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Research Paper

Heroic West, Villainous East: A Postcolonial Interpretation of Narrative Structure in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract

Many readers and critics regard Khaled Hosseini's fiction as an insider's account of life in Afghanistan. This study, however, aims to depict how Hosseini's novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, reinforces the orientalist discourse toward Afghanistan through certain narrative structures. Greimas's actantial model and Todorov's equilibrium/disequilibrium model are used. Then, Said's postcolonial theory is used to interpret the orientalist attitude revealed by those narrative studies. The deep structure of the novel suggests that all the positive actants have affiliations with the West and are exceptional to the East. In addition, the cause of disequilibrium is the East, whereas the West restores equilibrium. These narrative structures tend to naturalize in the readers the binary opposition of the West vs. the East and, in accordance with the post-9/11 media discourse, depict Afghanistan as the Other of the U.S. which needs to be saved from itself.

Keywords: Postcolonialism; Greimas; Todorov; Narratology; Discourse; *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

1. Introduction

Khaled Hosseini is an author who is well-known for the worldwide popularity of his fictionalized accounts of life in Afghanistan. His writing career began with *The Kite Runner* (2003), which won him international fame and critical attention. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is Hosseini's second novel, which is more concerned with women and their problems in a third world, Muslim country. The text revolves around the issue of misogyny, war, and violence. First published in 2007, this novel also made its way into bestsellers and book awards lists.

Though *A Thousand Splendid Suns* claims to provide a glimpse into what it actually feels to be a woman in Afghanistan, this cannot be accepted without careful examination of the novel. The timing of the publication of this novel, further, clarifies the necessity for reexamining the text's truth claims which coincide with the growing political discourse of Islamophobia in the U.S. and Europe, hereafter referred to as the West.

In spite of the great academic effort in the last decades of the 20th century to support that the notions of East and the West are discursive constructs which have to be reevaluated and deconstructed, the new millennium seems to be characterized by a resurgence of the binary attitude in politics. The relationship defined between the East and the West by the media has signaled a return to the imperialist discourse. Such a dichotomy can be traced from the past, especially the 18th-century Europe, first inspired by the "romantic idealism" (Moosavinia & Alami, 2011, p. 95) of those travelers who, having sailed to the exotic East, mingled in their travelogues their fantasies, desires, interpretations, and fictions with real happenings—setting the building block of the stereotypes regarding the Eastern Other which, in turn, facilitated the imperial colonization of the East. The term *orientalism*, first introduced as a discourse by Said (1979), sums up this attitude. This discourse illustrates radically set poles distinguishing the East and the West in which one is represented as white and the other is black.



Recently, this discursive gap has widened by the clashes between the Middle East and the U.S., culminating in the 9/11 catastrophe, which fed the discrepancies between these two worlds, refreshed daily by the media's account of the American army invading and occupying Afghanistan regarded as a haven to the new, dangerous Eastern Other. Thus, when we talk about the East, we mainly refer to this new orientalist attitude toward the Middle East as represented by the Western political and media discourse as the binary opposite of the West.

This inspired us researchers to explore the binary oppositions of the orientalist discourse existing in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, as a bestseller novel, so as to show how even an Eastern-born author can be susceptible to the cultural force of the powerful orientalist discourse. This study seeks to demonstrate how the narrative structure, analyzed through Greimas' actantial model and Todorov's narrative theory of equilibrium/disequilibrium, naturalizes the violent opposition of the West vs. the East.

These two models show how the narrative of the novel categorizes different forces, agents, and actants as either progressive or regressive. There are actants and forces which play constructive roles in the narrative, winning the sympathy of the reader with their heroism, bravery, and humanity, whereas there are other forces and actants which are destructive and antagonistic, embodying violence, chaos, and inhumanity. These narratological models significantly show that almost all the progressive forces are affiliated with the West and the Western values, whereas the East and the Eastern values are represented as mere regressiveness. To understand why such a result is achieved, we need to step beyond narratology.

The structuralist attitude takes for granted that the binary oppositions it reinforces are constructs which can be challenged if regarded with a deconstructive, poststructuralist view. Therefore, in this study, the findings of the narratological analysis of the novel are interpreted with the postcolonial insights originally offered to show how these constructed narrative structures distort and diminish the readers' understanding of the East, not as a multiple entity but as a fixed set of stereotypes.

Postcolonial consciousness makes it necessary to critically analyze the constructed reality about the East in this and other literary works. Such studies lay bare the narrative mechanisms that lead to the validation of the orientalist discourse, as a way to raise the unsuspecting readers' consciousness. Thus, the significance of the present study is not in its recognition of the narrative forces and actants at work in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, but in uncovering how these narrative structures naturalize and reinforce the existing orientalist discourse of Self/Other which aims at justifying the West for its violent manipulation of the Middle East, specifically Afghanistan.

