

Bias and Historical Truth in Khalid Hosseini's and Deborah Rodriguez' War Fiction: Whose Truth is it?

التحيز والحقيقة التاريخية في أدب الحروب: روايات خالد حسيني وديورا رودريغيز أنموذجا

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Abstract:

Bias in historical fiction has often aroused objection and disapproval. The paper argues that the value of historical fiction doesn't reside in the historical truth it imparts but in the possibilities of interpretation it opens. It draws evidence from Khalid Hosseini's A thousand splendid suns(2007) and Deborah Rodriguez Kabul beauty school (2007) to explain how biased narratives add to the richness of historical fiction by presenting a multi-dimensional picture of events.

The paper comes to the conclusion that bias can be an aspect of richness as it offers multiple perspectives and represents the triumph of literary diversity over political adversity.

Keywords: *Bias; Deborah Rodriguez; Historical fiction; Khalid Hussein; War on Afghanistan.*

ملخص:

كثيرا ما كان التحيز في ادب الحروب مثار جدل كبير ورفض. تهدف هذه الدراسة لاثبات ان القيمة الحقيقية لادب الحروب لا تكمن في نقل الحقائق التاريخية بل في فتح افاق جديدة لفهم الواقع. من خلال دراسة روايتي "الف شمس ساطعة" لخالد حسيني و " مدرسة الجمال بكابول" لديورا رودريغيز تظهر الدراسة كيف ان الروائيتين تبرزان جوانب تم اغفالها في الحرب على افغانستان رغم التحيز الذي اظهره كل من حسيني ورودريغيز.

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تتوصل الدراسة الى ان الذاتية و التحيز في ادب الحروب يمكن ان يكونا مصدر ثراء
يضيفي قيمة على العمل الادبي و يظهر انتصار الاختلاف على الخلاف.
كلمات مفتاحية: التحيز، ديورا رودريغيز، ادب الحروب، خالد حسيني، الحرب على
افغانستان.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bias is one of the highly contestable issues in historical fiction. The fictional works built upon historical settings are often criticized for issues of objectivity and authentication. As war is one of the essentially contested issues in history and literature, biased war narratives that impart an unspoken judgement are subject to considerable objection among historians, critics, historiographers as well as readers. Bias implies seeking or interpreting historical evidence in ways that are partial to an existing belief, expectation or a hypothesis at hand (Nickerson, 1989, p.175). This research deals with bias in two fictional accounts of the War on Afghanistan; Khalid Hosseini's A thousand splendid suns and Deborah Rodriguez' Kabul beauty school. It explains the way Hosseini and Rodriguez are prone to mistreat historical evidence when narrating the history of Afghanistan. Mackay, (2009) states that writers of historical fiction often tend to "torture facts into their service" (p.12) when dealing with events that matter to them. As both Hosseini and Rodriguez were involved in the war, their fictional portrayals are criticised for expressing commitment to the national cause rather than to the standards of rational historical inquiry.

This research contends to the conformist attitudes towards historical fiction which predetermine the disposition novelists should take. It aims at scrutinizing bias in A thousand splendid suns and Kabul beauty school arguing that the value of these novels does not reside in the historical truth they impart but in the new possibilities of interpretation they open. Unlike a history book, a historical novel does not aim at teaching historical facts. This research suggests that the exactitude of historical description, theorizing about historical events and commitment to a given ideological or political discourse

fall beyond the scope of fiction. It claims that war fiction narratives derive their literary value from capturing the details of everyday life which historians may ignore. Contradicting portrayals of historical facts can offer a multidimensional picture of historical events and thus contribute to a rich and diverse cultural portrayal.

Gilbert (2006) suggests that bias is a strong inclination of the mind; a preconceived opinion, irrational preference or prejudice impacted by societal images and norms (p.35). Bias can be unconscious or conscious, explicit or implicit. Oppenheimer (2012) argues that bias accounts for many of the disputes, factions, misunderstandings and cultural conflicts that occur among individuals, groups and nations (p.3). This shows that biased accounts of history are often regarded with hostility. Bias is held responsible for cultural tensions. As such, critics claim that biased fiction warrants elimination or correction to conform to the reader's pre-determined conception of historical facts.

