

What Happens in Afghanistan, Does Not Stay in Afghanistan

*Understanding American Literary Representations of
Afghanistan Through a New Orientalist Approach*

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Afghanistan Through a New Orientalist Approach*

“The challenge is to see each other’s humanity”

– Fatemeh Keshavarz

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Abstract

This study presents a thorough representation of how New Orientalist narrative is evident in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003), Susan Froetschel's *Fear of Beauty* (2013), and Trent Reedy's *Words in the Dust* (2011) in order to understand how American authors portray Afghanistan in contemporary fiction. By presenting a historical and socio-political framework for New Orientalism and highlighting how examples of this is evident through what is being referred to as the American presence, this study presents an understanding of how fiction can serve to reinforce and emphasize negative stereotypes and misconceptions. The analysis draws on theories such as Mahmood Mamdani's "good" vs. "bad" Muslims, Hamid Dabashi's "Native Informers", and Samuel P. Huntington's "clash of civilizations" in order to highlight how the examples of New Orientalist narrative influence the Western public's understanding of Afghanistan and its culture and people.

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Introduction

In 1978, Edward Said published a book that gained great influence on many different academic fields, and that is still considered one of the most important works ever written on the relationship between East and West. Said critiques what he refers to as the West's historical, political, and cultural perceptions of the East, and he highlights how these perceptions create faulty stereotypes and misconceptions. Orientalism was by no means a new concept when this book was published, but Said's *Orientalism* presented academia with a terminological framework for dealing with the power imbalance in our divided world. Said refers to Orientalism as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (*Orientalism* 2). Twenty-five years after, Said wrote a new preface for the anniversary edition of the book where he clearly stated the lack of progress that had been made since *Orientalism* was originally published: "I wish I could say, however, that general understandings of the Middle East, the Arabs, and Islam in the United States has improved somewhat, but alas, it really hasn't" (*Orientalism* xviii). Following the events of 9/11, some critics have made the argument that we are dealing with a second generation of Orientalism (Wecker), what has been commonly known as New Orientalism (Dabashi, "Native Informers"; Keshavarz, *Jasmine and Stars* 2). Where Said's Orientalism was focused on the East and the exoticizing of "the Other", New Orientalism centers specifically on the Middle East and the Arab World. The "Other" is no longer portrayed as exotic and mystical, but consciously portrayed as evil and less: less civilized, less modern, less moral. M. Shahid Alam says "what makes this repackaged Orientalism new are its intentions, its proponents, and the enemy it has targeted for destruction" (xiii). This use of the word *targeted* is important, because it insinuates a consciousness, and consequently points to the question of underlying motive and intent. New Orientalist narratives have been criticized as an American construct that serves only to justify and promote U.S. politics (Fitzpatrick 247; Whitlock, *Soft Weapons* 53; Dabashi, "Native Informers") and the result of this New Orientalism is that it leaves "American readers naively supposing Islamic countries to be intellectual wastelands, populated by sub-human fundamentalists" (Wecker).

Thematically, the stay focused on the public phobia (of Islam and the Islamic world): blind faith and cruelty, political underdevelopment, and women's social and sexual

repression. They provide a mix of fear and intrigue-the basis for a blank check for the use of force in the region and Western self-affirmation. Perhaps not all the authors intend to sound the trumpet of war. But the divided, black-and-white world they hold before the reader leaves little room for anything other than surrender to the inevitability of conflict between the West and the Middle East. (Keshavarz, “Banishing the Ghosts of Iran”)

Said also talks about the overlapping territories between the literary and the political: “The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them” (*Culture and Imperialism*, xiii). I do believe that there is a highly conscious and organized ongoing process where whole societies are portrayed as poorer, less civilized, and more primitive than what the reality is, a process that stretches far beyond bookshelves or newspapers and into the corridors of power, and it is all done in order to justify the predisposition that “we” are better than “them”. And not just better, but superior in every way; allowing (or even demanding) that we intervene and take control over other nations and people. This thesis will highlight how examples of New Orientalism are evident in contemporary American fiction by looking at three novels: *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, *Fear of Beauty* by Susan Froetschel, and *Words in the Dust* by Trent Reedy. All three novels are set in Afghanistan and portray civilian life in three different parts of the country. The examples of New Orientalist narrative that I have found in these novels are subtle, and the manifestation of it may not be obvious for most readers, there are no clearly imperial or anti-Muslim motives evident. But the subtlety of it makes it even more important to take a critical look at, because it is that kind of New Orientalism that is often ignored and therefore customary in contemporary fiction. I am, however, not claiming that the New Orientalist narrative that is evident in these novels is there as a result of conscious choice or motive by these respective authors. The objective of this thesis is not to say anything about motive or intent, as these are questions that are both impossible to present a comprehensive answer to, along with being questions that are of little interest in terms of understanding how the readers interpret the content. The objective of this thesis, however, is to look at how New Orientalist narrative is evident through what I will refer to as the “American presence”, and attempt to present a full account of how this aspect directly influences how the Western reader understands Afghanistan and its culture and people. This is important because “these texts function as producers of meaning in contemporary American culture in ways which are

both problematic and limiting and (...) the symbiotic relationship between texts of this nature and American foreign policy needs to be brought to the light and subject to critical review” (Fitzpatrick 243). In other words, when reading literature set in a location that we are not intimately familiar with, we as readers tend to take for granted that we are presented with a realistic and accurate image of the surroundings and its content. When authors are allowed to dictate this “truth”, we as readers must learn to be critical and aware of the literary tools that are applied in order to make the stories that are being told appealing to us. Some critics have argued that novels set in Afghanistan and the Middle East are used not only to justify military action from Western countries, but also in order to generate public consent by showing the West how terrible the situation in these countries is. In an article titled *Exploiting Afghan Victimhood*, the West’s fascination by what we see as a “war-torn, desolate country” is said to be exploiting the suffering of Afghans and turning it into a commodity in order to sell novels (Davies). Now, where is this West, you might ask? According to Gillian Whitlock, “the West” can only be defined relationally, as it is “a locus of symbolic and grounded power relations emanating from the United States and Europe” and not so much a geographic location (*Soft Weapons* 7). The same might be said for the “Other”, as they may as well be people within our own countries. Although the definitions are blurry at best, it is important for the reader to remember that the binary oppositions referred to in this thesis (West/East, us/them, Orient/Occident) are based on generalizations and should not be confused as clearly defined and representative categories.

This American presence I am referring to is just that: a presence. It does not have to be American characters; it can also be a reference to the United States in terms of pop culture, merchandise or commodities, or general representations of life in America. In the following chapters, I will highlight how the idea of America is present in these novels through different aspects, and how, regardless of what kind of presence, it usually always takes on one of three roles: the savior, the teacher, or the modern/moral. This last role may not be as self-explanatory as the first two. Morality and modernity may perhaps not always be associated, but in the content of the American presence, it is my belief that these concepts are, in fact, closely related. As the definition of New Orientalism states; this whole theory predisposes a set of beliefs where the Occident is inferior to the Orient, who consequently is considered less in every way and highly primitive. So the West’s modernity functions as a contrast to the primitivism in the East, and it is this lack of modernity that enforces a view of the “Other” as evil, and this trait of lacking morality is a direct result, I argue, of the lack of modernity. Therefore, I have made the choice of including both terms in one role, because as

far as my understanding and the following analysis of the New Orientalist narrative will show, these two traits tend to be co-dependent.

I have found examples of the American presence in every single novel I have ever read about Afghanistan, so this is not a distinctive feature in the novels I write about in this thesis, but something that appears to be consistent in this very specific genre: contemporary fiction set in Afghanistan written by American authors. I will argue that this American presence helps create a distance between the Western readers and the Afghan characters, as readers tend to relate most to the characters that are similar to themselves. The American presence, as I will demonstrate, also serves as a contrasting factor in order to emphasize the Orientalist reading and separate “them” from “us”. By taking a closer look at specific parts of the novels, the following chapters will present the readers with an understanding of why this American presence is necessary, and what characterizes it. Finally, the thesis will attempt to present a comprehensive and thorough answer to how this affects our reading of Afghanistan and Afghans, and how different these novels would be if the continuous references to the United States were not present.

I have chosen to focus on three very similar, yet also very different, novels. Similar in the way that they are all fictional stories set in Afghanistan, written by American authors, and published within the last 15 years. Different in terms of genre: one is classified as young-adult literature; one is a bildungsroman, and one is a mystery/thriller. And although American, the authors come from very different backgrounds, and I would assume therefore also have different approaches to, and motivations for, writing about Afghanistan. I will not use the authors’ biographies as a factor in understanding their work, but I choose to mention it in order to highlight that there has been a conscious choice in terms of deciding to look at novels of some variety when it comes to both genre and authors, in order to fully understand the overarching question that is “How do American authors portray Afghanistan in contemporary fiction?” I also made a conscious choice of not including novels where the primary focus of the plot was military life. It is my understanding that most contemporary novels set in Afghanistan or the Middle East are centered around a plot about soldiers and war, naturally perhaps seeing as this has been the main role Westerners have served in the region over the last decades. The novels I am focusing on are, however, not void of any military presence of course, it would be nearly impossible to accurately portray life in a country that has been at war for almost four decades without the mention of this. But seeing as the focus of my thesis is on the portrayal of Afghanistan, I wanted to isolate the stories that mainly focus on civilians, consequently excluding some very interesting novels such as

Elliott Ackerman's *Green on Blue* and Alex Berenson's *The Shadow Patrol* just to mention two. I also feel the need to point out the choice of excluding any Afghan or non-American authors from my project. This does by no means reflect on the quality of the novels, neither has publicity nor sales numbers been a factor. I made the conscious choice of focusing only on American authors, with the exception of Afghan-American Khaled Hosseini, because the question that sparked my curiosity and led to this research was how the highly complex, yet particularly interesting, relationship between Afghanistan and the United States translates into the world of fiction.