2. Literature Review

The critical reception of Hosseini's fiction is mainly dependent upon his debut novel, generally ignoring his second work. Yet, that body of critique is split in two different trends. Many critics of *The Kite Runner* have valorized the author for offering the Western reader a humane view of the Afghan people, for depicting sympathetic and heroic protagonists who transcend ethnic and international dichotomies, and for raising consciousness about the sufferings of his countrymen (Ahmad Pir & Vats, 2017; Kohistani, 2005; Parveen, 2015; Sadat, 2009). However, there are critics who have scrutinized Hosseini's view of Afghanistan as affected by the media and discourse of the West (Edwards, 2015; Hunts, 2009; Guar & Gunwant, 2016).

Yet, the number of the studies which have paid critical attention to the author's second novel are quite limited. Shapiro (2010) has argued that the novel reflects the representations of the Afghan women in the *New York Times*. Themes of male domination, sexual abuse, body coverings, restriction, among other themes, are common between the novel and *New York Time* articles from 2007-2010. This study is an evidence to confirm the influence of media on the narrative.

Resistance of the female characters to the patriarchal society is the subject of Gordan's (2013) study. She praises Laila, the protagonist, as a heroine who can create her own identity without attributing it to men. What this study fails to consider is that this heroine's characterization does not shed light on the actual resistance experienced by the Afghan women in their own country. The current study shows Laila's resistance is only fulfilled with the interference of the American forces.

Blumental (2012) finds the concept of homeland in Hosseini's novels challenging. She believes that in the second novel, the ideology of homeland is reconstructed because the dynamic characters find peace in a combination of

both Eastern and Western values. But Bluemental’s (2012) study does not account for the fact that this reconstruction is achieved through military interventions and orientalist discourse.

It is evident that the underlying narrative patterns of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* have never been studied for the kind of ideology they propose to the readers. By distinguishing the elements that make up the narrative, it becomes possible to, first, recognize and, then, to deconstruct the orientalist attitude at work in the novel. This is exactly what we intend to achieve

3. Methodology

This study is a library research, relying on a textual analysis of the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* through Greimas’ actantial model and Todorov’s model of equilibrium/disequilibrium. The structuralist findings of this analysis will, then, be examined through the poststructuralist lens of the postcolonial theory.

Narratology has roots in the structuralist approach to literature that considers the structure or langue prior to parole or utterances. Accordingly, narratologists try to focus mostly on the underlying structure of a narrative than to analyze the content of a text. Greimas and Todorov were both influenced by Vladimir Propp and Claude Levi-Strauss, among others.

Rimmon-Kenan (2002) explains that, in any scientific methodology, there is a “necessity of reduction” and Greimas’s method is “to reduce characters to action” (p. 36). Greimas (1987) discusses the narrative structure through the action/character narrative units called actants. Each narrative partakes of, at least, one of the following sets of actants: subject/object, sender/receiver, helper/opponent. Greimas (1977) maintains that the important feature constituting the subject-actant is the modal “want” (p. 30). Subject is the one who desires to be or to have something. Therefore, another actant is introduced: Object, that which is desired. Subject is the character going on a quest to achieve an object. Greimas (1977) defines sender as one who provokes the subject to go on a quest, and receiver as one who benefits from this quest. The helper actant is the aiding character, event, or even abstract idea, whereas the opponent is a threatening character who tends to prevent the subject (hero) from accomplishing the task, “a character of confrontation and struggle” (p. 32).

Therefore, the narrative consists of three axes: The axis of desire which relates the subject and the object, the axis of knowledge (also referred to as the axis of transmission or communication) which includes the sender and the receiver, and the axis of power (or the axis of conflict) which defines the relationship between the helper and the opponent with the subjects (Hèbert, 2020). Figure 1 presents a schematic view of this model (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002):

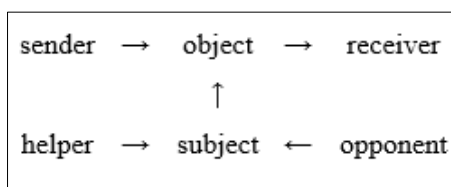


Figure 1. Actantial Model

These sets of actants help discover the deep structures that make meaning in the text. It is significant that this model literally consists of certain binary oppositions “into which all actants can be fitted, and which will generate all the actors of any story” (Moto, 2001, p. 75). Therefore, the actantial model will lay bare the conceptual and thematic binary oppositions that rule the world of the text.

Whereas Greimas’ model prioritizes agencies through character-action relationships, Todorov’s model focuses on the states of affairs in the narrative and how actions and events help define the relation between these different states. In his study, Todorov (1971) proposes that what makes a narrative is alteration of the events toward a better or worse state, each action acting as a “condition” for bringing up the next action; therefore, the main features of a narrative are “succession” and “transformation” of events (pp. 38-39).

