

Politics of persuasive narrative: legitimizing American invasion of Afghanistan in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* from a neo-orientalist perspective

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Abstract

The Kite Runner (2003), published shortly after the American invasion of Afghanistan, has received overwhelming readership in the West and continues to draw critical analysis for its calculated appropriation of Afghan culture tailored for Western audiences. The paper explores Hosseini's strategies of appropriation, often referred to as the "politics of persuasive narrative", through which he presents to Western readers the social, cultural, historical, and religious contexts of Afghanistan. Using neo-Orientalism as the theoretical framework, the paper examines how Hosseini employs the politics of persuasive narrative in the novel and finds that his narrative authority and authenticity as the native Afghan author are constructed and feigned, and his history is omissive, distorted and purposively crafted to import Western human rights and introduce secular ideals in the traditional Afghan society. The paper finally concludes that Hosseini's persuasive politics in the novel is designed to legitimize the American invasion of Afghanistan.

Keywords Neo-Orientalism, Authenticity, Historicity, Human Rights, Secularization

Paper type Research paper

Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) is a post-9/11 novel in English on Afghan-related issues. The conceptualization of the novel in the psyche of the Afghan-born American physician Khaled Hosseini, its publication after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan and the fall of the Taliban, its rise to the American best-seller list and its representation of Afghan life have attracted much interest around the globe. The fact that the story of a once-forgotten country rejected by the publishers suddenly reappears as a best-selling Western fiction has been intriguing.

In 1999, Khaled Hosseini conceptualized the idea of writing a story about his birthplace Afghanistan based on the news that the Taliban regime there had banned the popular pastime, the game of Kite Flying, in the country (Meena, 2023, p.53). But his 25-page story was not accepted by any publishers in America for the lack of demand



for such a story on the market (Ivanchikova, 2020, p.104). Afghanistan, which had kept the American people moved during Afghanistan's anti-occupational fighting against the Soviet Union in the 1980s, now went into oblivion with no regard for the human catastrophe in the area as the American imperialist agenda in the region was abandoned. With the Soviet Union withdrawing its troops and ending the ten-year-long occupation of Afghanistan in 1989, America and its allies diverted their attention, and the Western propagandist writers also ceased producing anti-socialist narratives henceforth. The scenario abruptly took a reverse turn at the catastrophic 9/11 and Afghanistan resurfaced in the Western media with America and its Allied Forces launching an invasion of Afghanistan through Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) on October 7, 2001. Now that the United States and its allies were on Afghan soil on a "War on Terror" mission to topple the Taliban regime, Western media outlets were flooded with reports of Afghanistan and its people and the neo-Orientalist narratives in scores were coming out. And at this propitious time, Khaled Hosseini's story reappeared as a novel titled *The Kite Runner* in 2003 and the novel received an overwhelmingly wide readership in America. The novel, winning the San Francisco Chronicle Best of the Year Award, the 2004 Alex Award and being nominated for the 2004 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, finally made it to the number one bestseller in the *New York Times* for almost two years (2005-2007) followed by a successful film version of the book in 2007. Aubry (2009) investigates the reader responses and reviews on Amazon and finds that many readers appreciate the novel as "it offers a digestible history of Afghanistan from the 1970s to 2001 and for describing some of the country's cultural, social and religious practices" (p.27) while some others love it for its "universal themes such as guilt, friendship, fatherhood, and forgiveness" (p. 27). The readers feel empathy for the sufferings, tortures, punishments, victimization, and deaths of the people of Afghanistan, a country that regularly pops up in the Western media for its alleged terror attack on the Twin Towers. The novel has even been integrated into the academic syllabuses of schools, colleges and universities around the globe to "expand, globalize, or decolonize their curriculum" (Ivanchikova, 2020, p.106). But what remains unexposed to the readers of *The Kite Runner* is the politics of persuasive narrative purposely employed for popularizing the novel, making the narrative of the novel empathically shared by the readers, and thus, fulfilling the agenda of the novelist and his promoters.