When understanding the West's conception of Islam post 9/11, Mahmood Mamdani's theory of "good" vs. "bad" Muslims is a good place to start. I choose to refer to it as the West's conception, although this specific theory may be most applicable to the United States. Hamid Dabashi also states that there is a significant difference between Europe and the United States as far as anti-Muslim racism goes (*Brown Skin White Masks* 65). The reason for this is that this distinction between "good Muslims" and "bad Muslims" were originally made by the Bush administration in the aftermath of 9/11. The "bad Muslims" were the ones responsible for the terror, while it is important to keep in mind that there also exist some Muslims that are like "us", in other words the "good Muslims". When judging whether or not a Muslim is "good" or "bad", it is important to keep in mind that these distinctions refer solely to political identities, and does not include cultural or religious ones (Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* 15). But the key idea here is that "unless proved to be 'good', every Muslim was presumed to be 'bad'" (Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* 15). This is important to understand, because it justifies some sweeping generalizations that have been made regarding Muslims, and it also creates a scenario where Muslims have to actively prove to be "good" in order to avoid being labeled as terrorist. And the only way to prove that you're "good" is to take a stand with "us" in the fight against "them"; also known as the "bad Muslims". The "good Muslims" are the Westernized, modern, and moderate/liberal Muslims. Preferably so liberal that one can barely tell that they are even Muslim.

In 1996, before the attacks on 9/11 and the events that have been said to mark the beginning of the New Orientalism, Samuel P. Huntington wrote about the "clash of civilizations", a theory where he claims that different civilizations are defined by their culture and cultural identities. And these different cultural and religious identities will be, he claims, the main source of conflict in the post Cold War world and consequently help define the power balance between East and West (Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*). In an article that Mamdani wrote on the topic two years prior to his book *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, he

offers another version of the argument, stating that the clash is not between civilizations, it is inside (Mamdani, “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim” 768). By connecting Mamdani’s theory about “good” and “bad” Muslims with my own about the American presence, I will add to this conversation by arguing that the clash *inside* civilizations (good/bad Muslims) is now being exploited as a means of reinforcing the clash *between* civilizations (East/West).

Hamid Dabashi wrote an article about what he refers to as Native Informers, where he points to what was a process of actively recruiting so-called “native intellectuals” post 9/11. Dabashi explains that “their task is to feign authority, authenticity, and native knowledge and thus to inform the U.S. public of the atrocities that are taking place throughout the world, in the region of their native birth in particular, by way of justifying the imperial designs of the U.S. as liberating these nations from the evil of their own designs” (Dabashi, “Native Informers”). These are the “good Muslims” that Mamdani is referring to: “good Muslim citizens are key to the War on Terror because their testimonials affirm the humanitarian premise of U.S. invasions that presumably liberate oppressed peoples around the world” (Maira 634). Maira continues by saying that one of the things that characterize the “bad Muslims” is that they are often voiceless, unable to share their views and stories, and presented as “anti-Western enemies” (636). The “good Muslim” on the other hand, these Native Informers, are put on stage and given an audience, because the story they are telling are the stories that “we” want told. These stories reinforce the (mis)conceptions we already have, and present us with the “American approved truth”. And that is the essence of what New Orientalism is all about: giving voice to the people that tell stories that justify or promote a certain set of beliefs, while subsequently silencing the ones that do not fit into the West’s narrative. Maira accurately states that the “the ‘good Muslim’ (...) needs the ‘bad Muslim’ to stay in business” (636), referring to the successful careers some “good Muslims” or Native Informers have made for themselves by providing testimonials of the atrocities that are being committed in the Arab world by these so-called “bad Muslims”. But not only Native Informers can do this job: although one of the things that separate New Orientalism from the classic Orientalism is that it gives voice to native intellectuals (Fitzpatrick 245), the job is not reserved solely for the ones with “native insight”. But the question of credibility is always present, and one might wonder if the fact that Khaled Hosseini as an Afghan-American author has received such a massive success compared to the other American authors being considered in this thesis, Susan Froetschel and Trent Reedy, might have something to do with his cultural background. A possible explanation for his success is that he is considered a Native Informer who presents the audience with credible information of

the region, compared to American authors without the Afghan heritage who may seem less trustworthy. Another explanation of why the one novel is vastly more successful than the other two, despite having much in common in terms of content, may be the time of publishing. *The Kite Runner* was published in 2003, only two years after the invasion of Afghanistan, when the war was still very much a hot topic. The other two novels, *Fear of Beauty* and *Words in the Dust* were not published until almost a decade later, respectively in 2011 and 2013, when the public interest for information may have declined a little. But the theory of “good” vs. “bad” Muslims is not primarily interesting because of the authors. It is not a distinction between “good” and “bad” people, but specifically Muslims. This reinforces the contrast of “us” vs. “them” and is evident in the novels that this thesis focuses on. The two concepts of “good/bad Muslims” and the American presence help emphasize and complement each other, so understanding Mamdani’s and Dabashi’s theories are vital in order to recognize how this serves as a cultural foundation for these American stories and our understanding of Afghanistan.

One might ask whether or not understanding such a relationship by reading fiction is even possible, and although the validity of any knowledge one gains through fiction may be brought into question, some scholars have argued that in order to understand Afghanistan, one must first understand the Afghan people, and that is best done by hearing their stories (Bryson). Jameson states that: “a study of third-world culture necessarily entails a new view of ourselves” (68), perhaps this is the beginning of an answer as to why American authors then feel compelled to include an American presence in this process of seeing themselves. “Acts of listening and reading, however diverse in location and purpose, seed new awareness, recognition, respect, and willingness to understand, acknowledge, and seek redress for rights violations. While such narrative acts and readings are not a sufficient ground for social change, they are a necessary ground” (Schaffer and Smith 226). This points to the importance of literature in terms of generating awareness around important political and humanitarian crises, but as highlighted in Coullie’s article: “narratives of displacement, suffering, trauma and survival, sell well”, and the Western-based industry behind these publications implicate the way these stories are constructed (140). And this point is important to keep in mind, because combining an audience that craves information on a certain topic, or a country in this instance, and an industry that wants to make profit does not always produce a reliable and accurate result. And there is no doubt that the public wanted information about Afghanistan and were intrigued by novels set there around the time of the invasion in 2001. Even news reports and media coverage were lacking real footage and real information (Fowler). But as

Coullie hints at, it is important to keep a critical lens when reading what some have referred to as “humanitarian novels” (Baron). Whitlock reminds us that:

Narratives from Afghanistan circulate in the war on terror as commodities that become part of a debate about the politics of intervention and resistance. They can be harnessed by forces of commercialization and they can be used to buttress aggressive intervention in so-called primitive or dysfunctional national communities. And yet they can be used to describe unbearable oppression and violence across a cultural divide; they exert a powerful human rights claim. (“The Power of Testimony” 149)

The following will present an understanding of how three American novels solved the task of writing about Afghanistan; first a chapter on Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*, and then a second chapter focusing on Susan Froetschel’s *Fear of Beauty* and Trent Reedy’s *Words in the Dust*.

1 *The Kite Runner*

The Kite Runner was Khaled Hosseini's debut novel published in 2003. It became a massive success with millions of copies sold worldwide, and was number one on the *New York Times* Bestseller list. Centered on the life of a man named Amir, the readers are presented with the story of two Afghan boys who grew up together in Kabul in the 1970s. Amir and his father, a successful businessman, immigrated to the United States when the Soviets invaded, and the novel begins with Amir receiving a phone call many years later from an old friend from the life he left behind. The novel's protagonist, Amir, tells the story of his childhood in Kabul, and we follow him on his journey as he returns to his homeland in order to find his long-lost friend Hassan. When he returns to Afghanistan, he learns that Hassan, who he discovers is his half-brother, has died, but has left behind a son who is now an orphan in Kabul. Amir sets out to find this nephew he never knew he had in an attempt to make up for his past sins and the betrayal of Hassan. In order to save his nephew, Sohrab, Amir is faced with an old enemy, the neighborhood bully Assef, who has now become a Taliban leader and is holding Sohrab prisoner. *The Kite Runner* is a powerful story of a man who has left behind his war-torn homeland in order to start fresh in the United States, only to be forced to make amends and confront the sins of his childhood when he returns to a country that has become unfamiliar to him. *The Kite Runner* presents the reader with a portrayal of Kabul in its current state after having been at war for over three decades. But it also gives a detailed account of what life was like in Afghanistan's capital prior to the Soviet Invasion of 1979, the coming to power of the Taliban in the 1990's, and the ongoing War on Terror marked by the invasion by the U.S. led coalition in 2001, known as Operation Enduring Freedom.

This historic portrayal is one of the important aspects that separate *The Kite Runner* from other contemporary novels set in Afghanistan, and the contrasting effect of now and then is a powerful literary tool in the genre of the humanitarian novel. The humanitarian novel is a novel where human rights violations, conflict, and politics are important themes. In our era of continuous warfare and human suffering, the novel has become yet another medium of trying to emotionally affect and engage the public that are increasingly suffering from compassion fatigue. We have become accustomed to facing suffering and catastrophe everywhere we go, and the humanitarian industry, which has now become big business, is always looking for new ways to engage the public. *The Kite Runner* does present the reader with a forceful portrayal of the suffering that the Afghan people have been victim to,

particularly the description we get when Amir returns to Kabul after all those years of war having left his old hometown in ruins. The depiction of the people that have remained in Kabul are perhaps the most powerful image, because it gives a more nuanced account than just the bombed ruins that media tends to provide us with. The incident with the man on the street selling his prosthetic leg in order to feed his children (259) is only one example. One might therefore argue that this is in fact a humanitarian novel that serves the purpose of engaging the reader, and preferably benefiting Afghans by generating public awareness on the continuous suffering that the Afghan population are victims of. But most of all, *The Kite Runner* is a bildungsroman, a coming-of-age story about a man who needs to come to terms with his past in order to fully find himself and become whole. As in many novels in this genre, the story is spread out over a big time-span, and mainly focused on the main character and how he evolves in relation to his surroundings and the people he meets.

Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul in 1965, but his family left Afghanistan in 1976, and was later granted political asylum in the United States (Hosseini, *khaledhosseini.com*). Hosseini did not return to Afghanistan until 2003, after he had finished writing *The Kite Runner*. Because he left Afghanistan at a very young age and spent the majority of his life in the United States, I have chosen to include him in this study of American authors and their portrayal of Afghanistan. It should be pointed out, however, that I am not trying to downplay his cultural background as Afghan-American, and although I do think that he belongs in the category of American authors, I value the importance of his heritage and believe he provides a nuanced perspective on Afghanistan compared to other authors from the United States. But I cannot escape the fact that Hosseini matches the description of a Native Informer (Dabashi, “Native Informers”). Although having spent most of his life in the United States; himself stating that he felt like a tourist when he went back to Afghanistan (Brown); and that Kabul is no longer home (Hoby), he is deliberately presented as Afghan-American. And although his Afghan background is not being questioned, I have to wonder if this excessive focus on Hosseini being Afghan is not, at least to a certain degree, a publicity strategy. There has been some criticism towards Hosseini because of this, and some have pointed out that he is claiming to have “native insight” although having lived most of his life outside the country he is writing about (Fitzpatrick 248).