Doing a structural analysis on *Decameron*, Todorov (1971) induces a common pattern ruling all tales. He expresses that each tale begins with a state of balance and ends the same, which he calls equilibrium. This moment is followed by disequilibrium (1969). The possible chain of events that can shape a narrative are (1) phase of equilibrium

or balance, (2) equilibrium is ruined, (3) a character (mostly the hero) is aware of the breakdown, (4) the character (hero) seeks to gain the peaceful moment back, and (5) the equilibrium is restored (1971).

A combination of these two narratological models helps cover different aspects of the narrative: characters, actions, and succession of events. These narratological models unravel in the novel a tendency to give positive agency and progressive presence to elements which are affiliated with the West, while casting the East and the Eastern values in negative and chaotic lights.

This astonishing result hints to the presence of the orientalist discourse in the novel analyzed by the use of Said's postcolonial theory of orientalism. Said (1994a) defines imperialism as "the practice, theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory" and believes that colonialism "is almost always a consequent of imperialism" (p. 9) as "a specific ideology of expansion" (p. 186).

Aside from referring to the period after colonization, postcolonialism implies the inversion of the long-established binaries in order to give voice to the minorities. Since the Renaissance, the Western humanist and rationalist philosophy has claimed to be "the best" (Gandhi, 1998, p. 50) for the whole world, posing as the holder of knowledge and objective truth. The humanists excluded non-European knowledge from the study of humanities in the West. Postcolonial studies are critical of this Eurocentrism and exclusion of non-European knowledge. They took it upon themselves to study and define the East, thus constructing an ideology of the East that has made a false and distorted identity for both the East and the West.

In his significant book *Orientalism*, Said (1979) emphasizes that the negative image of the East in the world is the result of the West's construction of it, not the truth of the East. He offers postcolonialism as a way to challenge Eurocentrism in knowledge and philosophy. Hutcheon (2001) admires *Orientalism* for evoking the academic world to study imperialism; she classifies the book in the realm of literary and cultural history. In contrast to traditional historians, Said (1979) has tried to delegitimize the discourse of orientalism represented by the West, through an insistent and repetitive style of writing, aiming for a deconstruction of colonial discourse that resulted in the construction of the Orient.

Different countries have acted as imperial forces through history, America being the most recent and still dominant. Although almost all previously colonized countries have declared their independence since the beginning of the 20th century, colonialism has survived in another form: neocolonialism. According to Young (2001), this means that these newly independent countries have remained dependent on the colonizing countries, specifically in terms of economy. Therefore, the role of the imperial powers has become more hidden, but still effective.

Whereas the academia may now claim to be fully aware of the culturally constructed nature of these notions, the general public is not. Said's criticism is still relevant and probably more so after the 9/11 political rhetoric of Islamophobia that still continues to shape the public understanding of their relationship with the Other of this political discourse, the Middle East, which is now the Orient.

Eventually, Said invites authors to resist this ideological imperialism and affect the established culture; writers should write in a way to shake or break these established stereotypes. Whereas, on the surface, the readers may regard Hosseini's novels as examples of such writing, the analysis of the deeper layers of meanings in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* demonstrates that the orientalist discourse is at work in shaping this novel, as well. Narratological reading of the novel helps uncover these problematic deeper layers.

4. Discussion

4.1. Actants in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

Greimas' actantial model helps clarify how the characters of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* are arranged in oppositional clusters which shape the understanding of the reader regarding the meaning of the text. Because "any real or thematized action may be described by, at least, one actantial model" (Hèbert, 2020, p. 81), investigating the binary oppositions proposed by the actants can help reveal the powers at work in the novel.

The main quest in this novel is Laila's endeavor to reach freedom and bring about progressive changes in her life, including her defiance of the norms of sexual relationship in her society, her attempt to escape the violence inflicted

on her by her husband, Rasheed, and, by extension, her desire to resist gender discrimination experienced by the Afghan women. Based on Greimas' narrative model, Laila is the subject, the heroine, who wishes to make progress. Early in her narrative, we see how under the influence of her father, she has a desire for progress. Yet, the novel does not initially offer this theme as its main quest.

In the beginning, we become familiar with Laila's love story which, according to Greimas, can be regarded as a basic actantial schema, with the lover as subject and sender and the beloved as object and receiver. Thus, in the initial love story in Laila's life, her sweetheart Tariq is the lover and she is the beloved, so her first actantial place is that of the object and the receiver. But as Tariq leaves and Kabul is bombarded, she is violently cast out of being the object into being the subject, searching for a way out of the situation she is caught in. She resists the attention Rasheed shows her, avoiding another romance narrative, and focuses on doing what is necessary to save herself and her illegitimate child. It is even in that spirit that she eventually accepts to marry Rasheed, as a subject searching for a way to change her fate, rather than an object of love. What she desires at this stage is safety, but later, as Rasheed's mistreatment of her and her daughter escalates, the object of her quest turns into freedom.