Slaughter (2007) finds *The Kite Runner* to be "carefully calculated, crafted, edited and packaged" (p.38) by its editors and the publisher with the glad consent and contributive willingness of the author in order that

the novel might be read as the success story of the American forces engaged in a “holy war” of saving the Afghan people from the Taliban and thereby establishing an America-like free, secular, individualistic and democratic state. Hosseini’s American nationality with Afghan birth lends him the authority to present to American readers “the story about Afghanistan” as the authentic “history of Afghanistan”. This politics of manipulation of the history of a Muslim country by Hosseini, an author from the region, is part of the neo-orientalist agenda promoted by the American imperialist neoconservatives after 9/11 for justifying and legitimizing American intervention in Afghanistan and other Muslim countries.

The study aims to show that Hosseini’s novel *The Kite Runner* is a neo-orientalist product brought to the market with a specific political agenda. For unfolding the agenda, the study discusses how Hosseini instills in the novel some of the post-9/11 rhetoric called “the politics of persuasive narrative” produced, marketed and popularized by the United States for legitimizing and humanizing its invasion of Afghanistan vis-à-vis villainizing and othering Afghan people and culture. The strategy through which Hosseini works for promoting the American agenda that also contributes to the promotion of his novel in the West is neo-Orientalism.

Neo-Orientalism is the recent and updated version of Said’s classical Orientalism with a new mode of representation of Islam, Muslims and the Muslim world. This post-9/11 system of hegemonic knowledge production is “the neoconservative construction of Islam and the Muslim world as a social and existential threat” (Kerboua, 2016, p.8) to the Western world and civilization. While classical orientalism is “a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it” (Said, 1978, p.3), neo-Orientalism is “a body of knowledge, news, analyses, and current affairs comments, created and propagated by a loose coalition of intellectuals, pundits, opinion makers, and to a lesser extent, political figures of Western public life” (Kerboua, 2016, p.22) that creates a “us versus them” schema of otherization.

Behdad & Williams (2010, pp.284-85) sketch salient features of neo-Orientalist writing with emphasis on its appropriation and corruption of a certain kind of critical function. Firstly, the neo-Orientalists, who are the ordinary individuals from the Middle East, claim authenticity and thus endorse and validate their discourses through their native subjectivity and Western agency. Secondly, the neo-Orientalists, engaging themselves actively in the politics of the Middle East and maintaining political affiliations with the neoconservative institutions, criticize their home countries and advocate for regime change there. Thirdly, the neo-

Orientalists who claim to be attentive to the historical events in the regions, tend to misrepresent them. They also deny any American imperialist agenda in the countries of the region. Fourthly, neo-Orientalists utilize superficial empirical observations about Muslim societies and cultures to make sweeping generalizations about them. Alrasheed (2015) points out that “the current renovated model” of neo-Orientalism is “the democracy mission” (p.20) by which America fulfils its imperial vision and, for making the mission successful, America and its allies take the pretext of establishing and solidifying human rights and secularism in the Muslim countries.

Hamid Dabashi in his 2006 article “Native Informers and the Making of the American Empire” characterizes the neo-Orientalist writers whom he calls “native informers turned comprador intellectuals” (para. 10) as the self-proclaimed intellectuals of Muslim descent from the Muslim world working to facilitate and justify the US imperial designs abroad by selectively writing their personal accounts divorced from history and context (Frouzesh, 2011, p. 253). Dabashi later elaborated on the role of the native informer in his *Brown Skin, White Masks* (2011, pp.72-73):

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, comprador intellectuals were actively sought out by the militant ideologues of the US Empire. Their task was to feign authority, authenticity, and native knowledge by informing the American public of the atrocities taking place in the region of their birth, thereby justifying the imperial designs of the United States as a liberation.