This question of whether or not Hosseini is a Native Informer is interesting because it is one of the aspects that defines New Orientalism. Classic Orientalism was problematic for a number of reasons, one of which being the effective silencing of the people whom it purported to describe. The typical Orientalist narrative was written about the Orient by

Westerners and for Westerners. This was, and still is, problematic because the subjects were not given an opportunity to represent themselves or clarify any misconceptions. Neither were the public who read these narratives equipped for the critical assessment of the information they were provided with. New Orientalism has many of the same problems, but one of the major differences, according to some, is that it “relies on native or semi-native narrators (...) to relate the same kind of problematic generalizations about a region as classical Orientalism had done” (Fitzpatrick 245). *The Kite Runner* was in fact the first novel written in English by an Afghan (O’Rourke; Noor), and the groundbreaking success by an unknown, previously unpublished author, was unexpected to say the least. Other scholars have disagreed with this focus on the author’s background, claiming that: “one can comment on a writer’s political associations but cannot fault them for becoming involved. All writers must have an agenda and are in some degree playing with identity politics, constructing agency or affiliated with contemporary discourse” (Lam 260). Lam then reflects on the important point of Islamic writers being “compromised in their Orientalism” simply by the politics of their identity (260), leaving us with the question of whether or not we can really use an author’s background as an argument when critiquing his/her work. Can we judge someone’s knowledge of their own country? I would say no, and that is not the point. What is important to focus on here is not the motive or intent, or whether or not an author is reliable based on how much knowledge he/she has about the country where the story is set. What is necessary to question is why some authors are given a voice and others are not. We should be asking questions about representing and representation, in other words: who gets to represent this country or people, and what kind of representations are they providing us with? Joseph R. Slaughter argues that “the West is corporatized as a human-rights-concerned consumer, whose demand for politicized human beings from the non-West creates (...) an international human rights market” (35), reinforcing the notion that literature of human suffering has become big business. In the article *Who Can Write as Other?* Gunew states that the problems occur when one individual taking on the role of the oppressed Other “supposedly speaks authentically and unproblematically as a unified subject on behalf of groups she or he represents” (qtd. in Fee). This is why Mamdani’s theory is important, because it reflects a methodical tradition where certain voices are being heard and others are not. And referring back to how literature helps create “truths”, that reminds us that it is important to be critical of why we are only ever presented with certain stories, written by certain authors, and to pay close attention to how these stories effect us when we read them. We must equip ourselves with the necessary knowledge required to expose Orientalist and racist narratives, and learn

to stay critical when we are faced with new information that is presented as “truth” on a topic that is, to some extent, unfamiliar to us.

And there is no doubt that *The Kite Runner* affected a lot of people: on the back of the 10th anniversary edition, Khaled Hosseini is referred to as “one of the most widely read and beloved novelists in the world”, and *The Kite Runner* and Hosseini’s second novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* have sold more than ten million copies in the U.S., and more than thirty-eight million copies worldwide in more than seventy countries (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*). *The Kite Runner* remained on the *New York Times* Bestseller list for over a hundred weeks (Hosseini, *khaledhosseini.com*), and received great reviews and extensive praise. This success is noteworthy, because American readers, who traditionally have been known to avoid foreign literature, made *The Kite Runner* into “a cultural touchstone” (O’Rourke). As mentioned previously, the initial success of this book may have been a result of the ongoing war in Afghanistan and the public interest in the topic. Some critics certainly think so as this delivery of information in an accessible manner is described as a way of “humanizing the newspaper accounts of a place that suddenly became a U.S. preoccupation again after 9/11” (O’Rourke). Others take it a step further, and claim that Hosseini’s novel is a carefully targeted, imperial design:

“(…) carefully calculated, crafted, edited, and packaged Hosseini’s debut *Bildungsroman* to satisfy a sudden, war-induced American taste for success stories from Afghanistan. The novel none-too-subtly endorses as humanitarian intervention the U.S.-Allied invasion of Afghanistan and the ‘War on Terror’ by reifying the United States as the land of perpetual opportunity and freedom while hypervilifying the Taliban as a gang of Nazi-loving, heroin-using, homosexual pedophiles intent on repressing the free and full development of the human personality”. (Slaughter 38)

But how much real information can we really expect to get from a fictional novel? Here it is important to separate between cultural knowledge and political knowledge. Some critics have argued that: “as far as the Afghan conflict is concerned, we get a selective, simplistic, even simple-minded picture” (Noor). The following will present an analysis where my theory of the American presence is exemplified and more thoroughly explained by looking at concrete examples from *The Kite Runner* where this presence is evident and serves to contrast the East and the West; the self from the “Other”; and “us” from “them”. I will also draw on Mamdani’s theory of “good” and “bad” Muslims in order to clarify how this

separation occurs, and what literary tools the author has utilized in terms of effecting how we read and understand the content through our Western, privileged lens.

1.1 The Westernized Protagonist and the Bad Muslim

The story of Amir as a child is a familiar story to Western readers. Not because we have heard it before necessarily, but because the aspects it consists of are so familiar to us that we forget it is set in Afghanistan. A boy growing up in a rich family, in a nice house, raised by a single father who is portrayed as fairly secular. And this lack of a strict Muslim upbringing removes him from the stereotype of a Muslim fundamentalist, and when Baba refers to the Mullahs as “self-righteous monkeys”, claiming that they “do nothing but thumb their prayer beads and recite a book written in a tongue they don’t even understand” (17), he sounds like any non-religious Western man. Amir grew up watching American Westerns, drinking Coca-Cola, taking rides in his father’s American-made Ford Mustang, and his daily activities involved playing and pulling pranks just like any other children. For the most part, the childhood that is depicted in *The Kite Runner* is lacking the exotic, dangerous, or primitive aspect that one would expect in an Orientalist/New Orientalist narrative. The definition of this type of narrative is, as mentioned: a representation of an “Other” that is less civilized, less moral, and less modern than ourselves. And this cumulates in a portrayal of the “Other” as evil and dangerous, as far removed from how we see ourselves as possible. But this familiarity we feel with the main character in *The Kite Runner* is important because it lays the foundation for our whole understanding of the character Amir as what I will argue is the main reason why *The Kite Runner* can be read as a New Orientalist narrative: he is like us. Of course, he is not like any American child growing up in the U.S. in the 1970’s. And there are important aspects of his life in Kabul that could not be confused with life in Europe at the time. But it is strikingly modern, and maybe most importantly: not how we might have pictured it. And by “we” I am referring to Westerners, thus knowingly making myself guilty of generalizations.

The point here is not to claim that the readers forget that the story is set in Afghanistan, and that the characters are “modernized” in order for the readers to better grasp the story. The point is that “he [Hosseini] does so much work to make his novel emotionally accessible to the American reader that there is almost no room, in the end, for us to consider

for long what might differentiate Afghans and Americans” (O’Rourke). In other words, Amir subtly surprises the readers by not being very different from us, leaving him with the role of what Dabashi refers to as the “good Muslim”. “His childhood is remarkably similar to the idealized American male childhood of drinking Coca-Cola and playing ‘Cops and Robbers’” (Jefferess 393). This is only one of the examples of an American presence in the story, but it is an important one. As mentioned, it lays the foundation for our understanding of Amir, and the recognizable aspects of this create a familiarity that pulls the reader in. And these commodities are not just any representations of American culture; they are iconic cultural gems. This image of America that the children in Kabul grow up with is not the negative stereotype of burger-eating, ignorant Americans that we are sometimes faced with in our time. It is the sturdy, handsome cowboy in the movie; the refreshing, hip drink seen in in the commercials; and the motor industries in full bloom. This is picture perfect America: The golden ages. The prime. And consequently all positively charged, setting the standard of an American presence that is modern and heroic.

The familiarity we feel with Amir is important not only because we identify with him, but also because he is the hero of the story. Seeing as Amir is the novel’s narrator and we are told the story from his perspective, we are on his side from the very first page. But he is not the average hero; he is perhaps the character in the novel with the biggest character flaw of them all, because he allowed Hassan to be abused and later punished for it. After being established as our protagonist and our window into this universe, we as readers realize that our hero is somewhat of a hopeless case. A rich kid who gets away with the betrayal of his best friend and never has to answer for what he did. But the promise of “there is a way to be good again” (2), leaves us with a hope that our protagonist will be able to redeem himself. Jefferess has argued that *The Kite Runner* is a political allegory that leaves the West with a promise of redemption (390). Amir not only reminds us of the classic American childhood, he is a symbol of the United States. As Amir goes back to Afghanistan to make up for the horrifying acts he committed years before, he represents the Western world and our striving to fix the damage of an issue that, some would argue, we were the origin of (Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*). This is an interesting thought, but I will attempt to leave the politics to someone better qualified. What I will argue is that Amir does become a symbol of America when he returns to Afghanistan. He is the American presence in the novel, the contrast to his old friends; his old home; his old life. This directly influences how we see these things; because our perceptions are tainted by the lens that we see through: in this case Amir. So when our narrator is as Americanized as he is, and the following will present more thorough

examples of this, we are already far removed from the characters and culture in Afghanistan, simply by approaching them from the viewpoint of the Americanized character.