The characters or forces that help Laila to reach these goals are the helper actant. The most obvious helper is Mariam, Rasheed's other wife, who seems to have no desire or dream of her own, and sacrifices her life to help Laila run away. Coming from a family in which the father has several wives and her mother is a working-class, submissive woman, Mariam seems to be incapable of living a free and progressive life herself, but she selflessly kills Rasheed to facilitate the educated, middle-class Laila's escape with Tariq, another helper. But even after Laila and Tariq run away and start a peaceful life in Pakistan, Laila's quest is not over yet. That is why it can be understood that the initial romance narrative is not the main narrative in this novel because, in that case, the reunion of the lovers would have been the end of the narrative. But Laila's peace and fulfillment is not attained before she returns to Afghanistan and starts her social work, rebuilding an orphanage and becoming a teacher for girls. Her object eventually is not just freedom or even love, but a social life which would result in progress, especially for women. And, this final stage of her quest is only made possible after Afghanistan is taken over by the U.S. army, the ultimate helper. The narrative seems to suggest that, after the defeat of the Taliban, the occupation of Afghanistan by the U.S. army is actually a ray of hope that can promise reform and progress.

Rasheed, the most evident opponent, is the one who most actively robs Laila of her wishes and her liberty. A true Pashtun, he is the epitome of misogyny and oppression in the novel. That his mistreatment of Laila, her daughter, and Mariam is supported and facilitated by the rule of the Taliban creates a deep connection between the two. It is not only Rasheed's individual oppression that frustrates Laila's attempts at escape, but it is often the Taliban forces and laws that block her way, even when she is successful at bypassing Rasheed. The violent abuse inflicted on Laila comes from both Rasheed and the Taliban militants.

The process of fighting with patriarchy and gender discrimination starts with Laila's awareness of women's rights through her father's indoctrinations. A pro-Western man, the father teaches his daughter ideas which enable her to act as a subject. So, it can be said that her progressive education is the quality in Laila that makes her eligible to go on a quest and can be regarded as the sender.

It is true that the receiver of the benefits is Laila herself, but she is not the only receiver in this narrative. As a teacher of women in the end of the narrative, Laila becomes a positive force in helping the women of the society. Therefore, the receiver includes all Afghan women by implication.

The schematic summary of the actantial model for the novel can be seen in Figure 2:

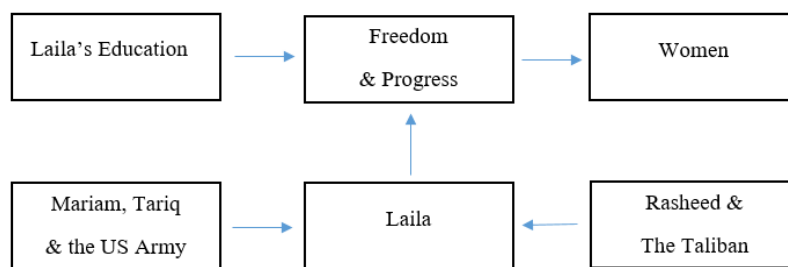


Figure 2. Actantial Model for *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

Whereas the desire of Laila for progress is, indeed, valid and significant, the way the quest from this desire is facilitated and achieved shows that the binary opposition governing this text is that of the West vs. the East. Paying attention to the axis of knowledge and the axis of power reveals the hidden political discourse.

4.1.1. The axis of knowledge

Knowledge is a governing power. In orientalism, the production of knowledge by the West about the East has resulted in the perpetuation of the colonizing mindset. Although the 20th century was characterized by the anticolonial discourse and the independence of many ex-colonies, the 21st century saw a return of both the discourse and the attitudes of colonization. The reluctance of the U.S. to leave Iraq or Afghanistan, in spite of the clear expressions of public disapproval, hints to the continuation of such a mindset. The argument for the continuation of this military presence is the old orientalist pretention of knowledge, which claims that the act of colonization is for the benefit of the ignorant colonized nation which does not know how to take care of itself and is in dire need of the progress the colonizer offers.

Likewise, in the novel, the axis of knowledge is immersed in orientalist discourse. Laila, the protagonist, is capable of changing her fate because she has been familiarized with the Western definition of progress. Influenced by her father, she is narrated as a different woman from almost all Afghan women in the novel, a woman who deviates from the common social norms. Laila has lived in a peaceful family whose father is educated and promodernization is in its Eurocentric form.

Laila's father, although depicted in favorable light, does not strike the reader as a representative of the Afghan men, either. The narrative singles him out as different from the norms of his community. He is called "sisy" by bully boys (Hosseini, 2008, p. 117) to imply that his lack of violence is not welcomed by the society. He acts differently in his two sons' funeral because he controls his grief and admits that he is "different" (p. 147), from the stereotypical Eastern man who is regarded as emotional and, therefore, irrational. He does not express any discriminatory views regarding his sons and daughter. Although the father can be said to provide an example of a good Afghan man, he is emphatically pronounced as an exception and, therefore, does little to redeem the picture of the Afghan man in the Western eye and media.

