrators, irrespective of whether they write in fiction or non-fiction genres. Her observations on the books she analyses and the two I have selected for this paper echo the aforementioned themes in terms of narrative construction. The texts seem to paint Afghanistan with a singular broad brushstroke, awash in misogyny, religious zealotry and deeply engrained violence. My point is not necessarily that these elements are absent or outliers of women's experiences in Afghanistan. Given the current Taliban regime and its extraordinarily austere laws on women's and human rights, the conceptualisation of an oppressive state is not a stretch of the imagination. However, my objection is that such cursory treatments and stock characters, bound together in a prose committed to amplifying the same themes, are then decontextualised from the interactions with global politics and three centuries (at a minimum) of empire-making. Fitzpatrick extends this observation by emphasising the thorny binaries such narratives conjure. In discussing books like Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, she notes that "[the] message then helps to unquestioningly promote the agenda of the empire (in this case the USA), but the message often now has an added moral urgency: We (the civilized Westerners) must take a stand now before this narrator's story (about the barbaric Orient) is repeated and the suffering continues" (ibid.: 253). The salience of Fitzpatrick's argument is all the more apparent in the saviour complex that often materialises as a subtext of the novels.

A problem with literary portrayals assumed as factual representations is how they colour the perceptions of the wider audience. Within the literature, a convenient muting of context ensues that casts Islam and Islamic cultures in an interrogative spotlight. In her seminal work, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, Lila Abu-Lughod observes that "these books do not ask us to examine the role Westerners already play [...] in perpetuating global inequities that exacerbate (and sometimes cause) the suffering of women elsewhere. This is particularly the case in places like Pakistan or Afghanistan, where the War on Terror seriously complicates moral persuasion" (Abu-Lughod 2013: 66). She presents the concept of "IslamLand", an imaginary space populated by stereotypes rather than people and "anoints the call to arms for women with transparent goodness" (ibid.: 69). In such a place, governments and institutions can readily justify invasion and intervention based on a humanitarian pretence. Caricaturising Muslim men as inherently violent and Muslim women as their hapless victims is effective in questioning the moral foundations of Islam. Abu-Lughod critiques mainstream literature that enquires whether Islam is misogynistic, while diminishing similar attributes in other religions. She rightly positions the enquiries as an extension of the War on Terror and Islamic fundamentalism, noting that "these stories are key ingredients in the normalization of political and military hostility towards countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq" (ibid.: 107).

Therefore, the factual value is severely limited by the imperial aim and subjectivities with which the books are produced. While Abu-Lughod focuses on pulp nonfiction, the tropes and themes that surface in the stories nonetheless resonate with literary fiction as well. The value of the effect of these "key ingredients" on the audience is paramount. Addressing the explanatory power of the stories, she explains that "[w]e have to place them in the context in which they are being read. These books are caught up in a charged international political field in which Arabs, Muslims, and particular others are seen as dangers to the West" (ibid.: 96). Moving beyond Said's concept of exoticisation, these narratives possess a powerful affective dimension that compels audiences to not only underscore, but also implicitly endorse the perceived necessity of imperial intervention.

What becomes particularly noteworthy, especially in light of the acknowledged tendency among audiences to blur fact and fiction, is the persistence with which Afghan fiction writers continue to echo and reproduce, through narrative and imagery, the justificatory tropes of imperialism. I do not seek to vilify the authors or attribute to them any deliberate intent. However, outside of their perhaps overt motive of writing what sells,[6] I try to situate their novels in the literature on the complexity of diasporic knowledge production. Writing with a native voice renders authenticity to the novels, but it also draws a distinction between the subject and the author, who, distanced from the experience, writes with a renewed imperial gaze. Enacting a "tactical cosmopolitanism", the authors are able to occupy a space of authority on Afghanistan at a distance, while retaining (and strengthening) their belonging in a world that validates and is validated by their accounts (Landau 2010). Their writing thus reflects the "dialogic imaginative ways of life" (Beck 2002: 21).

