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Burqas, Binaries, and Foreign Intervention: The Influence of 9/11 and Its Aftermath on the Portrayal of Afghanistan in Anglophone Literature

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Burqas, Binaries, and Foreign Intervention: The Influence of 9/11 and Its Aftermath on the Portrayal
of Afghanistan in Anglophone Literature

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1. Introduction

Over the decade following the attacks on the World Trade Center, Western authors published an abundance of literary texts about 9/11 and its aftermath. While the vast majority of these texts centred on post-9/11 America, Western readers also expressed their interest in the country which had now suddenly become the enemy: Afghanistan. The first decade of the twenty-first century saw a surge in novels set in Afghanistan, many of which became popular in Western society: Åsne Seierstad's *The Bookseller of Kabul* (2002) was translated into more than 40 languages and became "the most successful nonfiction book in Norwegian history" (Murphy); Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) was turned into a film, as well as a Broadway play; and Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin's *Three Cups of Tea* (2006) was on the New York Times Best Seller list for more than four years (Schuessler). Indeed, these novels still hold a prominent place in Western society. After the Taliban captured Kabul in August 2021, many articles were published like *The Financial Times*' "Five Books that Help Explain What is Happening in Afghanistan," recommending these novels to their audience. Indeed, these novels serve an educational purpose, teaching Western society about both the past and current situation of a country it was previously unfamiliar with, yet was now the site of a twenty-year conflict.

However, as this thesis will argue, the depictions of Afghanistan in these novels are not as accurate and authentic as their audiences believe them to be. Alla Ivanchikova captures the essence of this problem by suggesting that the term 'global Afghanistan cultural production' should be applied to the surge of Afghanistan-set novels that were written post-9/11. She argues that application of such a term is necessary to emphasise that "these texts were not written or produced by Afghans for the Afghan public but were created by foreigners for a global audience" (Ivanchikova 4). Indeed, they were not merely created by foreigners for a global audience, but they were written by and for a society whose perception of Afghanistan had changed drastically from ignorance to obsession as a result of the attacks.

In this thesis, I will explore how the events of 9/11 and the aftermath have impacted the depiction of Afghanistan in Anglophone literature. I will do so by comparing three novels that are set in Afghanistan, along a timeline that identifies how representation of this country changed: Deborah Ellis' *The Breadwinner* (2000), which was not at all influenced by 9/11; Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand*

Splendid Suns (2007), a novel that was written relatively soon after the 9/11 attacks; and Elliot Ackerman's *Green on Blue*, a novel from 2015, whose author was also familiar with the war in Afghanistan.

Within this timeline, I will be treating 9/11 as a an "event," the term which the French philosopher Alain Badiou uses to mark a moment of historical rupture. In his book *Logics of the World*, Badiou defines the "event" as a "separating evanescence, an atemporal instant which disjoins the previous state of an object (the site) from its subsequent state" (384). He argues that "the event extracts from one time the possibility of another time. This other time, whose materiality envelops the consequences of the event, deserves the name of the new present" (384). In terms of this thesis, this entails that the 9/11 attacks resulted in a "new present," creating a break in history between Ellis' pre-9/11 novel and the two post-9/11 ones. In the following chapters, I will compare *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *Green on Blue* to *The Breadwinner* to determine how this historical rupture is reflected in Afghanistan-set literature.

In my reading of these novels, the focus will be on the identification of manipulations, ways in which the authors have influenced their accounts of Afghan customs and historical events. In order to be able to compare the novels, I will primarily focus on the manipulations made to the characterisation of the Afghan protagonist, the representation of Afghan culture, the Taliban, and the role of the West. As this thesis belongs to the field of literary studies, I will not be providing an exploration of Afghan culture as a whole. Instead, I will take the elements that are foregrounded in the novels, place those in their relevant context, and analyse their accuracy and relevance. To provide this context, I will be looking at scholars who have done extensive research in the field of Middle Eastern Studies. For example, a recurring element is the depiction of the burqa, for which I will turn to Alia Al-Saji, who has combined her interest in feminism, race, and French philosophy in her essay "The Racialization of Muslim Veils: A Philosophical Analysis," in which she explores the way in which veiling is represented in Western culture. In this way, I will be providing the relevant information that is needed to understand these texts without straying from them.