*This research is concerned with the conscious implicit distortions of facts or interpretations of historical evidence which may lead the reader to faulty conclusions. Therefore, it focuses on two conflicting biased depictions of the War on Afghanistan: the depiction of the war as a liberating mission in Rodriguez' *Kabul beauty school* and the lament of Afghanistan's past before foreign invasions in Hosseini's *A thousand splendid suns*. For the purpose of demonstrating the way the two narratives promote multiculturalism and the pluralism of discourses, the article is divided into three parts. The first part theoretically discusses bias in history and historical fiction. The second part is devoted to identifying, analysing and evaluating nationalist bias in Hosseini's *A thousand splendid suns*. Finally, gender and cultural biases in Rodriguez *Kabul beauty school* are identified and illustrated.*

2. Bias in History and Historical Fiction:

Historical fiction blurred the boundaries between history and fiction. The claim that history can never be infused with fiction because of its objective and factual nature was questioned by postmodernists. De Groot (2010) states that fiction can mirror

historical events and historical evidence can be established from literary works. He raises the issue of how “accepted history has been disputed and how untold atrocities have been uncovered in a fictional context”(p.2).De Groot’s conception of historical fiction is arguably important because it gives the fictional portrayals of history a ‘truth-revealing’ function. According to De Groot, the historical novel is a tool that has queried, interrogated, and complicated fixed ideas of selfhood, historical progression and objectivity.

Yet, the question of whether there is just one historical truth remains a controversial matter. The controversy is exemplified by the case of a dispute in which determining who is right or wrong depends always on the predisposition we take. Bias is when the writer’s perspective is strongly for or against something that the information contained in the work has become unbalanced or prejudiced. McCullagh(2000)states that “all historical sources contain some type of bias but it is not always possible to ‘detect’ it” (p.39). According to McCullagh, historians are motivated by the desire to defend beliefs that they wish to maintain. Thus, when a valued belief is at risk, some historians may choose to mistreat evidence. Besides, some truths may be neglected just because they are not well-documented. When a historian believes a hypothesis to be untrue, the process of seeking evidence is more likely to be directed towards finding evidence that disconfirm rather than the evidence in favour. Yet, this doubted or rejected hypothesis might be someone else’s belief. As such, the evidence sought might fall more in the category of confirmation.

Shepard (1990) argues that historical fiction is inevitably biased and complete detachment in writing a historically contextualized novel is just an illusion. He states that “we are inherently biased; we may not be able to help it” (p.48).Similarly, Lang (1993) states that “all sources have an in-built bias, some more marked than others, and some more obvious than others, but none are exempt from it” (p.13). He explains that the writer’s job is not to investigate what happened but rather to discover new plots and mental maps through which the historical incident can be seen from different perspectives. Lang comes to the conclusion that all sources are biased but all sources are also reliable and the reader’s task is

finding out what they are reliable for. For Lang, bias doesn't reduce the value of historical fiction but rather adds to the wealth of historical narratives.

At times of war, history and literature become increasingly entangled. Docker (2008) addresses the problem of historical truth in war fiction. He states that "the very doubleness of history - in the space between history as rigorous scrutiny of sources and history as part of the world of literary forms - gives it ample room for uncertainty, disagreement, and creativity"(p.6). The double character of history creates ambivalence. Ambiguities in the fictional portrayals of history were the subject of heated debates in the 1960s and 70s, known as the Linguistic Turn or postmodernism and poststructuralism.

Poststructuralists like Michel Foucault (1926- 1984) and Jacques Derrida (1930 -2004) argue that there is no truth. This implies that all interpretations of history have a degree of correctness and can thus be accepted. Foucault is criticized for considering truth as an effect of power. Derrida however argues that there is nothing outside the text; the world in effect is only a text. Irving (1990) contends that postmodernism has removed the intellectual grounds for opposing the multiple-often biased interpretations of history (p.15). Yet, Foucault's and Derrida's perceptions of truth in historical fiction have been challenged. Curthoys (2004) points out that Foucault advocated what he referred to as a 'true historical sense'; a form of historical writing that stresses discontinuity and disruption in the past (p.7). She calls for a rigorous reading of texts, working by strict protocols, including establishing the precise provenance of a text as a historical event. Derrida's claim that the metaphoric nature of scholarly language may downplay historical truth is also contested. Hexter (1968) argues that logical positivists are trying to reduce historical writing to rigid scientific laws and to merely denotative language (p.362). Hexter's criticism of logical positivists is based on an argument that language can play a constructive role in writing history. He suggests that historical writing has its own distinctive

rhetoric which features similarity to fictive arts and language with a rich aura of connotation.