In the American context, the ready recurrence of familiar tropes in the novels of Hosseini and Hashimi may also suggest an internalisation of American power structures in relation to Afghanistan and the broader Muslim world. Nivi Manchanda's *Imagining Afghanistan* carefully dismantles the authority and authenticity that writers on Afghanistan have claimed. Discussing Hosseini's literature, she writes that "it is pertinent to note that Hosseini himself is not only widely acclaimed as a novelist but also recommended in many syllabi and widely extolled as an Afghan expert in the West. He has been subject to much censure in Afghanistan for claiming to speak for the Afghan people while being divorced from Afghan 'reality' and 'lived experience', having left the country at the age of five and never having learned the language(s)" (Manchanda 2020: 61). Manchanda aptly highlights the influence of fictive narratives in reshaping what is accepted as knowledge. In this context, Hosseini's imaginative work comes to

6 According to Hosseini's website, *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, combined, have sold more than 10 million copies in the United States and almost 40 million copies worldwide; https://khaledhosseini.com/book-facts/ (accessed January 2024).

function as a form of de facto expertise. Hamid Dabashi refers to such authors as "comprador intellectuals" – figures who, whether intentionally or not, contribute to sustaining hegemonic structures through the forms of knowledge they produce (Dabashi 2020). Abetted by the political preoccupations of the United States and the West with Afghanistan, Afghan society is thus articulated as a project in need of intervention.

Several scholars have discussed the complicated legacy of nineteenth-century colonial imaginaries in studies of contemporary Afghanistan.[7] Among them, Purnima Bose's description of "geopolitical fetishism" aptly accounts for a "number of material realities, including the human consequences of military intervention, the geostrategic motivations of imperial states, the profit drive of corporations, and the operations of […] 'the new imperialism'" (Bose 2020: 6). The narratives, as "material realities", inflict rigid binaries on perceptions of the Afghan people. Afghan men with toxic and violent masculinities are juxtaposed with strong women defined by their resilience and strength. An understanding of such an austere delineation between Afghan men and women helps decipher the consistent leitmotif of violence and victimisation that characterises the novels I analyse. Male protagonists are often emotionally and physically abusive, narcissistic and misogynistic – characteristics that appear as inherent traits in the examined books. Female characters, in contrast, are largely portrayed as strong and empathetic, yet constrained by patriarchy and custom. Afghan men, endowed with a preternatural capacity for pain and violence, are depicted as free; Afghan women, marked by an extraordinary capacity for grief and self-sacrifice, as trapped. The rescue narrative, in effect, writes itself – but it is misleading.

Ethnographic accounts, such as those by Julie Billaud (2015) and Sonia Ahsan-Tirmizi (2021), offer a far more nuanced and robust articulation of Afghan women's agency than the limited and insular roles they are afforded in literary representations. Situated within the scholarship on Islam and feminism, the research of Billaud and Ahsan-Tirmizi identifies spaces where Afghan women work influentially with, rather than against, religious and cultural traditions. In *Kabul Carnival: Gender Politics in Postwar Afghanistan*, Billaud's "analysis of veiling practices among women's rights activists and [Members of Parliament] […] shows that these women are both strategic and pragmatic when it comes to managing their audience's impressions in public. Their embodied knowledge of gender norms and social expectations allows them to navigate in different circles and carve out new spaces for negotiations" (Billaud 2015: 208). Billaud's work is most powerful in challenging the concept of powerlessness among Afghan Muslim women. Contrary to the prevailing narrative that life – often harsh and brutish – happens to Afghan women, she asserts that they consciously

7 Cf. Bose 2020, Daulatzai 2008, Manchanda 2020, Moallem 2008, Monsutti 2013.

appropriate what is regularly deemed by the West as symbols of oppression, such as the veil, to enact their agency. Billaud's work echoes that of Ahsan-Tirmizi (2021), whose research is based on interviews with runaways at a women's shelter. Ahsan-Tirmizi argues that the residents

> [...] actively inhabit the cultural repertoire of rejection of pious goodness and refusal of compliant obedience, and because they are not afraid to be called promiscuous, they demonstrate that all Afghan women are not voiceless, passive victims, deprived of agency, but rather are actively influencing the social hierarchies that implicate them. (Ahsan-Tirmizi 2021: 7)