To analyse the manipulations, I will place them within the context of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (2003). Said defines Orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3). Although *Orientalism* was first published in 1978, Said wrote a preface to the 2003 edition, in which he argues that his book is still – or again – relevant: "That these supreme fictions [of the distinction between Orient and Occident] lend themselves easily to manipulation and the organization of collective passion has never been more evident in our time" (xi). Indeed, linking it to 9/11 and its aftermath, he adds that "much of it [has] to do with Islam and the Arabs on one side, 'we' Westerners on the other" (xii). Said argues that Orientalism "is, rather than expresses, a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world" (12). Drawing on Said's work, I will be exploring how the manipulations in these novels create and reinforce this contrast between the East and the West.

As this thesis will show, one of the main ways in which the three authors have created this contrast between Orient and Occident is through the introduction of binaries. By contrasting the modern, active, and normal West to the traditional, passive, and strange East, the authors of these works increase the distance between Afghanistan and the West. As Donna Haraway argues in "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," these binaries are systems of oppression. While the focus of Haraway's essay lies on the boundaries between humans, animals, and machines, her definition of the cyborg is broader than merely the product of biomechantronics. Haraway's cyborg is defined by "transgressed boundaries" (13), the binaries that can be found in Western culture included. This is where her essay becomes relevant in relation to Orientalism, as Haraway notes that "certain dualisms have been persistent in Western traditions" and that these dualisms "have been systematic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of color, [...] in short, domination of all constituted as *others*" (35). Through the identification and exploration of these binaries, I will analyse the dynamic between Afghanistan and the West in these novels.

Lastly, I will be looking at the interviews that the two post-9/11 authors have given in relation to their novels, to understand their perspective on the situation in Afghanistan and their choice to set a novel there. The reason I will not be applying this method to Ellis' novel is because she has given few

interviews on *The Breadwinner* and those in which she does mention the novel date from after the 9/11 attacks. As it is essential to this research that the pre-9/11 text is not placed within a post-9/11 context, I will refrain from using these interviews with Deborah Ellis. For the other two novels, however, the interviews provide valuable context, as the statements in their interviews and the messages in their novels do not coincide.

Using this framework, I argue that, while the representation of the Taliban has remained surprisingly consistent, the representation of Afghanistan's "ordinary" society has undergone drastic change. The pre-9/11 novel shows that not all the noteworthy elements in the post-9/11 novels, like Haraway's binaries and the manipulation of historical events, are new to Afghanistan-set fiction. However, these elements have been applied on a much larger scale in the post-9/11 novels and they have gained a new purpose after the attacks, namely the justification and encouragement of Western intervention. Through the cherry-picking of events that favour the West, the treatment of Afghan culture, and the introduction of new sets of binaries, the post-9/11 novels in this study present Afghanistan as a nation that is suffering under its own culture rather than under the Taliban, depicting external intervention as the nation's only hope for a peaceful future.

In chapter 2, I will be discussing Deborah Ellis' *The Breadwinner*, one of the rare Anglophone novels set in Taliban-oppressed Afghanistan that was written before the attacks on the World Trade Center. The novel revolves around an 11-year-old Afghan girl called Parvana, who becomes the breadwinner of her family after the Taliban arrests her father. In this chapter, I will explore the ways in which Ellis has tailored her representation of Afghanistan to her Western audience, in order to establish a point of reference as to how pre-9/11 fiction treated the nation.

In chapters 3 and 4, I will be using this point of reference to analyse the two post-9/11 novels, in particular, looking for similarities to the identified ways in which Ellis manipulated her Afghanistan. In chapter 3, I will be looking at Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, a story about the bond between two Afghan women, Mariam and Laila, who meet in their abusive marriage to a "traditional" Afghan man. Written retrospectively, Hosseini's novel explores the life of these two women during the

Soviet-Afghan War and the Taliban regime, as well as the post-9/11 Western intervention which, I argue, is what the novel leads up to.

In chapter 4, I will examine Elliot Ackerman's *Green on Blue*, a novel set during the War on Terror, written from the perspective of an Afghan boy, Aziz. When Aziz joins a US-funded militia to save his injured brother, it becomes clear that the soldiers are all fighting their own wars, some of which clash with the US' mission, leading to corruption and acts of violence. Although the story itself differs from the story in the previous two novels, this chapter will demonstrate that the novel shows similarities in the ways in which it has been made accessible to a Western audience and that its message is identical to Hosseini's message in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