One very important point where this American presence is obvious is the way the character of Assef serves as juxtaposition. This is a classic example of “bad Muslim” vs. “good Muslim”. Assef, the “bad Muslim”, is portrayed as “a bloodthirsty would-be Hitler” (O’Rourke). From early childhood when he bullies and later rapes Hassan, and later in the novel when he has become a Taliban leader and is holding Sohrab prisoner, Assef is portrayed as the manifestation of evil and cruelty:

He leaned toward me, like a man about to share a great secret. “You don’t know the meaning of the word ‘liberating’ until you’ve done that, stood in a roomful of targets, let the bullets fly, free of guilt and remorse, knowing you are virtuous, good, and decent. Knowing you’re doing God’s work. It’s breathtaking.” He kissed the prayer beads, tilted his head. (Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* 277)

This classic bad guy serves as a contrast to our flawed “American” hero, who despite his own shortcomings looks good in comparison. In the traditional literary canon, having the protagonist fill the role of the bad guy is something that rarely occurs, and the idea of having an American bad guy in a New Orientalist narrative seems equally impossible. Realizing this, we are left with no other option when the protagonist is as flawed as Amir is, we have to bring in the terrorist. And after we have casted the role of terrorist/”bad Muslim”, we must portray him in a way that leaves no room for doubt regarding his role in the narrative. And Assef is not portrayed the same way as the other characters are: there are a number of examples such as “his snarl all spit-shining teeth, his bloodshot eyes rolling” (288), “Assef gritted his teeth” (42), “Assef hissed” (290), that creates an image of Assef as more animal than human. And this dehumanization of the evil character is interesting, especially in relation to the lack of detail when it comes to descriptions of Assef’s face. Where other characters, such as Hassan, are described in detail, we never get a thorough account of what Assef’s face looks like except the fact that he has blue eyes. Judith Butler has argued that the face of evil ceases to be a face at all, and identifies the ways in which a face can serve to dehumanize (150-151). This is what is being done with the character Assef, because the facial expressions we are presented with, paints a picture of a man that is “a creature, non-human” (Jeffress 393). And similarly to the silencing of the voiceless “bad Muslims” in New Orientalism, Assef who has that role in *The Kite Runner* is faceless and dehumanized,

reinforcing his position as an “Other”. And the effect of this contrasting between Amir: a flawed, Muslim character, and Assef: a Muslim character that is a lot worse and pure evil, once and for all settles that Amir after moving to the U.S. has become a “good Muslim”. And the Western influence on Amir as a “good Muslim” is also evident in the conversations between Amir and Assef. One example is when Assef talks about “taking the garbage out of Afghanistan”, and Amir tells him: “In the west, they have an expression for that, (...) they call it ethnic cleansing” (284). This is adult Amir, returning from America, explaining the situation in Afghanistan to the man who has lived there all his life. It is a good example of the American presence taking on the role of the teacher, educating a less intelligent population in the Orient. And it is not general education, but specifically on issues related to the “Other’s” own country. This is an effective symbol of the role the United States has given itself in world politics; the super-power with monopoly on the prerogative of deciding what is right and wrong. But it also took American influence for Amir to fully understand Assef for what he truly is: “Years later, I learned an English word for the creature that Assef was, a word for which a good Farsi equivalent does not exist: ‘sociopath’” (38).

These clearly defined roles are interesting when looking at everything Amir and Assef have in common. They are both Afghans; they grew up in the same neighborhood in Kabul; they both mistreated Hassan, although not to the same extent; and they are both Muslim. Yet there is no question regarding which of the two is the “good Muslim”. The story’s hero is the Americanized one; the one who grew up in the U.S. and not in Afghanistan, the one who was modernized in the West. And that is the main thing that separates them, seeing as they have the same cultural and socioeconomic background, but the one who stayed in Afghanistan remained evil, and the one who left to go to America became good. And now he is back in Afghanistan to save Afghans who didn’t leave in order to “be good again” or become even better perhaps. And this portrayal of America as the fresh start, the only way out of the misery, is a perfect example of the American presence in the role of the savior. Not only as a savior for Amir and his father when they first moved there, but later when Amir in the role of the Americanized hero goes back to save Sohrab. “America was different. America was a river, roaring along unmindful of the past. I could wade into this river, let my sins drown to the bottom, let the waters carry me someplace far. Someplace with no ghosts, no memories, and no sins. If for nothing else, for that, I embraced America” (136).

This portrayal of the U.S. as a safe haven repeats itself, as mentioned, when Amir saves Sohrab from Assef. Even after he has defeated the evil Taliban warlord, Sohrab is still not entirely free, as he is still in Afghanistan. The only way to provide Sohrab with a good

life, it seems, is to bring him back to the U.S. “Sohrab, I can’t give you your old life back, I wish to God I could. But I can take you with me. (...) You have a visa to go to America, to live with me and my wife” (355). When Amir realizes that Sohrab is his nephew, this provides him with an opportunity of healing and union, a very welcomed gift after having lost both his father and Hassan. But as Jefferess points out: “ironically, this new relationship or union is fulfilled not in Afghanistan but in the United States” (394). This is problematic for several reasons, one of which being that it portrays a country and a people that is unable to take care of themselves without Western intervention. And it also reinforces the moral assurances that justified the War on Terror, the humanitarian project of “saving oppressed Muslim children/women from misogynist, oppressive Muslim men” (Jefferess 398).

1.2 Ideological Homeland and Changing Families

To be fair, it is important to point out the aspects in *The Kite Runner* that separates it from a classic New Orientalist narrative. In the introduction, I presented the question of whether or not Hosseini’s Afghan heritage would somehow separate his works from other American authors, and I believe it may. Although, as shown so far, there is a strong American presence in this story, this methodical contrasting of East and West does not always result in an unfortunate portrayal of Afghanistan. Rachel Blumenthal argues that as far as where the ideological homeland is; Hosseini refuses to settle in either the U.S. or Afghanistan. As shown, America is portrayed as a place of refuge for the characters in *The Kite Runner*, but Blumenthal argues that when looking for home, “a complete turn to either space [for Hosseini’s characters], (...) amounts to a renunciation of personal history and identity” (263). One example of this is Baba, Amir’s father, and his change in character after moving to the U.S. “Baba loved the *idea* of America. It was living in America that gave him an ulcer” (125). The outspoken, successful man never found his place in his new homeland, and although making attempts to live a good life, he is never portrayed as the same man he was when living in Kabul. And this change in Baba reflects the decline in social status that the family has suffered. From belonging to the upper class; the social and political elite, they have become yet another immigrant family, having to swallow their pride in order to make a life for themselves in the West. “For me, America was a place to bury my memories. For Baba, a place to mourn his”(129). But the relationship between Amir and Baba does seem to

improve somewhat after moving to the U.S. From having a father/son relationship characterized by mutual disappointment, false expectations, and a mutual longing for the wife/mother, their fresh start in the West also presents them with a fresh start in their relationship. This change may be natural seeing as Amir grew up and became an adult, and their difficult past became a shared wound they both carried with them. But it is interesting to see how the young man Amir grows stronger and more confident in the West; he fulfills his dreams and grows into a kind and humble person. Baba, on the other hand, declines and grows weaker in their new homeland. [Baba:] “Peshawar was good for me. Not good for you” (129). As mentioned, he never regains his position in the community, and eventually dies after having been ill for a while. One might wonder if this shift is a symbol of Western and Eastern societies. Where the youth is empowered and given endless opportunities in the West, it also breaks down traditional cultures and erases aspects that are important in other societies. *The Kite Runner* may be trying to show us that modernization is not without consequences.

But perhaps the most interesting aspect related to family, is the struggle that Amir and his wife Soraya have, being unable to have a child. This American or Western ideal of happiness: “(heterosexual) marriage, middle-class privilege, a consumer lifestyle, and a happy nuclear family – cannot be fulfilled” (Jefferess 392). Amir and Soraya have at last been able to convince their parents to let them marry, and they are doing well in their lives. But the fact that they are unable to have children is one thing that keeps them from becoming the picture perfect American family that they are on their way of becoming. And the solution to their problem is, for once, not in America. They have to return to Afghanistan in order to be complete. By returning to Kabul to save Sohrab, a young boy who is already family, and then bringing him back to California and adopting him, Amir and Soraya are finally able to have a family, the way they have dreamt about for years. And Amir’s role as Sohrab’s savior is the last piece of evidence supporting that Amir has turned in to the man his father wanted him to be: [Baba:] “A boy who won’t stand up for himself becomes a man who can’t stand up to anything” (22). Amir has learned to stand up for himself in the West, and is now returning to Afghanistan to stand up for Sohrab.

But this notion that some of the solution is in Afghanistan is an important aspect that separates *The Kite Runner* from other similar novels. Although the savior is still America and the West, Hosseini presents the reader with an idea that the road to this bliss may actually be through Afghanistan. This is interesting because it presents us with a more nuanced picture. Although the intent of this thesis has never been to portray *The Kite Runner* as a solely New

Orientalist narrative, this notion that Afghanistan may be the key to the characters' happiness, although not by itself, is unlike most of the other content as shown above. And it does support Blumenthal's argument that Hosseini in his novel is unwilling to "choose". There is, to some extent, always a foot on each side, and the positive undertone about Afghanistan is different and refreshing.

Another important aspect of this American presence that differs from other novels is the characterization of Amir when he returns to Afghanistan. As shown already, Amir has become Americanized and returns to his land of birth a changed man: he is the modernized manifestation of the West returning to make amends for past mistakes. And the characterization of Amir as a representation of the West, and the U.S. in particular, is not merely supported by his continuous references to America as already shown. The way Amir as a character is portrayed is another example of this. This is not a man who returns to his childhood home well prepared, full of knowledge, or familiar with the life that unfolds there now. Amir is portrayed as naïve and even a little ignorant. The sights that meet him in Kabul shock him, and he makes no effort of hiding his unease. In many ways, he is portrayed as the stereotypical Westerner coming to a war-torn Arab country on a humanitarian mission. This is reflected in the Afghan characters and their attitude towards Amir: "Why are you coming back here anyway? Sell off your Baba's land? Pocket the money and run back to your mother in America?" (233). And although Amir on several occasions refer to himself as Afghan, there is a big difference between him and the other Afghan characters. And this is something that is evident from both sides: "I feel like a tourist in my own country', I said (...) Farid snickered. Tossed his cigarette 'You still think of this place as your country?'" (231). The Afghan characters clearly don't see Amir as a fellow Afghan, and consequently treat him as if he was any other Western man visiting Afghanistan for some reason. But in this bildungsroman, a big part of Amir's journey on becoming himself is going back to Afghanistan in order to "be good again". And the notion that this good side of him is in Afghanistan is a contrast to what expectations one might have had regarding a New Orientalist narrative. But although there are examples of portrayals of Afghanistan that are not entirely negative or necessarily reinforces a perception of Afghans as inferior, the notion that the Afghan protagonist after becoming even more Westernized returns to Kabul on a rescue mission, is problematic. And it is not done in a classic Orientalist manner by dehumanizing all the Afghan characters or portraying them or their country as entirely primitive, it is done by juxtaposing the modern and primitive; the good and the bad; and the West and the East. This is an example of my contribution to Huntington's and Mamdani's

theory: reinforcing the clash between civilizations by emphasizing the clash inside civilizations.