Laila's father possesses modern ideas. This intellectual man believes, "the only enemy an Afghan cannot defeat is himself" (Hosseini, 2008, p. 134) because of the old and regressive traditions to which they hold on. Although Laila's father expresses his love for his homeland, he thinks of departure to America. He wants her daughter to get education there because "that would be [his] absolute priority, to get [Laila] a good education, high school then college" (p. 148). But the heroine still says, "we'll come back to Kabul" (p. 186) to help the development of the country.

Laila is trained by such a father and is, in the same way, not the representative of the real Afghan woman in the minds of the readers. When she is a student, her close friends know that she is "going to be somebody" in the future, in contrast to other girls (Hosseini, 2008, p. 163) who will remain stereotypically passive and undereducated. Laila has an affair with Tariq against the strict codes of conduct which are at the core of the Afghan culture. Both Laila and her father's characteristics show their disregard for traditional norms of their society. She is the woman who stands against the patriarchal oppression. Laila's attempt to stop Rasheed from beating them is narrated as an "astonishing thing" (p. 235). She harshly criticizes the patriarchal society and the (Taliban) law which "benefits the man" (p. 260). Mariam, the uneducated, weak woman, does not express much anger and resentment toward the male-dominated society. She stands for those obedient women who are silent and who submit to any subordination. Laila calls Rasheed by words Mariam cannot dare to use, such as "despicable" (p. 275). She even punches Rasheed once when he asks her to let her daughter

go out for begging. Even her childhood nickname “Revolutionary Girl” (p. 112) demonstrates how different she is from the normal Afghan girl.

It is evident, then, that her difference is in their Eurocentric education which enables her to envision the kind of change which is easily understood and embraced by the Western reader. The axis of knowledge in this narrative sets the quest in motion in the direction of this orientalist understanding of the needs of the Afghan community.

4.1.2. *The axis of power*

The axis of power includes the relationship between the subject, helper, and opponent. As the word *power* clarifies here, one can find clear political implications along this axis in the narrative of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The opponent of the story is depicted in a negative light, which coincides with the very stereotypical image of the Eastern man in the orientalist discourse. Rasheed is portrayed as a man with a “big, square, ruddy face” and a hooked nose (Hosseini, 2008, p. 53) who hardly possesses any admirable characteristics. He is a villain without any complications of that term and, at the same time, is narrated as a stereotypical Eastern man with extremely misogynistic attitudes. Rasheed thinks that giving freedom to women means to loose “control of wife” (p. 69), which spoils a man’s honor and pride. These show how he deems women as belonging to their husbands. He taunts the wives as women who are “like children,” whose “brains are empty,” (pp. 97-98) and keeps throwing the women offensive words. He punches, slaps, kicks, beats, and enacts violence on his wives; he is portrayed as a wild man with no senses. The omniscient narrator explains, “this man’s will felt to Mariam as imposing and immovable as the Sefid Kouh mountains looming over Gul Daman” (p. 70). The extremity of the man’s dominance over his wife is compared to the height of a tall mountain in Afghanistan, which implies the connection between the man’s phallic power and dominance over women to the geographical background. Because Rasheed’s behavior is regarded by the narrative as an enactment of the traditional patriarchal norms of the Afghan society, the reader will not have much difficulty in generalizing these traits to the image of the Afghan man, in general. The image is supported by other male characters’ violence, polygamy, and insensitivity toward women (e.g., Mariam’s father).

Undoubtedly, the present study does not hesitate to condemn violence and misogyny. However, the point is that the Eastern man’s level of meanness in the novel seems to suggest a generalization and because it complies with the way the West observes the stereotypical Eastern man, it is easily accepted by the reader. Though the Afghan culture is, indeed, a patriarchal culture, the violent oppression of the women in that culture is represented as the only narrative in the novel because we do not see the many healthy Afghan families that could live side by side—an unhealthy family like that of Rasheed. Whereas many examples of nonviolent relationships and loving and caring Afghan fathers, husbands, and lovers can be found in the history of the literature of Afghanistan, the novels and memoirs that have attracted the attention of the Western readers in the past two decades demonstrate a serious lack in this regard. If a man is shown in positive lights (like Laila’s father or Tariq), he is cast as an exception to the norm, which is the wife-beating, woman-hating, terror-loving Afghan man.