Relating back to the binaries that shape literary works, Ahsan-Tirmizi provocatively argues that the more legitimate dichotomy lies between representation and reality, rather than the stark opposition of Afghan men and women. In the world into which she invites her readers, Afghan women are more complex than simply being oppressed or resilient. They simultaneously accept and contest social norms, negotiating new forms of power that incorporate, rather than necessarily reject, Islam and Afghan cultural codes. Both Billaud and Ahsan-Tirmizi emphasise the importance of understanding Afghan women on their own terms. This becomes particularly challenging in an environment that privileges narrow, parochial interpretations of Afghanistan and Islam, especially in relation to women. The difficulty, however, lies precisely in what Helena Zeweri and Thomas Gregory caution against. They posit that "if Afghanistan is perceived as a savage and dangerous place, then the pain and suffering experienced by the Afghan people is not an aberration, but consistent with normal expectations" (Zeweri / Gregory 2023: 268).

Little light beneath "A Thousand Splendid Suns"

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) follows the lives of two Afghan women, Mariam and Laila, who are brought together through marriage to the same man, Rasheed. Set against the backdrop of the first Taliban emirate in Afghanistan (encompassing 1996–2001), the novel traces their experiences with war, loss and domestic hardship. Despite their difficult circumstances, Mariam and Laila develop a strong connection and work together to navigate their situation. The portrayal of women in the novel is generally woven through two sets of relationships – those between women as mothers, sisters and wives, and those between men and women. The female characters evolve relationships of trust and protection. In contrast, interactions with men are overwhelmingly imbued with instability and the ever-present danger of gender-based violence. The male protagonist, Rasheed, is deeply volatile, unreliable and violent. The detailed depictions of viciousness, suffering and oppression,

while based on real issues, can serve to confirm pre-existing Western stereotypes about the brutality of Afghan (and by extension, Muslim) men and the helplessness of Afghan women (Abu-Lughod 2002). Mariam is Rasheed's young, naïve second wife and the subject of his obsessive control. This narrative advances an American or Western audience's fascination with the exotic and tragic "Other", while also reinforcing a sense of superiority and the moral imperative to intervene or rescue (Said 1978). For example, less than twenty pages into the novel, the reader is introduced to Rasheed when he

> [...] returns with a handful of pebbles and forces Mariam's mouth open and stuffs them in. He then orders her to chew the pebbles. In her fear, she does as he asks, breaking the molars in the back of her mouth. He tells her, "Now you know what your rice tastes like. Now you know what you've given me in this marriage. Bad food, and nothing else." (p. 94)

The fictive imagery is one of barbaric violence and trauma inspired by the character's anger at his wife's miscarriage. But the story that Hosseini develops, with its overlapping layers of cultural and social complexities, presents Rasheed as a product of his Afghan heritage and not as a sociopath discerned by his behaviour rather than distinguishing ethnic propensities. I offer the observation not as a way to excuse the deeply patriarchal aspects of Afghan society that undermine the rights and well-being of women. Instead, I question why Hosseini's Rasheed is not nuanced in a way that will make him recognisable in any society, Western or Eastern, where domestic and gender-based violence continue to run rampant. Abu-Lughod insightfully contends that "the books work hard not to let us make these comparisons" (Abu-Lughod 2013: 89). The settings of the stories function as "the authenticating details" that "mark[ ] the abuses as cultural or collective" (ibid.). This stunts the dialogic imagination in cultivating the perception that it is a particular type (Muslim, male and non-Western) that can embody such brutality.