2. Deborah Ellis' *The Breadwinner* (2000)

Deborah Ellis is a Canadian author whose interest in the Taliban's occupation of Afghanistan was sparked earlier than it was for most of Western society. When Ellis heard about the Taliban regime in 1996, "she decided that she had to get involved" and she "visited refugee camps in Pakistan, met Afghan women and heard about their experiences" ("Books"). These stories that she heard while she was abroad are what inspired her to write *The Breadwinner* (2000), a children's novel that became so successful after the 9/11 attacks that three sequels have been published, as well as a graphic novel and an animated film which was nominated for a Golden Globe in 2018 (Nevins). Because of how popular *The Breadwinner* became after the attacks on the World Trade Center, it is not surprising that scholars have analysed this novel in its post-9/11 context. For example, Özlem Sensoy and Elizabeth Marshall, who "believe that Ellis's book is best understood in a post-9/11 context in which Muslim girls in developing nations are constructed predominantly as the objects of Western interventions" (296). However, I argue that it is essential to read this novel in its pre-9/11 context as there are significant differences between this novel and the post-9/11 narratives that I will address in the following chapters, for example in the depiction of Afghan men. In this chapter, I argue that Ellis presents a manipulated version of Afghanistan which allows her to demonstrate the contrast between the Western world and Taliban-oppressed Afghanistan more explicitly, creating a narrative that is easier to understand for her younger audience. However, as a result, Ellis' setting becomes a stereotypically "strange" country in the Orient, rather than an accurate depiction of Afghanistan, and a mirror for Western values.

2.1 Parvana's Western upbringing

The main way in which Ellis has manipulated her depiction of Afghanistan is by presenting a protagonist who has lived a relatively Western life prior to the Taliban's occupation of Kabul. Both of Parvana's parents went to university and "with their education, they had earned high salaries" (12). Her mother was "a writer for a Kabul radio station" (7) and her father was a history teacher (27). Her parents are modern Afghans: "Her parents could speak English, too. Her father had gone to university in England" (10). Parvana points out herself that "most people in Afghanistan could not read or write" but that she

“was one of the lucky ones” (9). According to the UN’s *National Human Development Report* (2004), Afghanistan’s literacy rate in 2002 was a mere 28,7 percent of the entire adult population (Saba and Zakhilwal 18). More specifically, 43,2 percent of the male population was literate, but only 14.1 percent of the female population could read (28). As earlier numbers are unavailable, it is worth noting that these numbers might differ slightly from the literacy rates in 1998, which is when the novel is set. Still, the fact that both her father and her mother are highly educated and that both Parvana and her sister can read is notable, taking into consideration how low this literacy rate is.

It is equally noteworthy that, whilst Parvana has attended an Afghan school, most of the stories she shares regarding her education involve her father, a man who received a Western education. The Taliban had strong ideas regarding modern education and “closed girls’ schools and restricted other forms of non-religious education” (Rubin and Rudeforth 6). According to Ashley Jackson and Rahmatullah Amiri, this restriction of non-religious schools related to “concerns that state-run and private, secular schools indoctrinated students with Western ideas and anti-Taliban values” (15). Indeed, Parvana’s father’s Western education is perceived as a threat to the Taliban regime and he is arrested by the Taliban because “Afghanistan doesn’t need [his] foreign ideas!” (31) In contrast to the Taliban, Parvana’s father believes that the future of the country is in the hands of the educated, arguing that the family cannot leave Afghanistan because “if all educated people leave, who will rebuild the country?” (45) He emphasises the importance of education and condemns the Taliban, who he refers to as “illiterate thugs” (31). Although he is arrested and therefore not present for most of the novel, his Western values dominate the narrative, as they were a key part of Parvana’s upbringing.

Not only is the family modern and educated, but they also used to be extremely wealthy before the Taliban captured Kabul in 1996. Because Parvana’s parents both had successful careers and because they both “had come from old respected Afghan families” (12), they used to live a luxurious life, as reflected in the description of their house: “They had a big house with a courtyard, a couple of servants, a television set, a refrigerator, a car” (12). While the fact that they owned a car might not seem significant, it is a striking detail. According to the UN’s *Statistical Yearbook 1992*, there were around 31.000 passenger cars in use in Afghanistan in 1990 (639). Taking into consideration that the population

of Afghanistan was around 12,4 million at the time, that comes down to approximately 0,25% of Afghans who owned a car. To put this into perspective, the same yearbook reports that there were 143.549.600 cars in use in the USA at the time (652) which, divided over a population of 249,6 million, comes down to approximately 57,5% of Americans. The fact that they owned a car seems a trivial detail to a Western audience, to whom owning a car is a common thing, but it indicates that Parvana's family was incredibly – if not unrealistically – wealthy prior to Taliban rule. Ellis has opted to write a novel to illustrate the situation in Afghanistan to her audience, however, she has decided to do so by creating a protagonist who is not at all representative of the country.