Behdad & Williams (2010), while accepting Dabashi’s assertion that the neo-orientalists “feign authority, authenticity, and native knowledge,” acknowledge their “agency as self-promoting, if not always self-made, immigrants who have capitalized on the post-9/11 thirst for knowledge about Muslim societies to empower themselves and realize their ambitious desires” (p.286). They further point out that neo-Orientalists claim their native authority and authenticity not because they have lived in the Middle East but because they have a kind of feel for the culture due to their descent from the region. Behdad & Williams (2010) assert:

Neo-Orientalist authority is an experiential form of authority, an authority construed and claimed not only through having lived in the Middle East but also by having a “feel” for this particular society as a Middle Easterner, a kind of native sense of the people, their culture, and political situation (p.86).

Hosseini’s novel *The Kite Runner* (2003) has drawn significant academic attention since its publication, primarily for its portrayal of Afghan society and culture in the Western context. Ramin and Ward (2024) show that the novel represents the Western stereotypical construction of Muslim

identity, guilt and redemption from expatriate experience. Ullah and Ahmed (2022) critically examine the complexities of human relationships, social injustice, and the effects of historical events in both the personal and collective lives of the Afghan people as depicted in the novel. Hosseini in the novel fulfils Western expectations by representing the Muslim Afghan culture as the violent and the West as the savior (Altabaa & Nubli, 2022). Adhikary (2021) situates the novel in the transnational identity crisis and finds that Amir, the protagonist of *The Kite Runner*, traverses between the native Afghan culture and the American culture for regaining his lost identity. Sarhan (2021) contends that the novel unfolds the classicism, stereotypes and persecution inherent in the fabric of the Afghan social and cultural structures, privileging the Pashtuns over Hazara.

However, neo-Orientalist critics argue that *The Kite Runner* intentionally misrepresents Afghan culture, aligning it with Western expectations and agendas. Ivanchikova (2020) finds that the novel's depiction of Afghanistan is highly distorted as represented in the Western media (p.106). Morey (2018) discusses Hosseini's distortion of the history of Afghanistan through his presentation of selective events that facilitate the Western agenda of invasion (p.119). Butler (2012, p.150) shows how Hosseini "portrays Afghanistan as a den of violence and lawlessness" (p. 150) for justifying interventionist action. The narrative of the novel in its depiction of the Taliban lends "support for a neoconservative vision of the United States' interventionist prerogatives" (Aubry, 2009, p.178). Banita (2012) points out that the novel selects "a version of history that hails America as the uncontested "brash savior" (p.132) and liberator in ways that superficially endorse the rhetoric of the war on terror... (p.320).

The paper, in line with Behdad and Williams (2010) and Dabashi (2006), examines Khaled Hosseini's "authority" to write an "authentic" history of Afghanistan and finds that his "authority" is feigned and his history is "stories" as he did not have any practical experience of living in the country during his formative years. Then the paper, building on Alrasheed's argument (2015), investigates how Hosseini promotes America's "democracy mission" in the name of human rights and secularization in Afghanistan. The analysis reveals that Hosseini's manipulation of the neo-Orientalist tools of authenticity, historicity, human rights and secularization serves as a persuasive narrative strategy that legitimizes the American invasion of Afghanistan.

Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* is widely read in America and the West as an authentic history of Afghanistan. Aubry (2009) in her analysis of the reader reviews on Amazon finds that readers "seem to approach *The Kite Runner* either as an accurate record of Afghanistan's recent history or as a