Indeed, Hosseini seems to emphasise the origin of Rasheed's malevolent nature. Describing the centrality of honour and pride to his identity as a man, Rasheed tells Mariam of his intolerance for the liberal interactions between men and women he observes in parts of Kabul. He remarks with disdain that his neighbour allows his wife to walk about without the burqa and without a male chaperone. He tells Mariam, "But I am a different breed of man, Mariam. Where I come from, one wrong look, one improper word, and blood is spilled. Where I come from, a woman's face is her husband's business only" (p. 63). Three chapters prior, Hosseini contextualises Rasheed's upbringing as an ethnic Pashtun from Kandahar, leaving the reader to connect the dots between him and the Taliban, a largely Pashtun movement, who appear in subsequent chapters. The portrayal reflects "the colonial gaze and civilizing missions. Via Orientalist and colonial mythologies, from Rudyard Kipling to Winston Churchill, Pashtun men and women have been both valorized for their bravery and heroics and

also stigmatized as warlike and militant" (Osman 2020: 149, Jabbra 2006). For readers of such texts, the prevalence of such binaries – whether romanticisation or vilification – communicates an enduring message, particularly in the echoes of colonial voices.

In their literary criticism of the *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Abdullah Mohammad Dagamseh and Olga Golubeva pick up the thread of Western-ethnocentricity, arguing that a "[c]areful reading of the novel exposes Hosseini's biased treating of the roles of the regional and foreign powers in the conflict and almost total absence of historical context […] 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" (Dagamseh / Golubeva 2017: 5). The authors describe a meaningful connection in the juxtaposition of women and children, and the vulnerability of both populations to the depravities of war and trauma. Hosseini explicitly blames the Soviet invasion as the conduit of strife and generational trauma, but he is much more measured in his assessment of America's involvement, including a particularly saccharine monologue by Babi, who dreams of moving to America where opportunity abounds (pp. 135–136).

In fact, it is Babi, the wise elder (and one of the few non-violent male characters in the book) who advises Laila, his daughter and another key protagonist, that "Marriage can wait, education cannot [...] Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated" (p. 103). The remark presents the Taliban as an organic development, glossing over the political dynamics and military interventions that, in the seventeen years since the novel's publication, arguably contributed to the conditions the Taliban exploited to consolidate power – including the erosion of women's rights and freedoms under their renewed rule.

The centrality of the West as "saviour" is further substantiated when Laila, a typically headstrong but culturally shackled heroine, is first rescued by Tariq, the man she loves, and then by Mariam, who sacrifices her own freedom (by submitting to imprisonment and death by the Taliban) in exchange for Laila's passage out to Pakistan and then to America with Tariq and their child. Towards the end of the novel, as Laila begins to grasp the nightmarish circumstances unfolding in Afghanistan, she listens to the famed Mujahideen leader, Ahmad Shah Massoud, caution Americans and Europeans about the terror being spawned in his native land: "If President Bush doesn't help us, these terrorists will damage the U.S. and Europe very soon" (p. 279). While the statement is meant to be prescient of the September 11 attacks in the United States, it also points to America as Afghanistan's potential saviour; the sole international power that can restore order in a country hellbent on destroying itself and the world around it. Hosseini's clichéd themes and characters gloss

over the complexity of the political and imperial structures that ushered in the circumstances that contextualise his stories.

The relationship between the sexes is presented as invariably a product of Afghan culture. Dialogues between female characters build, for the readers, the cultural cages that define gender norms in Afghanistan. Within the narratives, conversations among female archetypes convey solidarity in the quiet sharing of wisdom and empathy. Women understand each other's pain; men simply inflict it. When female characters speak to one another of men, the associated ascriptions are consistently constrained and emotionally fraught. Mariam, shunned for being born out of wedlock, receives sobering advice from Nana, her mother: "Learn this now and learn it well. Like a compass facing north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always" (p. 17). The reminder of men's social privilege serves to underline the limited agency that Hosseini attributes to his female characters – an agency reconfigured as emerging through solidarity and shaped by an intrinsic struggle: that of being born female in a patriarchal society. In lieu of deeper character complexity, Hosseini frequently references the sheer tenacity of Afghan women as a kind of skill – as though patience and endurance alone could meaningfully confront the hegemonic narratives of power that have reshaped Afghanistan's sociopolitical landscape.