Despite not being representative of the country, Parvana's background does allow her to present the situation in Afghanistan to the novel's Western audience in a more comprehensible and relatable way. After the Taliban arrived in Kabul, "that house had been destroyed by a bomb" and "the family had moved several times since then. Each time, they moved to a smaller place. Every time their house was bombed, they lost more of their things. With each bomb, they got poorer. Now they lived together in one small room" (13). In their current house, the lavatory "was a very small room with a platform toilet – not the modern Western toilet they used to have!" (23). Indeed, with each bomb, the distance between Parvana's family and their previously Western life increases. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said argues that both Occident and Orient are "man-made," as without the Occident and its dominant position, there would be no Orient: "It is not merely *there*, just as the Occident itself is not just *there*" (5). He points out that "knowledge of the Orient, because generated out of strength, in a sense creates the Orient" (40) and that Orientalism "[promotes] the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')" (43). On a smaller scale, this is what happens in *The Breadwinner*. By giving Parvana a "normal" Western background, Ellis creates a gap between the West and Afghanistan that allows her protagonist to consider Taliban-oppressed Kabul to be "strange" in the same manner as the novel's Western audience would.

This "normal"/"strange" binary dominates the novel and functions as a way of demonstrating the superiority of Western values. In "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," Donna Haraway explores the implications of such binaries. Closely related to Said's *Orientalism*, she notes that these binaries are

systems of oppression, as they “have been systematic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of color, [...] in short, domination of all constituted as *others*, whose task is to mirror the self” (35). She argues that “we are cyborgs,” (8) as these binaries are both an unrealistic and idealistic way of categorisation. Like the Occident/Orient distinction, these binaries are manmade. Haraway points out several of these “troubling dualisms”: “Self/other,” “male/female,” “civilised/primitive,” and “right/wrong” (35). With the gap that Ellis creates between the West and Afghanistan, she strongly adheres to such dualisms, using them, as Haraway stated, to assert Western dominance and superiority.

As a result of Parvana’s Western upbringing, she becomes the “self,” looking at the rest of Afghan society as the “other”. Returning to the most prominent binary in the novel, the Western values and customs that she was brought up with are “normal,” while the Afghan customs are depicted as “strange”. Indeed, Parvana creates this binary herself when she says that she wants to be an “ordinary kid again”: “I want to sit in a classroom and go home and eat food that someone else has worked for. I want my father to be around. I just want a normal, boring life” (128). It is striking that Parvana uses the terms “ordinary” and “normal” because, as established, Parvana’s upbringing was by no means representative of the upbringing of an ordinary Afghan child. Indeed, Parvana’s definition of a “normal” life suggests the wish for an ordinary Western life, rather than an ordinary Afghan one.

If it were not for the fact that Ellis explicitly states that Parvana is an Afghan girl, there would be no reason to assume that this is the case. By presenting an educated protagonist whose “normal” resembles life in the Occident, Ellis is able to demonstrate the differences between the West and Afghanistan more explicitly. However, by doing so through the use of the “normal”/“strange” binary, she reinforces the conception of the Orient as strange and unfamiliar and supports the idea that Western life is superior.

2.2 Afghan culture and the depiction of the Taliban

Although Ellis portrays Western life as superior, the stories that Parvana’s father shares indicate that it is not altogether a pro-West narrative. Through his stories, Ellis emphasises Afghanistan’s extensive and powerful history. Parvana’s father “had been a history teacher before his school was bombed” and

“Parvana had grown up with his stories” (27). Parvana is familiar with Afghanistan’s long history of invasions: “Everybody had come to Afghanistan. The Persians came four thousand years ago. Alexander the great came, too, followed by the Greeks, Arabs, Turks, British, and finally the Soviets” (11). However, this history does not bother her at all. In fact, she takes pride in the fact that “all these people had come to Parvana’s beautiful country to try to take it over, and the Afghans had kicked them all out again!” (11). Here, she echoes her father, who also states that “everybody comes to Afghanistan to try to take over, but we Afghans kick them all out” (27). Both Parvana and her father emphasise that history shows the strength of Afghanistan as a united nation: “We Afghans”. Her father adds to this by stating the following: “We are the most welcoming, hospitable people on earth. A guest to us is a king. [...] We Afghans do everything we can to make our guest comfortable. But if someone comes into our home or our country and acts like our enemy, then we will defend our home” (27-28). Parvana’s father depicts Afghanistan’s history of invasions as a series of events that demonstrates the dedication of Afghans to their country.