preferable substitute for such record” (p.34). Film scholar Graham (2010) writes, “*The Kite Runner* has become not only the single important source of information about Afghanistan for American readers but also the most widely read American story ever written about the modern Islamic world” (p. 147). Finally, the U.S. First Lady and literacy advocate Bush (2006) recommends *The Kite Runner* as one of her and her husband’s favorite books as the novel “tells a compelling story of how wounded people and wounded societies seek redemption and renewal” in a world of lost childhoods” (Slaughter, 2007, p.321). The Western readers, in general, and the Americans, in particular, misperceive the novel as an avenue to experience the authentic history of the exotic culture and stereotyped people of Afghanistan where the vicious Taliban haunt every house. Ivanchikova (2020) points out that Hosseini’s identity as an Afghan American acts as a stamp of authenticity, an indicator of privileged access to Afghan culture (p.106). The perception that Hosseini’s descent from and “supposed” access to Afghan culture authorizes him to produce an “authentic” history of the nation is dangerously misleading. Hosseini, as Dabashi (2006) argues, easily fits into the category of native informer fulfilling the US neoconservative agenda through his hegemonic knowledge production for the imperial power. He has also capitalized on his “native agency” for empowering and realizing his 9/11 desires through his affiliation with powerful players in American politics, his positions in the UN and the affluence he has acquired with “38 million books sold around the globe” (Khaled Hosseini, 2023). Hosseini, born in 1965 in Afghanistan, left the country for France in 1976 (Kellaway, 2014) at the age of eleven finally settling down in America in 1980. His narrative authority and authenticity are constructed not through an experience of ‘living in the Afghan society but through his feel’ for it as he visited Afghanistan only once in 2003 after the publication of the novel *The Kite Runner*. In response to “Did you do much kite flying in Kabul?” in an interview with Kate Kellaway (2014), he cannot recall his personal memory of kite flying. And finally, in his interview with Elizabeth A. Harris on *The New York Times* on the day of the Taliban victory in Afghanistan, he dismisses the very idea of reading his novel(s) to know Afghanistan and its people; he rather advises people to read history books for learning about Afghanistan and reminds them that his books are fictions with his own perspectives: “These are stories. This is the perspective of someone who has lived in exile, essentially since 1980” (Harris, 2021).

Neo-Orientalists fulfill their political agenda by presenting selective and distorted history for manipulating the emotions of the target readers and legitimizing the imperialist intervention. They tend to situate the

social and cultural practices of the Middle East in a certain historical period that allows them to manipulate history by vilifying Islam and the Muslim world and glorifying the US interventionist agenda. Behdad & Williams (2010) assert:

neo-Orientalism is characterized by an ahistorical form of historicism. While claiming to be attentive to historical changes in the Middle East, neo-Orientalists tend to misrepresent important aspects of recent events in the region while denying the neo-imperialist relation of the United States to the Middle East (p.285).

Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* draws an idyllically paradisaical picture of pre-1979 Kabul—the city of beautiful geographic richness, cultural vibrancy, social and political cohesion and rare cases of racial discrimination. Hosseini, “by contrasting the images of beautiful pre-war Kabul with the images of bone-chilling destruction and violence that the Soviets initially bring and the Taliban complete” (Ivanchikova, 2019, p.71), oversimplifies the history of the conflicts in Afghanistan. The history of long-lasting conflicts in the pre-Soviet Afghan power politics, the American hands in the creation of the Taliban in the 1980s and the *Mujabideen* rule from 1992-1996 is blacked out. Morey (2018) asserts that “*The Kite Runner*’s view of history is highly selective” (p.119) and reminds us of the missing points in the history of the novel by referring to the curses by Amir’s guide for the destruction of the country, “The people behind the Taliban...the real people behind this government...Arabs, Chechens, Pakistanis” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 227). The list of the people responsible for the Afghan conflicts remains incomplete without the main player behind the scene. Rashid (2009) completes the list by describing how “between 1982 to 1990, the CIA, working with the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence, Pakistan) and Saudi Arabia’s intelligence service, funded the training, arrival, and arming of some thirty-five Islamic militants from forty-three Muslim countries in Pakistani *madrassas* to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan” (p.39). Ivanchikova (2020) details how Hossein blacks out the history of American support, promotion, funding, training, media and intellectual propaganda for the *Mujabideen* (militant fighters) during the entire era of 1978-1992. The subsequent era of *Mujabideen* rule during 1992-1996 was also omitted from the history of Afghanistan. The distortions and omissions in the history of Afghanistan in Hosseini’s novel are understandably crafted to conceal the real face, façade, and fallacy of American policy and the interventionist brutalities operational in Afghanistan for decades and to offer the American readership a “therapeutic narrative” that might reinstate in their anxious minds “a way to feel good” at the goodness of the United States at home and abroad—a