Rasheed’s extent of violence is paralleled to Taliban’s violent image in the Western eye. Laila sees Rasheed as pro-Taliban, calling both the husband and the regime as savages. Rasheed is narrated as an uncivilized, terrorist-like man. Even his interest in looking for “dagger” and “riffle” (Hosseini, 2008, p. 73) when going out with his wife is related to his association with terror and violence. Likewise, the society of this novel is populated by men, each and every one of whom is a threat to the protagonist. If she is beaten up at home by Rasheed, she is also beaten up, arrested, or threatened in the street by other men, who are usually the Taliban. The violence inflicted on Laila is associated with the rule of the Taliban.

According to Rostami-Povey (2007), the majority of the ethnic groups living in Afghanistan are Pashtuns who have their specific rules and codes. Their law says, “it is the absolute duty of men to protect the respectability of women and to protect the integrity of the homeland. This does not imply that women are passive” (p. 4). Such a male-dominated society, according to Rostami-Povey (2007), existed before the Taliban, even before the advent of Islam and is part of the culture and politics of Afghanistan. Therefore, it is “simplistic” (pp. 129-30) that the West has tried to associate all cultural elements to the Taliban’s oppression, disregarding the deep cultural tendencies that have been actively implemented by men and women for centuries.

The novel introduces the Afghan women as those who “endure all that falls upon [them]” (Hosseini, 2008, p. 90). One thing that is depicted to have fallen upon the Afghan women is burqa, a kind of hijab pictured in the novel as a means of oppression. This view differs from what many Afghans think of it. It seems that the narrative depicts the oppression of the Eastern women through the Western feminist perspective, with Laila as its representative, which disregards the study of the meanings of these cultural codes in the Eastern context. In an inquiry, to which Abirafeh (2010) refers, it has been revealed that burqa is not taken as a limitation for most women in Afghanistan and they do not regard it as oppression. Most believe that burqa “protects them and gives them a freedom they feel they could not have without it” (p. 89). This may sound very strange from a Western feminist point of view, but it is the practitioners of a cultural code who should have the voice to define the underlying meanings of those codes. Associating burqa with Islam and Islam with regression and terror is more in the interest of the Western colonizers than the Eastern women. The novel does not reveal that burqa was used in many parts of Afghanistan, even before the Islamic regime, as a symbol of “modesty and respectability” (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p. 35). But the narrator refers to the “limited, grid-like visibility of burqa” with Laila’s “feet still stumbling over them” (Hosseini, 2008, p. 225). The women of the novel never choose burqa of their own free will, it is always imposed on them. The narrator defines burqa as cumbersome, “tight and heavy” and “strange” (p. 71).

Considering burqa as a veil which robs women of their agency, Western feminism reduces the identity of the Eastern women to their own standard of gender. To gain universalism, the West “strips the people from their cultural identity. Culture becomes superficially the backdrop against which gender is written” (El Guindi, 1999, p. 75), whereas in many Muslim countries, religious, cultural, and social identities are significant parts of individual identity (Khan, 2014, p. 5). The fact that even after the fall of the Taliban many Afghan women continued to wear burqa astonished the West, which did not understand that they regarded it as an honor, not an oppression (Pazira, 2003). Relating burqa to gender discrimination alone, the novel uses it as a means to display the inferiority of the East for having such a tradition, which is against women’s progress. Whereas the Taliban’s rule (and the period of Mujahideen’s rule and political turmoil before that) had terrible outcomes for women’s safety, liberty, and rights, the way the novel approaches these issues is more in tune with the simplistic images of the Afghan women in the Western media than with the serious and complicated struggles the women were actually facing.

But if the novel shows the opponent through its imposition of violent power, the subject gains heroic stature by resisting that power. The orientalist stereotypes are highlighted by the conflict between the villainous opponent and the powerful presence of the subject who seeks the valuable, urgent, and sacred task of freedom. Although Laila’s extent of agency is questionable, because without the extraordinary help of the helpers, she is incapable of fulfilling her mission, the emphasis put on her singularity and difference is obvious. By attributing change and progress to the exceptional woman raised by the exceptional father, the novel undermines the agency of the real Afghan women in changing their lives for the better. The readers never learn about the actual Afghan women who are, and have been, actively seeking their rights and valuable achievements—women who are of and inside the culture they wish to revise. And even Laila’s mission is not fulfilled without the intervention of the U.S. troops, doubly emphasizing that the cause of her survival is her closer connection to the Western values and norms. This role of the West in the narrative as a savior is similarly evident by the application of Todorov’s narratological model to the novel.

4.2. Equilibrium/Disequilibrium

4.2.1. The East as the cause of disequilibrium

Todorov’s model of equilibrium/disequilibrium suggests the importance of the turning points in the narrative of a novel when the order and balance are broken or restored. The conspicuous disequilibrium moment in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is the outbreak of the war in Afghanistan. Prior to that, Laila lives with her family and has a fairly quiet life. It is with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that Laila loses her family and her lover and is forced to live with Rasheed. Russia, the antagonist of the U.S. politics, is the original source of violence and bloodshed in this novel. Although it is hard for the narrative to deny that under the pro-Soviet government women’s freedom grew rapidly, the situation of Laila’s family life and the society’s security are deteriorated.