While this hospitality is presented as an aspect of Afghan culture that Parvana takes pride in, it is also depicted as a complication in regard to their current situation. Parvana states that “now the country was ruled by the Taliban militia. They were Afghans, and they had very definite ideas about how things should be run” (11). As a result of the Taliban regime, Afghanistan turned into a shattered nation; Parvana states that most of her friends have fled the country and her father adds that “Afghans cover the earth like stars cover the sky” (9). Indeed, they are no longer confronted with an external enemy, but with an internal one, creating division rather than union, illustrating one of the ways in which the Taliban regime differs from previous invasions.

Although this history provides a patriotic contrast to the pro-West values of Parvana’s upbringing, the depiction of the Taliban and their regime throughout the rest of the novel shows a strong Western influence. Ellis pointedly addresses the cruelty of the Taliban regime, but she does not offer sufficient context to allow her young audience to understand it. There are three major violent encounters in the novel. First, “four Taliban soldiers burst through the door,” “grabbed [Parvana’s] father,” and “one of the soldiers hit him in the face. Blood from his nose dropped onto his white shalwar kameez”

(31). Second, Parvana and her friend Shauzia enter a busy stadium and are confronted with the punishment of prisoners: “One of the soldiers took out a sword, raised it above his head and brought it down on the man’s arm. Blood flew in every direction. The man cried out in pain” (121). Third, Homa tells the story of her escape from Mazar-e-Sharif: “[The Taliban] went from house to house, looking for enemies [...] They grabbed my father and my brother and took them outside. They shot them right in the street. My mother started hitting them, and they shot her, too” (151). Homa hides in the closet and when she finally leaves “the wild dogs had started eating some of the bodies, so there were pieces of people on the sidewalks and in the streets. [She] even saw a dog carrying a person’s arm in its mouth!” (152). These encounters are explicit, especially when taking into consideration that Ellis wrote *The Breadwinner* as a children’s novel, placing a strong emphasis on the barbarity of the Taliban’s deeds.

However, while the violent deeds of the Taliban hold a prominent position in the novel, *The Breadwinner* barely ventures to explain the regime itself, making it difficult for both Parvana and the novel’s young audience to fathom these violent acts. Parvana states that she “was afraid to look up at the soldiers. She had seen what they did, especially to women, the way they would whip and beat someone they thought should be punished” (8). “They thought” indicates an underlying fear and problem regarding the regime that is echoed throughout the entire novel: The incomprehensibility and subjectivity of the rules. Parvana also states that “the Taliban burned books they didn’t like” (32) and when she is sent to the market, she is unsure whether she should wear a burqa because “[she] wasn’t sure if she would be considered a woman” (54). Returning to the “normal”/“strange” binary, these are all elements in Taliban-oppressed Afghanistan that Parvana finds “strange,” as she is unable to understand them.

While Parvana’s confusion regarding these matters is understandable, her father produces a similar statement that makes Parvana’s lack of understanding problematic. When her father is released from prison and Parvana asks him why they let him go, he responds by saying: “I don’t know why they arrested me. How would I know why they let me go?” (160) The problem that needs to be addressed is that he *does* know why he was arrested, as he was told so: He went to England for his education and “Afghanistan doesn’t need [his] foreign ideas” (31). Here, his Western education and anti-Taliban values

strongly influence his thought process. Indeed, the issue is not that he does not know the reason for his arrest, but the problem is that he does not agree with it. This becomes problematic in regard to understanding Parvana's confusion, as it raises the question whether her confusion is actually the result of the Taliban's regime or whether her father simply did not explain it to her on the grounds of not agreeing with it. Having identified another occasion on which Parvana echoes her father's words, Parvana might merely be repeating her father's opinions as she is unable to form her own without understanding the situation.