The novel's touristic discourse (...) is deliberately designed to create a distancing effect. Hosseini's Afghans are thus 'humanized' at the same time as they are culturally and politically differentiated, and his Afghanistan ideologically 'Middle East-ified' so as to create the false dichotomies – between West and the rest, self and other, past and present – that its colonial modernity, fully coeval with America's contests. (Huggan)

And although the portrayal of Afghanistan is not entirely negative, the portrayal of America is always positive. Hosseini has even been criticized for not presenting readers with a nuanced picture of the war and the U.S. led invasion: The “American enterprise in Afghanistan is then reaffirmed as a well-intentioned and necessary occurrence – not because of the events of 9/11 – but because it is a continuation of such attempts by foreigners to liberate the country from its worst selves” (Fitzpatrick 250). This relates back to the question of which “truths” we are presented with, and what side of the story is being told. An author can never solely present the audience with a thorough and entirely accurate version of the historical truth, but the attempts Hosseini makes to present us with a nuanced image of Afghanistan are not sufficient in relation to the entirely positively charged American presence that is present throughout the entire novel. “The Hollywood elements of his [Hosseini] story conduce to a view of Afghanistan and its dilemmas that is in the end more riddled with facile moralizing than even the author may realize” (O'Rourke). In other words, this novel that promises the reader native insight on Afghanistan, may in fact be presenting the Western public with the exact story that the readers want to hear. The portrayal of the story's protagonist as Westernized and familiar, results in the reader, perhaps subconsciously, identifying and internalizing Amir's side of this story. His presence serves as such a strong contrast to the Afghan characters and the surroundings when he returns to Kabul, that it ends up creating a bigger gap between “us” and “them”.

One might wonder what this story would look like without the American presence, but in this context that may be hard to picture. The reason for this is that it is one of the originally Afghan characters that serves as the American presence for the most parts, and there are no Western characters to eliminate from the story. But if we were to imagine that Amir and his father had for example immigrated to Pakistan instead, and Amir would not

have been Americanized the way I claim he has been, the story would then have been completely different. The main difference in the reader's understanding of the story if that were the case is that it may have been harder for the Western public to identify with Amir, because if he had been raised in Pakistan, the familiar sides to him would have been removed. This may again have made it harder for the reader to just as easily forgive Amir for his past mistakes, seeing as the removal of him as the Americanized hero, also removes him from the role of the "good Muslim", and he may have been understood as just another Muslim man. But the main argument in this chapter has been that the familiarity of Amir and his role as the American presence creates a distance between the reader and the Afghan characters, so a removal of Amir from this role would most likely have decreased the gap between "us" and "them", although not by any means removing it completely.

2 Fear of Beauty & Words in the Dust

Fear of Beauty, published in 2013, is the fourth novel by American author Susan Froetschel. This mystery/thriller novel tells the story of life in a remote village in the Helmand Province in southern Afghanistan, told from two different perspectives: the American soldier in charge of the new outpost in the area, and an Afghan woman named Sofi who has recently lost her oldest son, Ali, in what may not have been an accident. The mysterious death of Sofi's son the day before he is supposed to leave for school as one of few in his village to ever receive an education, presents an additional layer of mistrust between the Afghans and Americans. Did Ali really fall from that cliff or is the culprit one of the locals in the village? Or perhaps the culprit is one of the newly arrived Americans? The U.S. outpost is not just populated by army personnel, but also scientists and experts on agriculture who are there to teach the Afghans how to improve their farming skills. Already, we are presented with the understanding that some of the American presence in this story will take on a very clear role as teacher. Not all of the Afghans in the village are eager to meet these "infidels", and those who are dare not say so in fear of reactions from the other villagers and the fundamentalists in the area. The novel depicts the difficult encounter between vastly different cultures, and illustrates how the presence of Western military forces and experts in Afghanistan is understood differently by the two groups: Western "settlers" and Afghan locals. We follow Sofi in both her search for the truth about her son's death, and the search for knowledge and information from the newcomers in the valley. She even kidnaps the civilian agriculture leader, Mita, from the outpost in an attempt to gain more knowledge. On the other side, we follow U.S. Army Special Ranger Joey Pearson, a man trying to balance his duties as respected leader at the outpost with his diplomatic mission of securing a well-functioning relationship to the Afghans in the local village of Laashekoh. This narrative style presents the reader with a very interesting approach to how Americans are understood in Afghanistan: how the Americans see themselves and their role there, and how the author imagines the Afghans experience the Western people coming to their country. The American presence is naturally very strong as half the characters are American, or at least Western, and the following examples from the novel will attempt to show how the manifestation of the American presence differs from that in *The Kite Runner* in some instances, yet mostly serves the same purpose: to reinforce the separation between "us" and "them" by contrasting the portrayal of Afghanistan and its people with the continuous references to the United States

and the Western world. There is a very clear American presence evident in this novel that utilizes some of the same literary tools that I found in *The Kite Runner*. But Hosseini's novel did not have any American characters, so this clearly defined distinction between East and West in terms of characters becomes even more evident in *Fear of Beauty* where the characters are split into two separate groups. The examples from Froetschel's novel in the following analysis will present the reader with a more detailed understanding of how my theory of the American presence works together with Mamdani's theory of "good" and "bad" Muslims in order to contribute to the ongoing conversation of clashes between, and inside, civilizations.

Words in the Dust by Trent Reedy is a novel in the young adult-literature genre published in 2011. The novel centers on the life of a young Afghan girl named Zuleikha and her difficult life in a small town near Farah, in western Afghanistan. The author is a former soldier in the U.S. army and wrote this novel based on the story of a young girl named Zuleikha that he met when he was on deployment. Zuleikha lives with her father, stepmother, and four siblings, and as the oldest girl in the family her days consist of chores and work around the house. The girl's mother passed away some years ago, and Baba's second wife – Zuleikha's stepmother – is now in charge of the household. The plot of *Words in the Dust* has some striking similarities to the famous story of Cinderella; it is a hopeful, fairytale-like story of a poor, young girl mistreated by her stepmother, but her dreams come true in the end. Zuleikha is born with a severe cleft lip and everyday activities such as eating, drinking and talking are difficult for her. This disability also leads to excessive bullying and isolation, and the only one Zuleikha is truly close to is her younger sister, Zeynab. She has lived her entire life being told that she must cover her face in public, that she will most likely never get married – which is the only probable future for a girl in her village – and that she will never look as pretty as her sister; this all adds up to a self-image where Zuleikha sees herself as a burden to her family and especially her father: "If I didn't have this... I motioned to my mouth with my free hand. '...then I wouldn't talk wrong like I do. Then maybe Malehkah wouldn't be so mean to me, and she and Baba wouldn't have as much trouble finding me a husband one day. Maybe I wouldn't be so much of a burden'" (*Words in the Dust* 92). But one day the American soldiers come to the village Zuleikha lives in, and they offer to fix her lip through reconstructive surgery, free of charge, no strings attached. This sparks a hope in Zuleikha and becomes the start of her journey to live a normal life, and the novel follows the life of this thirteen year-old girl as her whole world is turned upside down by a very

particular American presence: a presence that manifests itself in a problematic manner, as the following analysis will demonstrate, given the fact that this novel is targeting young readers.

I have chosen to combine the analysis of *Words in the Dust* and *Fear of Beauty* in this chapter because there are some important similarities in terms of both gender, applied theories in the portrayal of the characters, and some denominators that were not found in *The Kite Runner*. The following will analyze different aspects of these two novels in relation to my theory of the American presence and the manner in which this presence is utilized, at the same time as I will draw parallels back to my analysis of *The Kite Runner* in order to highlight how we can see these works in relation to each other, and help paint a bigger picture of how New Orientalist narrative is evident in these novels.

As mentioned, *Fear of Beauty* and *Words in the Dust* did not receive the same success as *The Kite Runner*, despite being similar in terms of content. The brief summaries of the novels provided should present the reader with some idea of the parallels between these stories, and the following chapter will present a more thorough analysis of the similar literary tools utilized. But there is one aspect that is noticeable even before reading the novels where *Fear of Beauty* and *Words in the Dust* differ from *The Kite Runner*: the cover art. Gérard Genette is famous for his theory on what he refers to as *Paratext*, which he defines as: “the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public” (Genette and Maclean 261). The paratext consist of *peritext* and *epitext*, and it is the former that is of interest in this chapter. The peritext is everything in the book that is not a part of the narrative: cover art, title, blurbs, prefaces, dedications, name of the author etc. The information on the cover of a book is the first impression most potential readers get, and it serves the purpose of both catching our eye in between all the other books on the shelf, and making us want to read that book instead of a different one. And as mentioned, these humanitarian novels that are focused on human suffering and trauma, sell well and there is a rapidly growing market for this genre (Coullie). So it is important and increasingly common for publishing companies to make sure that we as readers know, just by looking at the cover, that what we have in front of us is a humanitarian novel. And the manner in which this is being done is by incorporating examples of peritext that signifies themes and topics that are frequent in this genre. But the cover art of *The Kite Runner* does not instantly reveal where this novel is set or what the plot is about. One has to take a closer look at the city depicted under the title in order to notice that this is not a city in the West: the mosque and the seemingly empty, concrete buildings are how most cities in the Arab world are depicted. The novel’s immense success spread the word that this was a source for

information on Afghanistan, and the author's non-Western name became a promise of reliability and native insight. *Fear of Beauty* and *Words in the Dust* did not gain the same status, and the authors' American names removed them from the roles of Native Informers. The solution to this became the use of certain types of cover images that are becoming customary as its own publicity strategy in the genre of humanitarian literature: the veiled woman. The black and white cover image of *Fear of Beauty* is a close-up photo of a veiled woman with sad eyes and perfect eyeliner. The sexuality and femininity that make-up signifies in the Western world is a strong contrast to the depiction of the poor, Afghan woman living in a rural village that the story actually revolves around. *Words in the Dust* has a cover image of a younger woman, covered in a red veil, as she stares dreamily out in the air, in the direction of the military tank in the background – already presenting us with the notion that the military presence in the novel is not negatively charged.

Whitlock stresses that: “the production and carefully targeted marketing of ‘veiled’ life narratives in the West raise intractable problems about the practice of communicative ethics between women” (*Soft Weapons* 47). Dabashi refers to these types of cover images as “a photographic updating of a long tradition in Orientalist painting” (“Native Informers”). In other words, these covers are just another aspect of the New Orientalist narrative, but the use of the veil is particularly interesting as this New Orientalism does tend to focus on Islamic countries and not the entire Eastern hemisphere. Whitlock claims that these cover images of veiled women are exploited as symbols of Islamic women's oppression and subordination, and that the veil is often understood differently in the West than it is in Islamic countries (*Soft Weapons* 48). But these cultural nuances are rarely noticed or paid any attention to, because one of the strengths of New Orientalist narrative – strength in terms of sales numbers and perhaps weakness in terms of reliability – is that it does not “demand that readers have an in-depth knowledge of the culture on which the book is focused” (Keshavarz, *Jasmine and Stars* 4). So where *The Kite Runner* presented the public with a subtle image and a name that promised native insight, *Fear of Beauty* and *Words in the Dust* make up for the lack of this apparent insight by utilizing images of mysterious women, and subsequently promising the reader a look behind the veil. This is a powerful publicity strategy, according to Whitlock, and it “elicits both sympathy and advocacy that can be put to quite different political and strategic uses” (*Soft Weapons* 47).