The turmoil brought about by the Soviet occupation is soon replaced by the novel’s depiction of the horrors of the rule of Mujahideen and later by the Taliban. Mujahideen were the Afghan militant groups who were secretly supported

by the U.S. (Carlisle, 2010) and managed to free Afghanistan from the Soviet rule. America’s aid to Afghanistan to fight against the Soviets was a cold war project because of the communists’ threat to the influence of the U.S. in the East (Little, 2008). Mujahideen’s period of power is narrated as a time of horror and violence, with the narrative emphasizing their Islamic laws and totally neglecting their close connection with the U.S. There is, indeed, little difference between the Mujahideen and the Taliban the way the novel depicts them, except for the greater force of the Taliban power due to the fact that they were united.

Similarly, Rasheed and his traditional views are narrated to be the source of disequilibrium, conflict, and terror in Laila’s personal life, as if their family life is a replica that shows the clashing ideologies of the U.S. and the Islamist regimes. Their home is a microcosm of the Afghan society, confirming the terrorist lifestyle which is proviolence and unsafe, especially for women and, therefore, in need of the West’s intervention.

4.2.2. *The West as the bearer of equilibrium*

The equilibrium is restored in the novel, on a personal level, by Mariam’s murder of Rasheed which sets Laila free and, on a social level, by the arrival of the U.S. army annihilating the Taliban. They bring reformation, change, and modernization to the world of the novel, which pave the way for Laila to teach at school, reaching emotional equilibrium in the end of the novel. The problem with the novel is that in its excitement to welcome the Western modernization of Afghanistan by the presence of the American army, it forgets to acknowledge the resistance of a culturally rich country like Afghanistan to many of the instances of this modernization which disregards their own heritage and also it refrains from depicting the continuation of the war and terror in Afghanistan for a long time after the American invasion.

America is narrated to have the power to save Afghanistan, especially its women. Yet, the novel does not ask if the U.S. had intentions beyond saving the Afghan people with their war on terror. When the U.S. army enters the country, Tariq seems happy because he hopes that they kill the terrorists and bring peace back, whereas Laila is anxious about people’s death in the war, but, at last, “she knows that [Tariq] is probably right” (Hosseini, 2008, p. 375). This war is narrated as necessary because hope ensues from it. This is the moment in the narrative when the pro-Western heroine, who has tried so hard to escape from Afghanistan, even at the expense of other people’s lives (after all, she only manages to run when Mariam murders Rasheed, which results in her execution at the hands of the Taliban), suddenly feels ready to return to Afghanistan to be a part of the progress. Laila is reminded of her father’s words when the American army enters her country: “you can be anything you want,” and “when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you” (p. 378).

The application of Todorov’s model on the novel can be summarized as seen in Table 1:

Table 1. *Todorov’s Narrative Model*

	Bearer of Equilibrium	Cause of Disequilibrium
National	The U.S. Army	War (The Soviet, Mujahideen, and the Taliban)
Personal	Laila	Rasheed

The attack on Afghanistan is described as “not such a bad thing”. The consequent improvements are emphasized, in contrast to Afghanistan’s previously desperate state. There are “schools built in Kabul, roads paved, women returning to work”; “most of streets are paved, lined with fragrant pines,” as if pines would grow overnight; “there are municipal parks and libraries in mid-construction, manicured courtyards, freshly painted buildings” and “electricity is steady” (Hosseini, 2008, p. 374). After America’s arrival, drought is replaced with rain and snow, cinemas are opened, and folklore music is heard. Carefully avoiding reference to the continuation of violence and military conflicts in the various parts of Afghanistan, daily explosion of bombs, and groups of people’s resistance to the American occupation, the novel depicts the post-U.S. invasion Afghanistan as safe and in progress, looking thankfully to the U.S. army as its savior. But what does this saving imply?

After the 9/11 attacks and America’s entrance to Afghanistan, many reports were released regarding the terrible situation of the women in Afghanistan (Sacirbey, 2010). The images of the distressed, oppressed, and victimized Afghan women who were tortured at the hands of the Taliban abounded in the Western media. There were photographs,



interviews, reports, and memoirs which all pointed out how terribly the Afghan women were suffering and affected the following pictures of the Eastern women (Shapiro 2010). Though the long-standing sufferings of the Afghan women were very real, the sudden interest of the Western media in them was unprecedented. This image had a great role in sanctifying the U.S. attack on Afghanistan backed by NATO in the eyes of the American and European public, turning it into a holy mission of saving the innocence. Hosseini (2008), whose narrative directly reflects the Western media representation, has also provided a victimized image of the Afghan woman whose only hope is the West.