A prime example that highlights this problem is the way in which the novel treats the burqa. Parvana asks her father "how do women in burqas manage to walk along these streets?", to which he jokingly responds that "they fall down a lot" (17). Everyone in Parvana's family loathes wearing the burqa, Parvana's sister even says that "as soon as [she] [gets] out of Taliban territory, [she's] going to throw off [her] burqa and tear it into a million pieces" (139). Parvana's father's most prominent story within the novel is that of the Afghan legend Malalai. Malalai, more commonly referred to as Malalai of Maiwand, became a national hero for rekindling the battle spirit during the Anglo-Afghan Battle of Maiwand in 1880. According to Parvana's father, "she ran to the front of the battle and turned to face the Afghan troops. She ripped the veil off her head" (28) and then, "waving the veil in the air like a battle flag, she led the troops into a final rush at the British" (29). However, there are several different versions of Malalai's tale and it is noteworthy that Ellis opted to use this one. According to Roshan Noorzai, not all accounts involve her taking off her veil. Instead, other accounts state that Malalai was waving the Afghan flag: "[She] came forth and took the flag, after the flagholder was killed, and shouted a couplet (*landay*), which encouraged Afghans to go forward" (239). Instead of choosing the version of the story that promotes Afghan patriotism, Ellis opts for the version where a girl rips off her veil and uses it as a symbol of power and liberation.

Ellis' decision to use that version of Malalai's tale and the overall negative depiction of the burqa strongly relate to the debate regarding the representation of burqas in Western culture. Alia Al-Saji argues that "western representations of veiled women very often misrepresent the lived experiences of Muslim women and the diverse meaning of veiling" (877) and that "in western representation of the

veiled women, the veiled body is over-determined as an ‘oppressed’ body” (891). In line with this debate, Thomas Bean and Helen Harper argue that “the burqa symbolizes the loss of freedom. Yet the novel, written by a Westerner, albeit one with personal experience in Afghanistan, may be oversimplifying issues” as Ellis “leaves out those who might elect to wear the burqa” (99). Indeed, the novel depicts the burqa as a symbol of oppression and at no point does Ellis mention that there are women in Afghanistan who willingly wear the burqa. However, the reason why voluntary veiling is not a part of Ellis’ narrative is more problematic than Bean and Harper suggest. Not only does Ellis fail to mention that veiling might be a voluntary action, but she also fully ignores why it would be. In the entire novel, there is only one reference to religion, namely when Parvana’s father says the Taliban are religious scholars (14). Ellis completely disregards religion, one of the results being that the burqa is never linked to Islam.

Both for the novel’s young audience and for Parvana, this missing link with religion is an important one. The burqa is portrayed negatively, but Parvana appears to be unfamiliar with its context, causing her to hate a thing she does not understand. Indeed, it becomes yet another “strange” custom, which she likely only denounces as a result of echoing her father. In this light, the “normal”/“strange” binary does not solely relate to Orientalism in the sense that Western standards are depicted as superior to Afghan ones, but also in the sense that “strange” becomes a shield which Ellis raises, allowing her to withhold the context and explanations offered by Afghan culture.

There is another significant passage in the novel where Ellis raises this shield, namely Parvana’s transformation into a boy. While this is an important part of Parvana’s journey, Ellis addresses it laconically. After her father’s arrest, there are only women left in Parvana’s household. As they are not allowed to leave the house without a man, they decide that they will “turn [Parvana] into a boy” (63). They call her Kaseem, cut off her hair, and make her wear boys’ clothes, so she can earn money and go grocery shopping. While this is a huge sacrifice, Parvana claims that she likes it and that she is glad that she does not have to wear the “strange” burqa anymore, as “with her face open to the sunshine, she was invisible [...] she was just one more boy on the street” (70). This transformation is addressed in an

extremely casual manner. However, there is more context needed for the reader to understand it, context which Ellis does not provide.

Indeed, Ellis glosses over the fact that cross-dressing is an age-old Afghan tradition: The practice of “bacha posh”. According to Jenny Nordberg, who has done extensive research on the practice, bacha posh “literally translates as ‘dressed like a boy’ in Dari” (67). Nordberg points out that the practice can be found among both rich and poor families and that “the only thing that binds the girls together is their family’s *need* for a son” (69). She adds that “having a *bacha posh* in the family is an accepted and uncontroversial practice” (70). During Nordberg’s interviews with Afghan women, she is told that “‘it is [an Afghan] tradition from a long time ago [...] It was before Islam even came to Afghanistan,’” (108) which, Nordberg points out, would mean that the tradition dates back more than 1400 years. Instead of pointing out the place of the bacha posh in Afghan culture, Ellis leaves it unexplained and “strange”.