concept that Donald Trump later popularizes, “Make America Great Again.” Aubry (2011, p.193) mentions one of the Amazon reviewers revealing this neo-Orientalist politics of the novel:

And I thought his handling of September 11 was just irresponsible. He mentions the event itself, but then there’s no mention at all of the fallout in Afghan communities in the US. Nothing about the people hiding in their homes because people who appeared Middle Eastern were harassed, assaulted, or sometimes killed. No mention of the outrage American Afghans felt at the abrupt change in US policy towards Afghanistan or the subsequent war. Nothing. I have to wonder, cynically, if he purposely left this out because he knew how many of his American audience he would piss off if he appeared ‘un-American’ and I just don’t have much respect for that.

Human rights as constructed, construed and sold in the West is one of the frequently used neo-Orientalist strategies of the neoconservative administration for their interventionist agenda in the Muslim countries, and for the purpose, the regimes promote humanitarian narratives without foreseeing their limitations of a reductionist approach and counteracting effects. Slaughter (2007) discusses the role of humanitarian narratives as the literary tools for touting, promoting and establishing global hierarchies that “serve to recenter the traditional subjects of history now as the subjects of benevolence, humanitarian interventionist sentimentality, and human rights—the literary agents of an international human rights imaginary” (p. 324). He also shows how a humanitarian best-seller narrative might be instrumental in preempting, legitimizing and implementing a military interventionist agenda under the cover of human rights establishments. As the humanitarian narrative is inherently built on the artifice of the imperialist domination of the Muslim lands, Hosseini’s narrative in *The Kite Runner* receives wide success in the United States and the West but is little known in the land represented by the narrative. And human rights that inherently demand a victim and a violator ultimately end up villainizing the people of the Muslim world.

Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* is widely mistaken for a novel about human rights in the United States and the West, having no readers in Afghanistan. The novel pictures an Afghanistan that has already been devastated by the Soviet occupation forces during 1979-1989 and the Taliban are completing the destruction mission. The US intervention is presented as the only way to save the country and its people. As the novel unfolds a new juncture through a call from Rahim Khan from Pakistan that “there is a way to be good again” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 2), Amir, the protagonist, instantly decides “to be good again” by redeeming his

childhood guilt of intentional inaction during Hassan's rape by Assef. Amir enters Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and rescues Sohrab from the pedophile Taliban leader Assef. Amir's humanitarian intervention hypervillainizes the irredeemable monstrosity in Assef—the Afghan, the rapist, the pedophile, the terrorist, the Taliban and the Muslim. Amir confirms the ingrained 'badness' of the Afghans essentializing the intervention from outside, "That there are bad people in this world, and sometimes bad people stay bad. Sometimes you have to stand up to them" (Hosseini, 2003, p.319). Slaughter (2007) points out:

The novel ultimately elevates the invasion of Afghanistan to an act of humanitarian intervention not only by representing the Taliban as a vicious sect of homosexual pedophiles intent on repressing the human personality; it also assures its American (and Allied) market readers that "we" are on the side of the people (and therefore that the aptly named "Operation Enduring Freedom" is a liberationist rather than imperialist venture) and, more pointedly, that these are people like us—people who "love . . . the idea of America" and freedom, enjoy Coca-Cola, appreciate John Wayne and Charles Bronson films, read *Les Misérables* and Ian Fleming novels, pursue happiness, and desire upward mobility (P.321).