2.1 Imperial Feminism

One of the most noteworthy differences between *The Kite Runner* and the two novels this chapter focuses on, *Fear of Beauty* and *Words in the Dust*, is the almost complete lack of female characters in Hosseini's novel. Except for Amir's wife, Soraya, who is a minor character in the novel, the story is void of any significant female presence. *Fear of Beauty* and *Words in the Dust*, on the other hand, are centered on the fictional life narratives of two female characters, presenting us with a whole new line of questions regarding how American authors portray Afghanistan. One of the most interesting aspects related to characters and gender is the difference in how Afghan women and Western women are portrayed. A common denominator for the female Afghan characters is that they are often victimized, powerless, and subjugated. The Western female characters then, serve to juxtapose these women, as they are often portrayed in positions of authority, strong-willed, and always very kind. This is not to say that Afghan women are never portrayed as kind, but the kindness of Western women is often specifically emphasized, perhaps in order to avoid that these characters appear masculine or less relatable in any way. A good example of an authoritative and good-hearted Western woman is Captain Mindy Edmanton, the commanding officer of the American soldiers that come to Zuleikha's village in *Words in the Dust*. Not only is she the compassionate one who offers to fix Zuleikha's lip and brings her presents, creating a strong contrast to Zuleikha's stepmother – the evil Afghan woman -, but as an officer she is also the most powerful of the soldiers, leaving the Afghan men dumbfounded: "Can you believe that? A woman. A woman officer. (...) They're supposed to be the most powerful army in the world, and they have women in command of men" (*Words in the Dust* 65). This reinforces the negative stereotype of Afghan men as misogynist and primitive, and Afghan women as powerless and in need of saving. And the American presence in the role of the savior is not a new theory. After the classic essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* the concept of "white men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak) has become a widely referred-to phrase within postcolonial- and humanitarian literature. And this promise of savior is exactly what the cover images of these novels signify to the Western public; somehow, by reading and understanding how mistreated and oppressed Islamic (brown) women are, we (the white) can do something to help and save these women. It presents the Western public with an opportunity of feeling someone else's pain by reading about them; a short break from our own privileged world where we are reminded how well off we are when we try to

visualize someone else's suffering; a feeling afterwards that we now know what it's like there, and that we somehow did something good by caring for a few hours.

The subjection of women in Muslim societies – especially in Arab nations and in Iran – is today very much in the public eye. (...) One might expect that by now American feminist groups would be organizing protests against such glaring injustices, joining forces with the valiant Muslim women who are working to change their societies.

This is not happening. (Sommers 14)

As Sommers points out, very little seems to be done in order to actually improve the lives of these oppressed, Muslim women. Despite the public interest and the high sales numbers of these types of narratives, the object of the humanitarian novel: to engage the public, does not seem to be successful on other levels than the emotional one. It appears as if the readers of these narratives are only engaging with the politics in their own minds while they are reading, and the problems that are discussed and presented are forgotten the moment the reader turns that last page. This Imperial Feminism has not shown great promise in actually making a difference, and perhaps that is where the imperial motives come in: committing actions that only serve to improve our own situation, by feeling good about ourselves and our own lives, and not so much engaging with the real issues that women are facing in other parts of the world.

Perhaps these veiled women are another political allegory, not necessarily promising redemption as in *The Kite Runner*, but presenting us with a chance to be the hero (again) and save these poor brown women from the awful brown men. And this line of thinking, that we improve and increase our own position of power, disguised and justified as a humanitarian mission to save oppressed women and children, is what is referred to as Imperial Feminism, and has been actively utilized as justification for political action (Whitlock, *Soft Weapons* 49). But the use of this type of feminism as a justification of military intervention is not the only reason why it is problematic: “as several Third World Feminists have argued, a historical weakness of liberal feminism in the West has been its racist, patronizing attitude towards women of color who have been seen less as allies/agents and more as victims in need of rescue” (Kumar).

Maira claims that in terms of Mamdani's theory about “good” and “bad” Muslims, the distinction of who fits into which category is heavily gendered and Orientalized (641). It is the men that are most often depicted as the “Other” and the “bad Muslims”, and women are,

as I have noted, often portrayed as powerless victims of these men. In other words, the women can be civilized, and must therefore be saved from these “bad Muslim” men: “The preoccupation in the United States with women in hijab, or presumably ‘oppressed’ Muslim and Arab women, coexists with a desire to rescue them from their tradition in order to bring them into the nation” (Maria 641). The essay *Under Western Eyes*, published in 1984 and revised in 2003, critiques what is referred to as “Western feminism”; the ongoing production of the “Third World woman” as a singular, monolithic subject created for Western consumption (Mohanty). This woman becomes a passive subject unable to represent herself, and Whitlock argues that the image of the veiled woman is a powerful example of this “third world” subject, because it “sustains the discursive self-presentation of Western women as a secular, liberated, and individual agents” (*Soft Weapons* 49). This Western/Imperial Feminism is evident in *Fear of Beauty* and *Words in the Dust* in several ways: in the cover art as shown above, and also in other examples as the following analysis of the American presence will highlight even further.

2.2 Clash of Civilizations

As already mentioned, there is a clearly defined difference in the manner in which female characters are portrayed in the novels, but the juxtaposing of characters is not just based on gender. There is also a very distinct separation between the American characters and the Afghan characters. In *Fear of Beauty*, there are a lot of Western characters compared to the other two novels. These characters are very different, and there are nuances in the portrayal of the Americans that are important to pay attention to, and we must not make the mistake of considering all characters a homogenous group based solely on nationality. Cameron Janick is one of the American agricultural experts, and he serves the important role as the American bad guy. What separates *Fear of Beauty* from *The Kite Runner* is that there is more than one bad guy, and there are problems between characters on both sides. On the American side, Cameron is the one who is portrayed as sexist towards the female characters, racist towards the Afghans, and has a complete lack of perspective and respect for authority: “Others were irritated about Cameron constantly questioning orders. With every question, the man managed to spread doubt about the mission, Mita, Joey, Laashekoh, all of Afghanistan” (*Fear of Beauty* 244). This depiction of Cameron is consistent from the start of the novel, and he is

a contrast to other Western characters such as Mita and Joey who both show great understanding and compassion with the Afghan people. Cameron is the rebel in the group who wants conflict, the biggest threat to the diplomatic mission: “‘They’re all extremists!’ Cameron interrupted. The unit’s captain kept going as if Cameron had not spoken (...) ‘We need to hit them hard!’ Cameron exclaimed” (199). The American bad guy serves to contrast the other American characters and consequently make them all look good in comparison. This is similar to the way Amir looks good, despite his character flaws, when compared to Assef in *The Kite Runner*. This example of Cameron may be understood as a “reversed good/bad tactic”, as we are now dealing with the “good” and “bad” American and not the Muslims. I am not arguing that Mamdani’s theory is applicable in general and can be transferred to other groups of people, as I clarified in the introduction, this theory refers specifically to Muslim political identities. But the literary tool used in *Fear of Beauty* resembles the rhetorical strategy in Mamdani’s theory: presenting one person as bad in order to make others look good in comparison. And this is exactly how the character of Cameron is being utilized: trying to make the other American characters look good, and although depicted as a bad guy, Cameron is never entirely bad, because he is American, and the “bad Muslim” will always be worse. But this contrasting effect of Cameron’s character leaves the readers with a more positive impression of the other American characters, despite their, at times, questionable behavior. Characters such as Joey Pearson and Mita Samuelson are continuously portrayed as fair and kind, calm and collected, respectful of the Afghans, and they consequently take on the role of the modern/moral. This portrayal of Joey and Mita is not just evident in relation to the Afghan characters, but also in relation to other American characters, leaving them in roles of authority and respect: “‘They’re people,’ Cameron insisted to no one in particular. ‘They must want what we want.’ ‘Agreed,’ Joey said gently. ‘But it’s news to them that we see their lives as miserable. Look at it this way – every idea we bring is radical and terrifying’” (38).

The Afghan characters in the novel are not a homogenous group either, yet the author plays upon Western stereotypes when presenting how the Americans see them:

In the remote corner of Helmand Province, the team could expect to find three categories of Afghans – hard-core Taliban, moderate Taliban, and skeptical bystanders. Soldiers in Afghanistan had learned the hard way that, depending on day-to-day encounters, news reports, or rumors, any Afghan could slide from one category to another and back again in a week. (*Fear of Beauty* 23)

In the village of Laashekoh, there is a big span in terms of how the characters that live there are portrayed. And this idea that everyone is a potential terrorist, and that if not today, then maybe tomorrow, is evident in how we see the people in the village. Sofi, our window into this community, is searching for the person responsible for her son's death, and is open to the possibility that everyone is a potential murderer. This fluid characterization of who is "good" and "bad" is evident from both the American characters and Sofi when referring to the Afghans. The insecurity of not knowing who the fundamentalist Muslims, or "hard-core Taliban", are reminds us of Mamdani's theory where it is clearly stated that unless proven to be good, one must assume that every Muslim is bad. But there are examples of "good Muslim" characters, such as the main character Sofi, who is willing to listen to the Americans, and wants to learn from them. This "clash inside civilizations" that exists on both sides consequently creates a bigger clash between the civilizations in certain ways. By creating conflict between either side in regards to how the groups interact with each other, the polarization of the two sides increases. In other words, when there are distinctions between "good" and "bad" characters, the choice of who to identify with is already made for the reader, and the objectivity of the bigger picture is stained as a result. This is an example of my addition to these theories, the clash inside civilizations reinforcing the clash between civilizations, being evident in textual manifestations too.