As a bacha posh, Parvana has a crucial encounter with a Talib that changes the novel’s hitherto severely anti-Taliban values into more ambivalent ones. After her father’s arrest, Parvana takes over his occupation of reading illiterate people’s letters at the market and her very first customer is a Talib. He brings her an old letter that is addressed to Fatima Azima, his wife. When Parvana finishes reading and hands him the letter “his hands trembled” and “she saw a tear fall from his eye. It rolled down his cheek until it landed in his beard” (79). The Talib explains why he is emotional: “‘My wife is dead,’ he said. ‘This was among her belongings. I wanted to know what it said’” (79). His emotion and willingness to explain himself are striking as, juxtaposed with the explicit and violent encounters and the overall condemnation of the regime, the image of a friendly Talib does not align with Parvana’s conception of the Taliban as thoroughly wicked men. This encounter has a strong impact on Parvana: “Up until then she had seen Talibs only as men who beat women and arrested her father. Could they have feelings and sorrow, like other human beings?” (80) Indeed, while the Taliban are dehumanised throughout the rest of the novel, this encounter causes Parvana to feel slightly more sympathetic, “Parvana found it all very confusing” (80).

Looking at the “strange” shield that Ellis continuously raises, it is not surprising that Parvana finds it all confusing; like the reader, she is not offered sufficient context. When her own experiences clash with the values her father has taught her, her knowledge of the nation’s customs and culture is insufficient for her to pass her own judgement. Both Afghan culture and the Taliban regime are incomprehensible due to the lack of explanation, causing Ellis’ Afghanistan to become an archetype for a “strange” country in the Orient rather than an accurate and helpful depiction of Afghanistan itself.

2.3 Afghanistan as the setting

This avoidance of the exploration of necessary context shows that the novel is not about Taliban-oppressed Afghanistan, but that Taliban-oppressed Kabul merely functions as a setting for Parvana’s story. There are several passages in the novel where Ellis attempts to make her depiction of Afghanistan more authentic. The first two pages of the novel are a map of the world where Afghanistan is highlighted and a map of the country itself, suggesting an interest in educating her audience. In addition to the history that she explores through the father’s stories, Ellis demonstrates the beauty of the country. Parvana asks the foreign customers at the marketplace “where they were from and what it was like there” and “sometimes they would tell her about the weather. Sometimes they told of the beautiful mountains or the field of opium poppies blooming into flower, or the orchards heavy with fruit” (132). Another notable aspect is that, while the Taliban are portrayed as horrible and cruel men, the other men in the novel are friendly and show the hospitality that Parvana’s father argues characteristic of Afghan people. For example, when Parvana and Shauzia have accidentally entered the stadium during the punishment of the prisoners, a “kind voice above Parvana” tells them to “keep [their] heads down,” as “there will be time enough when they are old enough to see such things” (121). When the girls drop the contents of their trays, “the men around them gathered up the spilled items and returned them to the girls” (121). Ellis continuously refers to Afghanistan and Afghan culture, however, these references are all of a superficial character.

Looking at the content of the novel, Afghanistan never becomes the topic. Instead, the country functions as a backdrop for the topic that Ellis focuses on: Childhood in a war zone. While the Taliban

play an important role in the lives of Parvana's family, it is the abnormality of Parvana's life and her experiences under the regime that are placed at the centre. The most prominent aspect of the novel that illustrates the abnormality of Parvana's life is the family's financial situation and Parvana's role as the breadwinner. As noted previously, Parvana's family faces severe financial decline as a result of all the bombings, causing them to live in a one-room apartment rather than a big Western house. In addition, they have to sell all of their luxuries, such as good clothing, because they need the money and "there's no longer any use for it" (24). While the family could previously afford servants and a car, they now live in abject poverty, forcing them to prioritise food over anything else, turning other basic needs into luxuries: "What Parvana earns keeps us in nan, rice and tea, but there's nothing extra. We need more money for rent, for propane, for fuel for the lamps" (116). This shifted definition of what qualifies as "extra" illustrates the aforementioned gap between Parvana's "civilised" Western upbringing and her "primitive" life under Taliban rule.