Hence, there is a difference between evaluating evidence to come to an unbiased conclusion and building a case to justify a conclusion. The former is the task of historians. Historians identify the historical event subject to examination, analyse it and come out with objective conclusions. Fiction is however, the creation of a fictional world structured to justify the writer's beliefs, assumptions, judgements and already-made conclusions. In fiction, writers selectively gather events. Thus, they may give weight to unimportant events and eliminate significant facts. They may also neglect or discount the events that stand against their own vision of history and emphasize the ones that support it no matter how trivial, partial or irrelevant they may seem. While historians engage in already-built cases, novelists consciously build their own cases. Hence, fictional narratives differ from historical accounts because the former involve an explicit one-sided case building in which it's hard to determine the validity of the source whereas the latter rely on well-documented sources.

To identify bias in historical fiction, it is important to find word choices that are extreme in their description such as depictions that are clearly exaggerated, extreme positivity or negativity of the language, obvious errors or silence, i.e. intentionally leaving out important information. These imply that the writer has a specific position towards the events portrayed and s/he wants to communicate it in a way to influence the reader's judgement. Finding bias in a source doesn't automatically make it unreliable or inaccurate unless it contains misleading information. Fictional works that portray historical events are always governed by respecting the standards of rational historical inquiry. As such, accounts which clearly fail to meet these standards are discarded. Novelists who prefer one account to another or choose to side with one opinion over the other are often viewed with suspicion. They are suspected of defending a given agenda or presenting history from perspectives that suit personal interests.

There are two ways in which historical fiction works can be biased. First, bias can appear in the form of misinterpreting evidence. Novelists sometimes fairly describe historical events but infuse them with their personal or cultural judgements when giving interpretations. So, the inferences drawn from historical facts are just partially true. Second, fact omission is another manifestation of bias in historical fiction. Fact omission implies making an unbalanced narrative credible by elaborating on specific events and ignoring others.

3. Nationalist Bias in A thousand splendid suns:

This section identifies the implicit manifestations of nationalist bias in Hosseini's A thousand splendid suns. It gives examples of the reflections of bias in the historical truths portrayed in the novel. Then, it examines the extent to which Hosseini; a native Afghan writer is fair-minded in his portrayal of the War on Afghanistan. It also evaluates and illustrates the exactitude of historical description and analyses the impact of Hosseini's national, cultural and even religious orientations on his interpretation of events.

A thousand splendid suns depicts the plight of women in Afghanistan in different historical periods characterised by several invasion and political upheavals. Through the character of Mariam, Hosseini portrays the life of a generation of Afghan women who witnessed Afghanistan before the Soviet invasion and survived to the post-invasion era. Laila represents the new generation of women born during the civil war. She later lives under the rule of Taliban. Male domination is the obstacle faced by both female characters. Mariam is an illegitimate daughter. She is a victim of Jalil; the oppressive father who denies her the right of kinship and legal status. Being deprived of education, Mariam is defenceless. She is married off to a more oppressive husband. Laila similarly experiences the same type of male domination as she is a victim of a forced marriage. Being a young orphan, she cannot stand alone in a war-torn Afghanistan. Laila accordingly agrees to a loveless marriage just in order to secure shelter and financial support.

Through the portrayal of deprivation, injustice, patriarchy, absence of social equality and the denial of access to education, Hosseini reveals how women in Afghanistan went through gender equity in its severest form since ages. As a liberal Afghan writer with western education and perspectives, Hosseini draws the image of women's daily struggles from western lens. There is an implicit comparison between the position of women in the American society where he has spent his adulthood and the way women lived in the Afghanistan of his childhood. This comparison neglects the religious, cultural and historical specificities of both regions in multiple ways.