And these counterparts present us with an interesting depiction of how some of the Afghans are content with their own way and don't want Western technology, consequently refusing help from the American saviors: "Some will appreciate the advice. Others will be terrified and refuse to talk to us" (*Fear of Beauty* 33). These characters reinforce the notion that Afghans are primitive, because the idea that a society may not want Western modernity is unthinkable to a majority of Western readers. But because we have this clash inside the Afghan village, the readers are more likely to relate to the "good Muslim", Sofi, because she is more like "us", making her easier to identify with. And Sofi wants the information that the Americans offer more than anything, and everything else fades in comparison. She is desperate to learn how to read and understand more of the world, and this longing for the knowledge offered by the Americans becomes stronger than the longing and grief over her dead son: "Sadness returned, and I realized it was more about missing Mita than Ali" (234). Sofi ends up kidnapping Mita in an apparent attempt to keep her safe, and while Mita is in captivity, she kindly offers to teach her kidnapper how to read and write, and also teaches her about the world, specifically about the Western world:

Mita's patience amazed me. Early on we talked about reading and agriculture. Our conversations – rushed and packed with words, a stilted combination of Dari and English – naturally tumbled toward history, religion, politics, health, markets, and something she called economics. We spoke about the differences between our cultures. My curiosity knew no bounds, and Mita gave like a gushing rain, so many drops of knowledge that could merge in ways I had never imagined. (*Fear of Beauty* 171)

This is a good example of the American presence in the role of the teacher: so concerned with civilizing and modernizing that nothing else matters, because Mita clearly knows the dangers of not returning to her outpost. So when Sofi kidnaps the American woman and keeps her hidden in a cave for a long period of time to soothe her own hunger for information, she places a heavy strain on the already complicated relationship between the two groups: both sides blaming the other for the disappearance of Mita and then lying about it to serve an underlying purpose. The strange relationship between these two women develops into a friendship. But interestingly enough: although being Muslim and Afghan, Sofi is never portrayed as evil or responsible for any of her negative actions. The first reason for this is that she is a woman, in other words she is too weak to be considered a threat. The native women are after all supposed to fill the role of the victims; she is the brown woman in need of saving. The second reason why Sofi's kidnapping of Mita is apparently unproblematic is that her reason for doing it is so that she can be taught Western ways: she wants to be modernized. And this gives the American characters a chance of taking on the role of savior and teacher, whereas if Sofi had been portrayed as evil and bad given her actions, the Americans would have been left with the role of the victim. And the victim never holds any power, and is consequently unable to influence perceptions the way the figure of authority is. This is why it is crucial for the American presence to remain in the role of either the savior, the teacher, the modern/moral, or a combination of these.

The more Mita teaches Sofi about the Western world, the more fascinated Sofi is, leaving her to question why the Americans are even there. This presents the American hero with a chance of taking on the role of the moral: "She was embarrassed by my eagerness to hear about such riches, and I wondered why the Americans came to Afghanistan. 'To help,' she said. 'To counter the extremists who believe that freedom and the human spirit are a threat to Islam'" (172). This removal of any blame or responsibility from Sofi is interesting

considering her wrongdoings. It is similar to how Amir is understood in *The Kite Runner*, because they are both the “good Muslims”, and as long as there is a “bad Muslim” to make them look good in comparison, we tend to forget everything else. And there are plenty of “bad Muslims” in *Fear of Beauty*, not only the fundamentalists in the area that raids the village, but also the possibility, and probability, that someone in the village is helping these terrorists. But although having similarities with Amir, the aspect of gender is not possible to escape when discussing Sofi and her actions in relation to Mita. If Sofi had been a male Afghan character, the story would have been completely different, and someone else would most likely have been given the role of “good Muslim”. This is in compliance with Maira’s claim that the distinction between “good” and “bad” Muslims is heavily gendered (641), because as mentioned previously, the evil “Others” are most often men, and the characterization of Muslim people is defined by gender, where the women mostly serve to fill the role of the victim in order to reinforce the understanding of the men as “bad Muslims” who are evil and less civilized than Western men.

2.3 Good Americans and Bad Muslims

Zuleikha, the young disabled girl in *Words in the Dust*, has lived a harder life than most Afghan children her age. She is depicted as a sweet girl, kind to everyone around her, wise beyond her years, and with a secret wish to go to school and learn. The whole story starts with Zuleikha practicing spelling in secret, and this presents the reader, already from the very start, with an understanding of her as a “savable” young girl: a girl with potential in the ongoing quest of Westernizing the world. This willingness to learn and require knowledge is often understood as a wish to become modernized, as seen in the example with Sofi, and as a wish to step away from the rest of the people that are consequently primitive. But Zuleikha does not have the same opportunities as everyone else, seeing as her condition has left her with an unflattering malformation, and the girl is mistreated and bullied as a result of it. The other children call her “donkeyface” and attack her on the streets, people turn away in disgust or stare appalled when they see her, and she has learned to live with the embarrassment and continuous harassment. Even within her own family she is being mistreated: primarily by her stepmother, made worse by her father and older brother working long days and therefore unable to defend her and see what is really going on within their home. And as if all of this

was not enough, the young girl has lost her mother, serves as caregiver for her younger brothers, one of whom also makes fun of her, and has a younger sister who is extraordinarily beautiful, contrasting her own unfortunate appearance. The tragic destiny of this young girl, and the very clear parallels to the familiar Cinderella story, makes this an easily understandable story for younger readers, and the familiarity increases the chances of the reader's identifying and internalizing the story. The reader is left with no other choice but to sympathize with this girl, and keeping in mind that this is a novel that is written for young adult readers, it is a way to ensure that the reader pities and feels for this girl, without requiring plenty of background information on Afghanistan and the political situation in the region. And the goal with any humanitarian novel is, as mentioned, to engage the readers about the topics that are of importance in the story.

The main character is yet another poor, little brown girl in a New Orientalist narrative. But her sufferings and hardships may be worse than first assumed; her problems keep piling up, and they seem endless at points. But this may be a literary tool that is utilized specifically in order to affect the younger readers. Where some adult readers may agree with the notion of "less is more", younger readers are more accepting towards entertainment where the emotions are portrayed clearly, and one does not have to do much reading between the lines in order to fully grasp the significance. There is no bright future in store for this girl, and she seems to have accepted the fact that she will never have a good life. But then the American soldiers come to town, and everything changes. Already the next day, the soldiers appear in Baba's shop asking to see Zuleikha. Without asking questions about medical background, and without taking her to a hospital to have her properly checked-out, the Americans promise to fix Zuleikha's cleft lip. Free of charge, no strings attached, just out of the kindness of their hearts. Perhaps it is all a little too good to be true, a cynical adult reader may think? But the audience this book is written for is not a rational and consequence-oriented group with strong ability of logic and critical thinking, so the author will most likely get away with this breach in probability. The American soldiers are there as an entirely positive presence, and they offer to do the one thing no one has ever even talked about doing: changing the life of this girl for the better. The Americans take on the role of the savior: they save Zuleikha from her miserable life, and with only one surgery they will make all her troubles go away. The fact that they have the required technology and skills to perform the surgery, also serves to present them in the role of the modern/moral. This contrast between the Afghans as cruel and unsympathetic and the Americans as kindhearted and morally- and technologically superior helps to reinforce the distance between the Eastern and Western characters. But the American

presence does not just influence Zuleikha directly through the story; it also affects the other Afghan characters and their demeanor in relation to Zuleikha. From being the ugly duckling, the girl that people preferred not to see during dinner parties, she becomes the center of attention when the Americans shine their light on her. “So, *this* is the little angel. The one the Americans took such an interest in” (80). Zuleikha is now the interesting girl, made interesting by the American’s interest in her. And this is also another example of how the Afghan women are portrayed in relation to the American presence: these women in the dinner parties were amongst the people who would turn away in disgust when Zuleikha entered the room, and they would focus all their attention on the beautiful Zeynab and consequently isolate Zuleikha from the very important female community in Afghan society. These women, along with Zuleikha’s stepmother, were portrayed as evil and cruel earlier in the story. As mentioned, this portrayal of Afghan women increased the gap between them and the American woman, Captain Mindy, who is depicted as kindhearted and patient. It is not until after the American soldiers have shown an interest in Zuleikha that the Afghan women start changing their behavior towards her, carefully illustrating the massive effect of the moral Americans: they are so kind that their kindness rubs off on the Afghan population.

But the American doctors not only serve as heroes for the novel’s main character; they also serve as an extremely powerful contrast to the Afghan doctors that are presented later in the story. Zuleikha’s sister, Zeynab, is married off to an older man, and it becomes evident that she is not happy in her marriage. Zuleikha worries that her sister is being abused by her husband, but as a young woman in patriarchal Afghanistan, there is nothing she can do about it. One day they receive word that Zeynab is in the hospital, having suffered severe burns all over her body. Zuleikha and her older brother arrive at the hospital, only to find that nothing is being done in order to save Zeynab’s life. The Afghan doctors do not have the necessary equipment or medical skills to treat her, and the girl is left in a hospital bed without any supervision or treatment. Zuleikha’s desperate attempt to get help for her younger sister is useless, as the medical personnel along with Zeynab’s husband is unwilling to waste any resources or time on saving her. To them, she is just another Afghan girl, worthless and insignificant. But again the Americans appear, the only ones willing to save Zuleikha’s sister. But this time they are not able to take on the role of the savior, importantly though, this is not because they do not want to or are unable to do so, but simply because they are being boycotted by the Afghans, and specifically Zeynab’s husband:

He had to know that this hospital was nothing like an American hospital. This place was dirty. The people here hadn't run one tube into her arm as the Americans had. They hadn't even bandaged Zeynab. (...) Captain Mindy and Shiarqa went outside several times, I knew they were fighting with Tahir. Every time they came back, Captain was angrier. (*Words in the Dust* 224-225)

The Americans are revoked their savior role by “bad Muslims” who serve to support the negative stereotype that Afghan men are evil and hateful. “They hate us because they hate each other. They hate each other because they are hateful, and they hate women most of all” (Fitzpatrick 246).

And this understanding of Afghan men is interesting in relation to Imperial Feminism and the female characters in these novels. The idea of “women without men” has been said to be a common aspect of New Orientalist narrative (Keshavarz, *Jasmine and Stars*). Perhaps the most evident manifestation of this is the American female characters: they are all successful, well-respected, autonomous women in leader roles. Both Mita, the most important American female character in *Fear of Beauty*, and Captain Mindy, the equivalent in *Words in the Dust*, have jobs where they are in charge of men; they are well-liked by everyone; and most importantly – they are single. These are independent women, the ideal woman for any Western feminist. And they serve as a strong contrast to the married Afghan women who have been corrupted by their Muslim men and turned into subjugated, oppressed, and disempowered housewives. One of the best examples of this corrupting effect is Zeynab, a girl who is initially portrayed as resourceful and strong-minded. Her decline begins when she is married off to an older man – which in itself is a strong criticism of patriarchal, traditional Afghan customs – and eventually ends up dying a horrible death that could have been avoided more than one way. Zuleikha's disability may in fact be a blessing in this regard, seeing as her cleft lip is what keeps her from getting married, and eventually presents the Americans with the opportunity of sweeping in to save the day. Zuleikha has dreams and aspirations of wanting to become an educated, and thus modernized, woman. But this dream will only ever become true if she remains a woman without a man. After all, the only two choices an Afghan woman has, according to the way it is portrayed in these novels at least, is to either get married and be respected, or to stay alone and isolated from the community, but then with some sort of autonomy.