According to Abu-Lughod (2013), “when you save someone (Afghan women), it means that you are saving her from something and you are saving her to something.” This statement implies that “projects of saving other women depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority” (p. 47), which results in imposing a foreign culture on the Eastern women to change them into what the Western feminism dictates, not hesitating to ask whether they have the ability to recognize and express how they want their situation to improve. This is reminiscent of Spivak’s (2013) sentences, “white men are saving brown women from brown men” (p. 92). Outlawing the culture of Other women, or Subaltern in Spivak’s (2013) terminology, results in women’s inability to express themselves because adopting the Western culture leaves the Eastern women voiceless. Furthermore, it implies that the Eastern women have no discourse to speak with and the only discourse to gives them power is that of the West.

The Western feminism claims to help the Eastern women have their own voice. However, it has been criticized for assuming a homogenous, fixed identity for the Eastern women—The Third World women—by depicting the Eastern culture as oppressive in its totality. Mohanty (1984) relates the reason of such depictions to the Western hegemony with imperialist goals, “defining women as archetypal victims freezes them into ‘objects-who-defend-themselves,’ men into ‘subjects-who-perpetrate-violence’ and (every) society into powerless (read: women) and powerful (read: men) groups of people” (p. 339). That is also how Rostami-Povey (2007) asserts that the matter of gender equality in once-colonized countries is a two-side issue: one side pointing at challenging the male-oriented society and another pointing at imperial hostility. If women are proved to be powerless, the role of the colonizer is that of a savior of, at least, half of the nation, which easily sanctifies the colonization project. And, this is what the novel seems to suggest.

In Hosseini’s (2008) novel, terror and chaos ensue from the Afghan culture and religion which have caused disequilibrium and it is the holy mission of the West to eliminate these sources of strife and restore equilibrium, replacing oppression, war, and patriarchy with prosperity, peace, modernity, and freedom. The plot twists of the narrative, therefore, reveal the underlying ideology of orientalism.

5. Conclusion

Said’s concentration on the creation of the orient by the West corresponds to this narrative. Khaled Hosseini has represented the East from a female hero’s perspectives. The narrator’s voice looms over the narrative as an omniscient narrator, and the reader is forced to see the Afghan world the way the narrator represents it.

Here, not only does the author act like a colonizer on the reader enforcing the discourse of his novel, but he also represents the East as inferior to the West and in need of progress. The influence of the discourse of Islamophobia as a new face of orientalism and the image of the Middle East in the Western media as terrorist are evident here. In fact, it seems that the discourse of orientalism has been reinforced by the narrative which seeks to justify America’s war on Afghanistan. The study of the narrative structure of the novel helps demonstrate this point clearly.

Greimas’ narrative model has shown that the subject actant, influenced by the heroine’s father’s notion of pro-Western modernization, crosses the borders of her traditional culture. Her association with the Western values is shown to result in benefits. In other words, although an Afghan woman, Laila is the Self, the bearer of peace, and the representatives of rationality. On the other hand, the opponent actants of the narrative repeat the orientalist image of the Easterner whose features are exaggerated by rhetoric and repetition which dehumanized them. Hence, the Other is the traditional East, uncivilized, abnormal, and inhuman, causing anarchy, war, and danger.

The narrative model of Todorov also illuminates that, in the novel, disequilibrium is caused by the Easterners and Islamic values, whereas equilibrium is restored by forces associated with the West and its culture of progress. The protagonist comes from the East, lives there to the end of the novel, and shows her affection to her country; however, her dream of making progress is inspired by her pro-Western education and comes true after the equilibrium is restored by

the American army. Therefore, there is a covert, yet effective, influence of the West at work in the narrative. These narrative models show that the deep structure of the novel tends to condemn the Eastern norms and values and privilege the opposite by emphasizing the liberty and progress the Western values and traditions bring about. It has also been implied that to have affiliations with the Western values helps one to survive the hostile situation and ensue liberation, fulfillment, and happiness.

This is not to say that violence, war, danger, or lack of liberty for women are acceptable in the Eastern culture and should be respected. But the novel fails to show that the struggle against these atrocities in the East has a history much older than the U.S. invasion. By selectively representing these problems as specific to the East and as the norm of the Eastern culture, the novel undermines the right of the Afghan people to decide for their own fate, representing them as inferior, ignorant, and dangerous. These qualities emphasize the already established orientalist stereotyping of the East which can only result in the perpetuation of the colonial mindset.

Postcolonial studies remind us of the fact that in order to challenge the binary of the superior West vs. the inferior East, both the East and the West should try to understand how these stereotypes are constructed and how they affect the consciousness of the readers. By decoding the orientalist attitude represented through the narrative structure of this novel, the postcolonial, poststructuralist reading can show how those structures are the products of the dominant, Eurocentric discourse of the time and, therefore, are cultural constructions that can and should be challenged and deconstructed to pave the way for a new understanding between the East and the West.

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