Hosseini's nationalist bias can be identified at three main levels. First, he gives an idealized portrayal of pre-war Afghanistan. As he describes the atrocities committed by the Taliban, Hosseini glorifies the pre-Taliban era. Yet, his portrayal of the wretched and wronged character of Nana reveals a striking contradiction. Nana is the typical embodiment of the suffering inflicted on Afghan women in pre-war Afghanistan. The way she is forced to assume the whole responsibility of her illegitimate child after the father gives her up to protect his social status as a respectable married man reveals the position of women in patriarchal Afghanistan. Nana insists: "Jalil and his family see us as weeds-albeit weeds not so much plucked, but transplanted at a distance" (Hosseini, 2007, p.5). Nana gives Mariam conflicting accounts of her birth. She informs her that she was "alone in the hut, lying on the floor for two days with a knife by her side to cut the umbilical cord. Jalil did not even think of visiting (his daughter) for over a month" (Hosseini, 2007, p.6).

Similarly, Laila gives birth to her son in the same terrible conditions in Taliban's Afghanistan. The hospital did not have the minimum of the required medical equipment. She consequently undergoes a surgery without anaesthesia. The two cases reveal that the position of women before the Soviet invasion remained the same under the Taliban's rule. Hosseini attempts to attribute all the hardship Afghan women experienced to wars and religious extremism. Yet, when the experiences of Nana and Laila are juxtaposed, the contradiction becomes apparent. The only difference is that in pre-

Taliban Afghanistan, some women were enjoying certain rights. In Taliban's Afghanistan, all females experienced gender discrimination.

*Hosseini's resentment is amplified in the story as he establishes the theme of multiple truths. Schooling also assumes a significant place in women's representation in both novels. In *A thousand splendid suns*, Hosseini describes Nana's disastrous reaction to Mullah Faizullah's suggestion of sending Mariam to school. Mullah Faizullah is Mariam's Koran tutor and her favourite visitor. After their lessons, Mariam and Mullah take walks together. On one of these walks, Mariam tells the Mullah of her desire to go to school, as she has heard her half-sisters talk about it. On Mariam's behalf, Mullah asks Nana to let Mariam go to school but Nana refuses, asserting that "the only thing Mariam needs to learn is how to endure the hardships she'll encounter throughout her life" (Hosseini, 2007, p.32).*

*Second, *A thousand splendid suns* represents a typical example of nationalist bias through fact omission. Hosseini attributes all the constraints and impediments that had a devastating impact on the life of Afghan women to the rule of Taliban. He represents the pre-Taliban phases in the history of Afghanistan as more prosperous with regards to gender equality. Historical evidence however show that though the situation was relatively different, it was not as fair as Hosseini represents it. Singh (2013) states that "Although the situation of women under the Taliban rule was centre stage, yet in several other regimes in the history of Afghanistan, the miserable plight of Afghan women can be traced. There is a long history of the subjugation of Afghan women over centuries" (p.88). Laila says: "The freedom and opportunities enjoyed by women in the 1978 and 1998 were a thing of the past now" ((Hosseini, 2007, p.222). She remembers her father saying that the years of communist rule: "were good times to be a woman in Afghanistan" ((Hosseini, 2007, p.223). All the communist laws that empowered women come to an end with the beginning of the rule of Taliban. The Mullahs impose rules based on their extremist understanding of Islam. Thus, women are forced to put the head-cover. They are also forbidden from travelling without a male kin.*

Representing pre-Taliban Afghanistan as a place of cultural tolerance and gender equality is noticeably biased.

Over-victimising women is another aspect of nationalist bias in Hosseini's novel. His interpretation of events emphasises the impact of social and political circumstances on the life of women but neglects the role they play in the process of female subjugation. Mariam and Laila are victimized from all sides. The loss of paternal care and protection, living with a sadistic husband and the unfair gender roles imposed by the Taliban regime all contributed in creating the image of the submissive Afghan woman. Hosseini neglects that the war atmosphere limits the potential of both men and women. It's true that women are subject to more restrictions under the Taliban regime due to certain religious misconceptions, but the situation is getting worse for both genders. Both men and women in the novel are subject to the restriction of choices. This means that the oppression of women is not only the outcome of patriarchy but more importantly the result of war and political unrest.