And Zuleikha's role around her father's house, where she must stay if she can not find a husband, is also what accidentally introduces her to the only Afghan woman in *Words in*

the Dust that is portrayed fairly secular: Meena. This older woman lost her husband years ago, reinforcing the idea that women without men are better off, especially in Afghanistan where they are surrounded by “bad” Muslim men. This older woman saves Zuleikha from a man that is chasing her on her way home from the bazaar one day. It turns out that Meena knew Zuleikha’s mother and used to be a teacher at a university many years ago. Meena offers to teach Zuleikha how to read, and she takes on the teacher role, interestingly enough seeing as she is the most Westernized Afghan character: she is independent, educated, fearless, and moral.

“They [the Taliban] did nothing!” She straightened up so fast that a splash of tea spilled over the side of her cup, splattering on the floor. “They tried to ban everything besides the Holy Quran, anything that didn’t fit with their twisted idea of Islam. But Afghanistan’s literature has survived (...) “I want to learn to read and write. I want to know about the poems my mother loved,” I said. “Will you teach me?” “Child,” said Meena with a smile. “It would be my honor”. (*Fear of Beauty* 45)

As mentioned, the willingness or ability to learn and receive an education is often used to signify modernity. And the one adult, Afghan woman who is the least moral in this story is the modern and educated one. Supporting my initial claim that the notions of modernity and morality being connected.

2.4 The Heroic American Soldiers

Where *Fear of Beauty* portrays Afghans as skeptical and scared in meeting with Americans, especially American soldiers, *Words in the Dust* has a completely different approach. Already from the very start of the novel, when Zuleikha first sees the American soldiers arriving in her village as she is walking home from the bazaar, they are portrayed as heroic and welcomed by the villagers. The children run towards them in hope of presents and candy, and the American soldiers smile and wave (*Words in the Dust* 12). “Everyone had been saying that An Daral wasn’t an important enough village. But they were wrong. The Americans had come to town!” (13). The way this scene where the American soldiers are arriving in town is portrayed seems almost bizarre. There is no mention of any negative side

of their arrival, on the contrary: they drive smiling and waving through the streets greeting people, the same way the Pope or a royal family would do when visiting a city. The excitement and honor of having American soldiers in their village is described the same way one would talk about a famous rock band coming to town. It seems as if this is something the Afghans have been waiting for and looking forward to for a long time. The people, both young and old, are excited; the kids are receiving presents; and the soldiers parade through town like celebrities. The highly romanticized image of American soldiers resembles the one found in *The Kite Runner* when discussing Amir's childhood. But where Hosseini's novel romanticized the idea of America and American culture, the American presence being romanticized in Reedy's novel is the soldiers. This is especially strange considering when this novel is set. Although we are not given an exact year, the back of the cover mentions the Taliban having been driven from the country, telling us that the story is set years after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Considering that the American led coalition had been bombing and fighting in the country for years before this story is supposedly set, it does seem odd that a whole village is wholly positive and happy about having American soldiers there. This is an example of where it is important for the reader to stay critical and remember the questions raised earlier in the thesis of "who gets to represent whom and by what authority?"

When initiated in the most militarily powerful country in the world, the United States of America, already deeply engaged in military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq (and through Israel in Palestine and Lebanon), such acts of racist representation speak voluminously of a far more deeply rooted claim to normative and moral agency, a phenomenon that must be unearthed and examined. (Dabashi, *Post-Orientalism* xvii)

I am not trying to promote an image of Afghans as anti-American in any way, but it does strike me as a bit odd that the arrival of a military troop from the invading country is depicted as entirely positive. And this is especially problematic in a novel that is directed at a younger audience: a group of readers who, as mentioned, may be less likely to be critical than adult readers. The portrayal of Afghans as skeptical and scared that the military presence might bring with it more violence and battles, as seen in *Fear of Beauty*, does seem more credible taking Afghanistan's history of invasion and warfare into consideration.

But it is not just the scene where the soldiers are arriving in the village that reinforces this image of the Americans as heroes. When Zuleikha and her sister, Zeynab, talk about the American soldiers, they are referred to as "very handsome", and the young girls daydream

about catching a glimpse and making “sexy eyes” at these strange men (27). And where the young, Afghan girls have romantic fantasies about the Americans – the young, Afghan boys idolize them: “His own plastic soldiers were exactly like Habib’s green ones, except Khalid’s were tan. Tan – just like the uniforms of the American soldiers” (50). And the power relation between local forces and American forces is evident also in the boys’ games, described as an indisputable truth that no one ever questions: “Then, as always, the more powerful weapons of the great American army killed all of Habib’s green Pakistani men” (51). And while the girls wish they could be *with* them, and the boys wish they could be *like* them, the adults praise the changes that this American presence brings with it: stability and more jobs. After times have been hard, and Zuleikha’s father and older brother have worked endlessly in their welding shop, they are now given a big contract to work with the new school building that the Americans are building. And this is, of course, a school where girls will also be allowed. This is a good example of the American presence as modern/moral, pushing their own modernity on a primitive people that are stuck in their traditional, unequal ways, in desperate need of a morality lesson. “It’s like Baba always says, these are good times. A new Afghanistan!” (214). This whole portrayal of the soldiers is a classic, and perhaps even exaggerated, example of the American presence in the role of the savior: saving the young girls and boys from their dull and uneventful lives, saving entire families from poverty, and saving whole communities from unemployment and primitivism.

The savior role that the American presence takes in *Fear of Beauty* is a little more subtle perhaps, yet just as powerful. In the end of the novel, when it is finally time for the “good Muslims” to defeat the “bad Muslims” once and for all, they are unable to do so by themselves. Some of the Afghans from the village stand up against fundamentalists in order to save a group of children that have been kidnapped from a nearby village, yet they are not able to succeed without the Americans’ tactical and technological support. This has a clear resemblance to the American presence in *The Kite Runner* where Afghans are unable to save themselves and require help from the Westerners. This relates back to the concept of “white men (and women) saving brown women from brown men”, and sometimes also “saving brown men from themselves”. As mentioned, this type of narrative or positioning of the American characters as the constant hero reinforces the predisposition that the Afghan people are so primitive and lacking in morality that they not only are unable to fix their own problems, they are sometimes even unable to see their own problems. And that explains why Western countries have used this New Orientalism in order to justify and create public consent for military action in the Arab world. We are after all presented with a set of beliefs

and “truths” that portray Afghans as entirely hopeless compared to Americans. Again, looking at the notion of literature as political allegory is interesting, because this example from *Fear of Beauty* also presents the readers with a promise of redemption, heroism, and the role of the savior. And this “White savior complex” that is evident in so many New Orientalist narratives is important, because it illustrates a self-image in the Western world that borders on narcissism. Perhaps the biggest issue with New Orientalism is not the ignorant and condescending portrayal of the “Other”, but the “collective amnesia” that the West suffers from (Dabashi, “Native Informers”) and the unwillingness to see ourselves. Perhaps the overarching problem with these narratives is not that we are unable to see ourselves, but that we spend so much effort seeing ourselves in relation to other people, that we end up with a distorted image of these so-called “Others”.

Conclusion

This thesis has presented an analysis of three contemporary, American works of fiction: *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, *Fear of Beauty* by Susan Froetschel, and *Words in the Dust* by Trent Reedy. Based on the theory of New Orientalism and an understanding of the separation between the East and West, I have presented the reader with an analysis of how one can justify the characterization of these novels as New Orientalist by focusing on what I have chosen to refer to as the American presence. This presence is evident through the roles of the savior, the teacher, or the modern/moral. These three roles all portray this American presence, which may refer to any mention of the United States, as heroic and entirely positive. My main claim is that this American presence serves to contrast and create a distance between the Western readers and Afghanistan and its culture and people. The reason for this is that readers tend to identify more with the familiar and well-known aspect in the story, and have as a result not been able to identify with the Afghan characters or fully interact emotionally with the Afghan culture because there is a continuous reference to the United States. The American presence also serves as a contrast in order to emphasize the Orientalist/New Orientalist reading and consequently separate “them” from “us”; the Orient from the Occident; and the self from the “Other”.

The direct result of this American presence is that we are often depicted a highly romanticized image of the United States, whether it is as a safe haven for refugees, a moral super-power with kind and heroic soldiers, or a technologically advanced force that justify political actions based on humanitarian grounds. The effect is that this positive portrayal of the United States promotes and reinforces negative stereotypes regarding especially Muslim men, as primitive and incapable of self-governing and self-control. Afghanistan as a whole is portrayed as less civilized and modern than the Western world, and this often serves to explain a lack of morality.

In an attempt to actualize the topic and present the reader with a bigger picture of the issues this thesis deals with, I have drawn on theories by Samuel P. Huntington and Mahmood Mamdani relating to the clash inside/between civilizations. I have argued by referencing textual manifestations and examples from the novels that my own theory of the American presence utilizes Mamdani’s theory of clash inside civilizations, primarily the distinction and categorization of “good” and “bad” Muslim, in order to enforce and strengthen Huntington’s theory of a clash between civilizations, which is the power

imbalance between the East and West that both classic Orientalism and New Orientalism focuses on.

The portrayals of Afghanistan are not always entirely negative, especially in Khaled Hosseini's novel, where I have found examples of nuanced and positive depictions. This thesis does not claim that the respective authors are demonstrating a motive for racist and stereotypical representations of Afghanistan. The result of the Western public's perception through these novels is not so much a result of the portrayal of Afghanistan in itself, but more the juxtaposing of "us" and "them" through the American presence, creating a gap between the Western readers and the Afghan characters.

Although Afghanistan is not always portrayed as negative, the American presence is always entirely positive, creating a contrasting effect that reinforces this distinction between the two sides. Despite looking at novels from three different genres, although I have made the argument that they can all be classified as humanitarian novels, I have found that these three novels utilize the three roles of the American presence in different manners, but it appears that the result is the same: all three novels reinforce misconceptions and negative stereotypes regarding Afghanistan by contrasting Afghan culture and people with Western ideals and representations.

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