In an initial mother-daughter moment, Nana tells Mariam "there is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don't teach it in school. […] Only one skill. And it's this: *tahamul*. Endure […] It's our lot in life, Mariam. Women like us. We endure. It's all we have" (pp. 17–18). This fictional representation of women as victims robs them of agency. Ahsan-Tirmizi's (2021) research for *Pious Peripheries*, however, quite starkly demonstrates that in reality, Afghan women do not merely endure; they navigate and negotiate within the spectrum of piety and cultural customs to fashion a way of existing meaningfully. In contrast, Hosseini's portrayal emphasises resilience as the primary, and at times sole, expression of female agency, the only viable path available to his characters. While I employ resilience, as a term, simply to echo its use in the novel, endurance is perhaps a more accurate rendering of women's agency because it connotes patience, tolerance and some measure of passivity – tropes that feature prominently in Hashimi's novel as well.

Persistent Tropes of Afghan Womanhood in *The Pearl that Broke Her Shell*

Four years prior to her U.S. congressional candidacy in 2018, Nadia Hashimi's novel surfaced as a complementary window into the lives of Afghan women, produced by an Afghan-American woman. Hashimi renders a hopeful story of strong women and gender norms, but paradoxically deepens the fascination with a particular feature of Afghan society: young Afghan females occasionally dressing as males in Afghan households to perform in the capacity of a male counterpart. *Bacha posh*, referring to a young woman who dresses as a boy, is a temporary practice that is often abandoned by the time girls reach puberty. Dressing as boys, Afghan girls can subvert gender norms in conservative households or communities and be able to secure work or an education in support of their families. This is particularly the case in the absence or death of male breadwinners in the family (Corboz et al. 2019).

Hashimi's story interweaves the lives of two Afghan women separated by a century: Rahima, a young girl in contemporary Afghanistan, and her great-great-grandmother, Shekiba, living in the early 1900s. Both characters must become *bacha posh* to support their families, a practice that renders them not marriageable until they can reassume their lives as women. Upon marriage for both women, the freedoms afforded while masquerading as men vanish and are replaced with strict regulations on their movement, reproduction, education and social interactions. While the novel is celebrated for its vivid storytelling and its focus on the adaptability of Afghan women, it nonetheless evokes the same prosaic binary of victimhood and resilience; of fear and courage. The dialogic dimension of the novel follows along the same lines as Hosseini's novel – presenting dramatic vignettes of violence and oppression that compel the reader to reconcile the words and imagery with Afghanistan's bleak reality.

In a particularly symbolic vignette, Rahima, who gets chastised by her mother for wrestling with a male neighbour and is punished by being given only a meagre dinner, angrily admonishes her mother for not having food ready for her "son" – her anger consistent with the expectation of emotion and entitlement from an Afghan man. The dissonance here is that Rahima is being punished by her mother for conforming to male gender norms, a battle that, in the end, Rahima could not win. When her father enters the room, he strikes his wife in the face for failing to provide a meal for his son despite knowing that Rahima is, in fact, his daughter. Only Rahima and her mother know the real cause of their altercation – that Rahima crossed a line of rigid gender norms by physically wrestling with a man as a biological woman. Rahima recounts to the reader that "As angry as she was, my mother couldn't bring herself to throw me into the fire" – meaning that her mother abstained from informing her father of the

social impropriety (p. 88). Rahima's implied masculine rage and her mother's feminine soft-heartedness are overtly juxtaposed, defining what it means to be a man or woman in Afghan society.

Similar to the relationship among women in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hashimi also uses the dialogues between women to communicate with readers the distinction in men's and women's lives; the former, wild and free, and the latter, tame and measured. In each case, women derive their power from their inner strength, which is compounded by their solidarity with one another. For example, just as Nana had warned Mariam about men's compulsory implication of women, Rahima's mother cautions her that "Men are unpredictable creatures" (p. 107). The text interacts with the reader through its dramatic irony: men are unpredictable to the characters, but the audiences have already deduced the pattern of behaviour among Afghan men. The readers can hardly be surprised when Rahima's emotionally manipulative and physically abusive husband, Abdul Khalid, beats her for the death of their ill son in infancy and savagely cuts off her hair to relegate her to the status of a boy, as she has failed him as a woman (pp. 408–409). Rahima endures the suffering, using her shorn hair as an asset when she finally escapes him in disguise as a man.