One of the major pleas of the American interventionist agenda is to establish democracy in the Middle East and the Muslim world. Malik (2006) maintains, "the erstwhile 'White Man's Burden' . . . is presently being justified through terms such as democratization, restructuring and development" (p. 39). "Democracy is believed to be exportable to the Middle East, but the US has to play a pivotal role in its implementation, and it reserves the right to bring it by war if necessary" (Alrasheed, 2015, p.79). Lyons (2014, p.115) as the eyewitness to the actualization of the American democratization policy in the Middle East elaborates on how "Lewis Doctrine" was made instrumental in the process:

That policy, which the same newspaper dubbed as the "Lewis Doctrine," called on the United States to intercede forcibly to bring forth what the Muslim Arabs were incapable of achieving on their own: a recognizable—that is, Western-style—democracy.

But the Muslim world fails to import, spread and feed democracy in its western form as Islam's claim of sovereignty of God is incompatible with the democratic ideals of Western perception. For democracy to be tolerably operational in the personal and social modes of the Muslim world, the Muslims must understand, accept and internalize secularism as done in the Christian West. *The Kite Runner* manipulates the narrative of

Amir's exposure to and practice of Islamic religious rituals in a way that does not create negativity in the minds of the Western Christian readership. Justin Neuman (2014, p.167), aptly sketching the development of Amir's ever-growing religiosity, shows how his Islamic religiosity, perceived to be a private and personal phenomenon, not political and social, and practiced as such, conforms to Western secular ideological expectations. *The Kite Runner* is set in the city of Kabul during the secular rule of Zahir Shah in which jubilant pastime games of *Buzkashi* and kite flying go along with the recitation of the poems of Rumi, Hafez, and Omar Khayyam who had already been popularized in the West through secularization. Religious schooling in the secular Afghan society produces socially low-class people. Ali, the household servant at Amir's, is a *Hafiz-e-Quran* and Mullah Fatiullah Khan, a physically impaired man, is the teacher of Islamic studies at school. The Islamic ideology of these socially low-class people is contrasted against the dominant secular worldview of Baba, an affluent businessman. Neuman (2014, p.164) nicely pictures Baba's "secularist secularity" in sacrificing animals and distributing meat. While Baba mocks the story of Eidul Adha, he sacrifices animals on the occasion but breaks the religious system of dividing the meat by giving away all the meat to the poor, "*the custom is to divide the meat in thirds, one for family, one for friends and one for the poor... every year, Baba gives it all to the poor*" (Hosseini, 2003, p.76). Amir's turn to the religious practices actuated by Sohrab's suicide attempt at the time of his physical and emotional suffering is crafted to show his privatized spiritual awakening. Hosseini employs secular tropes of spirituality when Amir declares his "*shahadah*" and declares doing "*zakat*," "*namaz*," "fasting," pilgrimage to the Ka'bah and memorizing the verses of the Quran.

American readers at first and global readers at large may be tempted into taking Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner* as an "accurate record of Afghanistan's recent history or as a preferable substitute for such record" (Aubry, 2009, p.34). The devastating war raging in Afghanistan over the last four decades has furthered the misrepresentations of the country and its people. The paper, using neo-Orientalism as the research theory, has examined the text and shown that the novel is a strategy for self-promotion of the author and propaganda of the neoconservative administration for legitimizing the American invasion of Afghanistan and hence, the misrepresentations in the novel are the politics of the persuasive narrative by which the stakeholders— the novelist, the publisher, the promoters and the neoconservatives—normalize, legitimize and positivize the American invasion of Afghanistan. The paper has investigated the neo-orientalist representation of the authority of the native author, the authenticity of history, the initiation of human rights

and the secularization mission that the novel so vividly seeks to instill in the minds of the Western readers. The paper concludes that the didactic mission of the novel goes along with the “liberating” mission of the United States and the novel’s appeal to humanity finally ends up legitimizing the American invasion of and the operation in Afghanistan through the novelist’s passionate linguistic enigma.

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