*Though it reveals many aspects of nationalist bias, Hosseini's novel celebrates multiculturalism as it outlines the geographic and cultural features of Afghanistan. Hosseini describes it as a country where multiple cultures and traditions co-exist. The aspects of multiculturalism in Hosseini's novel range from advocating mutual respect and understanding between the different ethnic and religious groups inhabiting the country to the calls for maintaining unity despite of diversity and difference. While Hosseini emphasises the distinctiveness of cultures and ethnicities, he promotes an ideology of integration. His novel succeeded in making Afghanistan more accessible to the outside world. It can be read as a successful attempt to understand the culturally different 'Other'. Nationalist bias in *A thousand splendid suns* does not prevent its perception as a work that represents the triumph of cultural diversity over historical adversity. This novel "has nothing to do with historical reality and accuracy, but is rather best understood as a symbolic act of difference that introduces a reading of authentic and intense biased national feelings as compared to the official historical affect" (Naik & Tiwari, 2018, p.3).*

4. Gender and Cultural Bias in Rodriguez' Kabul Beauty School:

Kabul beauty school is a memoir of the time Rodriguez spent in Afghanistan. It depicts the journey of a trained beautician and Michigan native who goes to Kabul after the fall of the Taliban regime to work as a medical assistant for a relief organisation. Deborah rebels against the social code governing the lives of women in Afghanistan. She refuses to put a head-cover, to dress in dark colours or to play the submissive woman who stays at home and rarely gets out. She later founds her 'beauty school' to train young Afghan women to be hairdressers and beauticians. This measure aims at guaranteeing financial success and independence for Afghan women.

Rodriguez' gender bias can be identified in her portrayal of the life of Afghan women. She believes that the fight for gender equality is the longest and hardest battle women in Afghanistan have to undertake. Ironically, as the women in the beauty school learn about make-up and hair dye, Rodriguez learns about their sad lives, daily beatings, rape and loveless marriages to old men. She says that the beauty salons "gave women their own space where they were free from the control of men" (Rodriguez, 2007, p.32). The Taliban closed the salon many times claiming that they made women less pious and looking like prostitutes. Rodriguez' account is saturated by a language of oppression which represents Afghan women as wretched and deprived and celebrates US invasion as a liberating mission. This language is perpetuated by a biased conception of the invasion of Afghanistan as seen from an American lens only.

The novel gives a historical account of life in Afghanistan and provides a highly informative portrayal of the life of Afghan women. Cultural bias in the novel is clear in the attitude of Rodriguez towards the Taliban regime. Bias through fact omission is apparent in the narrative as Rodriguez criticizes the Taliban for devastating the position of women in society but never gives any reference to the fact that the Taliban is the creation of the CIA. Many historical facts are omitted-consciously or unconsciously, to serve the end of representing the US invasion as a saving and civilizing mission. Rodriguez says: "I was going to the right place at the right time" (p.9). This reveals the

way she conceives her journey to Afghanistan. Though it was a dangerous lace because of war and political instability, Rodriguez has the feeling that she is destined to go there to save the women suffering from oppression and discrimination. She describes Afghan women saying: “When they were growing up in the shadow of the Taliban's rule, girls were not even allowed to go to school. If they were allowed outdoors at all, they would always be hidden behind the head-to-toe burka and treated as second-class citizens” (p.11). To prove that US invasion is a liberating mission, she states that: “Now, they talk about freedom, and defying the fanatics who used to terrorise them” (Rodriguez, 2007, p.11).

The depiction of the Taliban is another example of fact omission in the novel. Rodriguez offers a one-sided image of the ideology of the Taliban based on the way the girls in her Beauty School perceive it. Rodriguez' portrayal of the Taliban is biased as it focuses on religious fanaticism and ideological extremism. While emphasising the reputation of the Taliban's for mistreating women and imposing several limitations on their personal liberties, she omits the opinion of a large portion of Afghans who regard the Taliban as liberators coming to free the country from the Soviet invasion and bring an end to the consequent civil war.

The implicit bias in Rodriguez' novel appears at the level of ideology. Rodriguez preaches the discourse of a liberating mission in Afghanistan. She oversimplifies the tragedy of Afghan women to a battle for beauty. Though this aesthetic aspect is quite important, yet in a war-torn country, beauty was the last thing women could think of. Their daily battles are more challenging, feeding their children, getting medical assistance, providing education and finding shelter. She represents her students at the beauty school as 'women who don't have a voice' but never refers to the true reason why they are so. Fact omission can be identified as Rodriguez makes no reference to the disastrous impact of US invasion.