When viewed through Bakhtin's dialogic imagination, Hashimi's use of rhetorical analepsis[8] serves to inform and educate the reader about Afghanistan's complex political history. Even at the outset of the book, Afghan women are represented as analogous to the country itself and its resistance against imperial powers. Hashimi unequivocally states that "in that way, Shekiba was Afghanistan" (p. 14). Just as Afghanistan has been subject to conflict and violence in attempts to conquer its domain, so too have Afghan women, like Shekiba, faced the brute force of subjugation. The narration of Shekiba's story, set in early twentieth-century Afghanistan, traces her life as an orphaned and hapless *bacha posh*, who finds purpose and a measure of control over her life by becoming a harem guard at the king's palace.

She is broken, rejected and defeated at every turn, but she persists, using her circumstances to her advantage. She marries a friend of the king as his second wife, and lives a stable life within the confines of her gender – no longer a *bacha posh*. Moreover, the text conveys hope for Shekiba and therefore for Afghanistan by recalling the country's independence. With Shekiba having been granted permission to attend a talk by the country's revolutionary queen, the narration recounts that "suddenly, Queen Soraya looked at her husband and pulled her head scarf off her head. Shekiba's mouth dropped open. She looked at King Amanullah and was shocked to see him smiling and clapping" (p. 434). Here again, the trope of the veil emerges as both an element that obscures, negates and constrains the agency of Afghan women, even though it is presented against

8 A literary device similar to a "flashback", where a narrative is interrupted to recount something having occurred in the past and outside the chronological order of the story.

a changing social and political environment. While the setting is fictional, the monarchs are real, as is the reform that made veiling a choice, not a mandate.

Shekiba and Rahima, therefore, experience independence in different ways. However, the connective tissue of their newfound hope is situated in Westernised (and namely American) institutions: Shekiba's in the reforms of the ideologically "European" monarch and Rahima's through Ms Franklin, the American resource centre teacher, who ultimately guides her to a women's shelter. What the narrative seems to underscore is that Afghan women universally strive for what the book suggests are Western values, such as freedom and education. Like Hosseini's novel, the representation of Afghan women instils a sense of universal suffering and resignation to a life of physical and mental servitude. The female protagonists may be afforded agency, but the authors appear to emphasise tragedy and suffering as the prevailing context of Afghan women's lives.

In reality, the situation is more nuanced. While perhaps few in number, some Afghan women, as Billaud (2015) notes in her research, may accept traditional structures that are often vilified and resisted in the narratives. Such perspectives receive little attention. For the most part, both Hosseini's and Hashimi's texts guide readers towards a moralistic interpretation of Afghan women's lives. In Hashimi's case, particularly given that her novel was published well after Hosseini's, the storyline is not only formulaic but also essentialises Afghan women while exoticising their relationships with Afghan men.

Alternative literary portrayals of Afghan women: *My Pen is the Wing of a Bird*

When creative fiction by Afghan authors is further de-centred from American or European contexts, the knowledge produced about Afghan women through fictive storytelling gains in variety, imagination and depth. A recent example is *My Pen Is the Wing of a Bird* (2022), an anthology of new fiction by Afghan women who resided in Afghanistan prior to the Taliban's takeover of the country in 2021. While the anthology is edited by Hannah Lucy, a British writer and social entrepreneur, the narratives depart from the clichéd literary devices and self-Orientalised plotlines often found in the works of the two Afghan-American novelists. Whereas the latter tend to write in a politicised voice aligned with the American establishment, Afghan women writers in the anthology offer a range of stories that are apolitical, focusing instead on the ordinary and the personal. Although each story is situated within contexts of war and violence – whether structural or physical – the thematic focus allows for a more nuanced picture of Afghan women's experiences to emerge, moving beyond reductive victim-saviour binaries.

This shift in perspective is evident in the everyday textures of the stories themselves, where meaning is derived not from spectacle, but from small acts and personal desires. In "The Red Shoes", Naeema Kargar describes a girl's desire for a pair of red suede boots – something that brings unbridled joy when her father finally acquiesces and buys them for her. Despite the shoes being a size too small, the protagonist contends that it doesn't matter because "the important thing is that you got what you chose. And I chose a pair of boots" (p. 183). She not only has the freedom of choice, but she is also able to obtain the object she chooses. Kargar explores the nuanced issue of female choice and agency in Afghan culture through the original trope of shoes. Metaphorically, the story avoids overused themes, such as forced decisions (as in marriage), that routinely appear in the novels of Hosseini and Hashimi.

Batool Haidari's short story "I Don't Have the Flying Wings" offers a poignant exploration of gender and identity through the lens of a young man who desires to become a woman, handling the subject with emotional sensitivity and nuance. Both the topic and the treatment of sexuality and gender are narrated by Haidari, an Afghan clinical psychologist specialising in sexology. This personal and introspective portrayal contrasts sharply with the representation in Hashimi's *The Pearl that Broke Her Shell*, where Rahima becomes a *bacha posh* not by choice, but in response to cultural demands. In Hashimi's narrative, gender assumes a utilitarian function; society dictates Rahima's masculine role to enable her to fulfil familial responsibilities. While Rahima performs masculinity out of obligation, Haidari's protagonist seeks a deeply personal form of gender expression, captured in a moment of solitude and yearning: "Whenever the house is empty, I feel a world of unknown desires crashing down upon me, head to toe [...] I want to be this different person. When the house is empty, I can be" (p. 62).

The contrast underscores the tension between imposed identity and the longing for authenticity. While the story is set in Afghanistan, the protagonist's struggles are relatable across cultural contexts and are not framed in a way that necessarily vilifies Afghan culture or custom. Rather, Haidari's narrative nudges a more nuanced look at how the intolerance of what is human and "normal" creates unnecessary anguish and pain – reminding readers that people are connected through their shared humanity, rather than by singular aspects of their identity. Haidari's short story is not only imaginative and thought-provoking, but it also enables the audience to conceptualise the breadth of topics and experiences that Afghan women can write about – they need not be limited to the war-torn or destitute.

In that vein, the story "Ajah", by Fatemah Kavari, prevails as a story of solidarity and strength among Afghan women against an entirely different sort of power – nature. Ajah Ayub, the central female heroine, singlehandedly mobilises the women in her village to dig ditches and divert floodwaters to prevent

her community from being submerged (p. 167). The story evokes the theme of resilience but does so against the backdrop of an entirely different plotline. Kavari's narrative is particularly compelling because it draws attention to factors outside of war, such as natural disasters or climate change, that affect the lives of Afghan women in very particular ways. While the anthology represents the first collection of fiction by Afghan authors, its content provides ample reason to encourage further Afghan voices to engage with and challenge dominant U.S. and Western conceptions of Afghan women.

Conclusion

The examples of the two novels by Hosseini and Hashimi demonstrate how fiction can both reflect and reinforce prevailing narratives about gender identity and roles in Afghanistan, especially the agency of women. A key concern of this analysis is the privileging of certain voices within the American publishing industry. To what extent might there be a tendency to select formulaic narratives that align with familiar conceptions and stereotypes, thereby limiting the diversity of perspectives represented?

U.S.-Afghan literature, including the two texts discussed in this paper, often portrays Afghan women through a lens of suffering that emphasises their victimisation by patriarchal systems and cultural constraints. These narratives tend to simplify women's identities, reinforce rigid gender norms and circumscribe depictions of their agency. In contrast, recent works by Afghan women writers and ethnographic researchers offer more nuanced portrayals that more comprehensively illustrate the diversity of their lived experiences and social roles.

While I acknowledge that nonfiction books about Afghan women also track closely to their fictive counterparts, my argument in this analysis is that the representations across both genres speak to the dialectical influence of imperial politics and war. The novels discussed reflect the complex interplay of gender dynamics, cultural representation and narrative framing through which an idea of Afghanistan and Afghan women is projected. The authors' portrayal of women and their relationships, both among themselves and with men, serves as a vivid *tableau vivant* illustrating the harsh realities and enduring strength of Afghan women under oppressive patriarchal systems. Yet, it is imperative to recognise how the narrative might cater to or reinforce U.S. stereotypes of Afghan, and by extension, Muslim societies. The characters, particularly male antagonists, are depicted with certain cultural and ethnic backdrops that emphasise violent and oppressive behaviours, potentially reinforcing a monolithic view of Afghan men as inherently brutal and Afghan women as their perpetual victims.