Some critics say that Rodriguez' book is full of inaccuracies and inconsistencies. She provides an inaccurate representation of the wounds and needs of the Afghan nation. The way Rodriguez mentions that her skills as a hairdresser are much more useful than her nursing

skills reveals her biased conception of the dilemma of women in Afghanistan. She constantly raises issues of gender equality, the veil, arranged marriages and women's participation in the workforce to turn attention away from the serious repercussions of US invasion to Afghanistan. Rodriguez is biased as she emphasises pre-war problems and totally neglects the way the war aggravates them.

Ross (2008) states: "We need to know that the words that carry a charge present an opportunity for learning and change" (p. 17). Biased Fiction can present an opportunity to become informed about the various conceptions and interpretations of historical events. Being confronted with bias creates a new challenge of managing diversity. Rodriguez similarly introduces a completely unusual idea in a hostile historical context as she represents her Beauty School as a foreign aid project and petitions companies for sponsorship when she returns back home. Though the idea seems radical, Rodriguez goes further in her claims that a beauty school is the only thing that can change the life of women in Afghanistan. Rodriguez says: "I knew from my own experience as a hairdresser back home that a salon is a good business for a woman-especially if she has a bad husband" (p.37). A beauty salon is not only aesthetically important but also financially liberating. Rodriguez expresses total commitment to the idea of enhancing the position of women through turning them to breadwinners.

In Rodriguez' novel, social, cultural, religious and political differences are explored in a biased but profound manner. Both accurate and biased portrayals present an opportunity to look at historical evidence from a different angle. The diversity of perspectives enables a more comprehensive conception as it provides a heterogeneous view. Some critics claim that Rodriguez' biased novel promotes stereotypes. They claim that the use of ethnic language and the focus on strange cultural practices enforces the cultural gap. Yet, one cannot neglect that the outsider's role of Rodriguez plays a significant role in determining her attitudes towards Afghanistan.

Despite of revealing gender and cultural bias, Rodriguez thematizes cultural diversity. Centred on an opposition between the

past and present, Kabul Beauty School offers multiple perspectives on Afghanistan in its different historical phases. The discourse of multiculturalism is powerful in the novel. Seeing the history of Afghanistan using an American lens establishes awareness of difference and enables the construction of the country's cultural jigsaw.

Comparing both narratives, it becomes clear that they contribute to promote awareness of the existence of multiple historical truths. Hosseini provides the western world with an alternative perception of Afghanistan, different from the stereotyped representation perpetuated by US media. Rodriguez however exemplifies American assumptions about life in a country about which they knew very little before the 9/11. Literature accordingly becomes a powerful tool to manifest, explain, accept and even appreciate difference. Historical fiction assumes a particularly significant place in this light. As the times of war and political upheavals create more disparities, stereotyping and hostility, War fiction becomes a safe site of dialogue and reflection. Developing cultural consciousness is thus a vital function of war fiction.

Therefore, the effects of bias in historical fiction can be moderated by making conscious cultural choices. Wheeler (2015) calls this "an awareness of why we do the things we do" (p.326). He argues that social psychologists have investigated the ways in which the higher mental processes such as judgment and social behaviour could be triggered and then operate in the absence of conscious intent and guidance. According to Wheeler, bias becomes more influential when the unconscious takes over. It leads people to make seating choices without being aware or conscious of why they are making them.

4. CONCLUSION

A thousand splendid suns and Kabul beauty school are two contradicting accounts of Afghanistan's history. After analysing the two narratives, it becomes apparent that Hosseini and Rodriguez show commitment to the national cause rather than to the standards of rational historical inquiry. Yet, though they are biased, both narratives were able to make transformations in the perception of

highly contested issues: multiculturalism, gender equality, war and religious fundamentalism. A comparison between the reflections of bias in both narratives allowed determining the impossibility of eliminating bias in fictional accounts of history. Bias can be monitored, reduced and regulated but not completely eliminated. To conclude, bias in the two narratives speaks a language of diversity. It can make readers feel uncomfortable when confronted with different interpretations of historical evidence but it provides insights into the way historical events were perceived not the way historians reported them.

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