In discussing the character development and thematic elements of the selected novels, it becomes clear that while the authors vividly capture the endurance of their female characters, the narrative also risks affirming a singular perspective of Afghan cultural identity – framed through a consistent theme of suffering and victimisation. Even in terms of agency, the novels by Hosseini and Hashimi tend to situate women's tacit power within their strength and endurance, portraying these qualities as the sole means to overcome victimhood. Since the novels are often treated as reflections of reality, they convey the impression that all Afghan women are fragile repositories of honour with an immeasurable capacity to tolerate suffering. This idealised generalisation generates values associated with the typified Afghan woman, such as virtue, patience and perseverance, resulting in a portrayal that is inherently insular. It leaves the reader questioning how to interpret Afghan women who do not conform to the mould of the quiet, suffering heroine.

Bakhtin's concept of dialogic imagination, therefore, offers a meaningful aperture through which to view the representation of Afghan women as a consequential form of knowledge production. The dialogic imagination explains how the language of the novel interacts with a multitude of voices, contexts and meanings. In literary nonfiction, reality often tempers the imagination. However, in literary fiction, authors have tremendous scope to construct new worlds of thought – to provoke and engage readers across a spectrum of diverse representations. That the writers choose to retain their novels against the same backdrop of "war-torn Afghanistan", or to suspend their female characters in ever-tightening webs of patriarchy, communicates a message about what they may want known or accepted about Afghanistan and Afghan women. By locating a finite set of archetypes in Afghanistan, the interactions of the text with the public, whether intended or otherwise, distance the Afghan people as a pitied Other.

Ironically, each of the novels claims to draw attention to the plight of Afghan women (equally the case for other works of fiction and nonfiction as well), and yet they do so in a way that is profoundly essentialising and replete with Orientalist overtones. Hosseini's narrative choices, in particular, highlight the role of external geopolitical influences in a subtle critique of their impact on Afghanistan's social fabric. However, the narrative often positions the West – especially America – as a compass for civilisation and salvation. Despite being published in the twenty-first century, many texts nonetheless align with historical colonial tropes and archetypes. This approach risks oversimplifying the multifaceted roles of foreign intervention, which were not always benign or constructive. While the dynamics of the American publishing industry are complex and difficult to fully account for, Afghan-American novelists nonetheless have a choice in how they represent Afghan voices – or rather, whose voices they choose to represent. My intent is to encourage greater reflection

and mindfulness regarding how fiction may interact with perceptions of reality, often taking on the role of de facto expertise in politically fraught contexts. In both Hosseini's reception of Laura Bush's remarks and Hashimi's promotional clip, the novelists present their works as authentic projections of a distant reality. Whether the authors themselves have made clear the distinction between fiction and reality remains questionable.

Literary fiction can play a significant role in illuminating the experiences of individuals and societies across time. However, when approaching with a critical lens, it is essential to consider the limitations of such narratives and the extent to which they may contribute to a parochial and insular knowledge about complex societies. As this paper has demonstrated, fictive narratives about Afghanistan often mirror colonial projections and align with existing biases, whether explicit or implicit. This observation does not diminish the literary value or impact of the works discussed, but rather calls for a more nuanced reading – one that is attentive to their broader cultural and political implications. The collection of fiction in *My Pen is the Wing of a Bird* marks a promising departure from dominant literary conventions. Emerging Afghan writers, and the publishers who support them, would do well to deviate from predictable themes that currently typify representations of Afghanistan. The country and its culture encompass far more than war and violence, and Afghan women's lives exemplify more complexity than the prevailing literary archetypes suggest. These stories, too, deserve to be told and, perhaps most importantly, heard.

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