Parvana constantly mourns this fall from grace – grace being a Western lifestyle – and expresses a wish for life to go back to "normal." There are several more passages which resemble the aforementioned conversation in which Parvana states that she wants to be an "ordinary kid again". To earn money for rent and propane, Parvana takes on the gruesome job of digging up bones and, while she does not understand what will happen with the bones, it is a job that pays well. This is another one of the moments where Parvana articulates the injustice of her situation: "We have to remember this," Parvana said. 'When things get better and we grow up, we have to remember that there was a day when we were kids when we stood in a graveyard and dug up bones to sell so that our families could eat'" (111). In addition to noting the abnormality, she also expresses a cautious sense of hope regarding the future, anticipating that when she grows up, she will make money in a "normal" manner and return to her Western lifestyle. However, there is also a looming sense of hopelessness which is reflected in an – oddly prophetic – conversation between her and Shauzia: "Maybe someone should drop a big bomb on the country and start again.' 'They've tried that,' Parvana said. 'It only made things worse'" (138). While Parvana desperately wants the Taliban regime and her suffering to end and for things to go back to "normal", she expresses a sense of helplessness, as she has no influence over it and there appears to

be no way to stop it. The focus of the novel lies on the exploration of Parvana's life under dire and incomprehensible circumstances, making major sacrifices, and experiencing indefinite suffering. The emphasis of the story is not on the setting, but on exploring the "abnormality," i.e. the quality of not being according to Western standards, of Parvana's experiences.

In *The Breadwinner*, Ellis narrates a story about the suffering of a child in a war zone, presenting a version of Afghanistan that is carefully tailored to her Western audience. To create the setting, she draws on accuracies, like the history, the geographical location and landscape, and the presence of the Taliban. However, the actual exploration of Afghanistan and its culture is limited and shows a strong Western influence. Namely, the protagonist is not representative of the country and important aspects of her story – such as Islam and the context of the bacha posh – are completely missing from the novel, while other aspects – such as the legend of Malalai of Maiwand – have been manipulated so that they reflect perceptions of the novel's Western audience. Indeed, based solely on this novel, the circumstances in Taliban-oppressed Kabul are entirely incomprehensible and the setting is a canvas for the reinforcement of Western superiority.

3. Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007)

After the success of his debut-novel *The Kite Runner* (2003), Afghan-born Khaled Hosseini initially felt some apprehensions when writing his second novel: *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). In an interview published on his own website in 2007, he admitted that he had started to doubt his own literary skills, knowing the scale of the audience that awaited his next novel. Moreover, he had a raised awareness of the power he was given in representing Afghanistan, stating that “it is quite a burden for a writer to feel a responsibility to represent his or her own culture and to educate others about it” (“Interview”).

Like Ellis, Hosseini explores pre-9/11 Afghanistan, however, the two authors are writing from two different perspectives: While Ellis wrote about the present situation, Hosseini's narrative is written in retrospect. The novels are separated by, what Alain Badiou calls, an “event,” a moment of historical rupture. Badiou argues that “the event reveals the void of the situation [...] because it shows that what there is now was previously devoid of truth” (*Inaesthetics* 55). Badiou adds that an “event” is “unpredictable and incalculable,” (*Inaesthetics* 55) which means that it is unthinkable until it has taken place. Therefore, the occurrence of an “event” initiates a “new present” in which this “truth” has entered the public domain, abolishing the previous “present.” Treating 9/11 as an “event,” this means that Ellis and Hosseini were writing during different “presents” which were marked by different “truths.”

While Ellis' *The Breadwinner* could not have been influenced by the attacks and their aftermath, I argue that Hosseini's exploration of pre-9/11 Afghanistan is permeated by his knowledge of the “event.” Writing from the “new present,” Hosseini is unable to retrospectively explore pre-9/11 Afghanistan without taken the new “truth” into account. Indeed, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a justification for the Western intervention after the attacks in 2001, rather than an attempt to objectively educate his audience. Like Ellis' *The Breadwinner*, Hosseini's novel strongly relies on Haraway's West-dominant binaries. However, while Ellis used her “normal”/”strange” binary to illustrate the contrast between the East and the West, Hosseini forces a “modern”/”traditional” binary onto the central characters, not only illustrating the contrast between the East and the West, but also creating a dichotomy in Afghan society. Hosseini continuously places the “modern” West on a pedestal, while “traditional” Afghan culture is inextricably linked to violence and oppression. Hosseini depicts pre-9/11 Afghanistan

as a nation that is suffering under its “traditional” culture, a problem which can only be solved by an external entity, namely the West.

3.1 Dual protagonists

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini presents a protagonist who is strikingly similar to Ellis’ Parvana. Like Parvana, Laila is a young Afghan girl who grows up in a modern environment. Laila’s father is highly educated, having graduated from Kabul University, and “he’d been a high school teacher before the communists fired him,” (114) just like Parvana’s father. He, too, encourages his daughter’s education as he considers it an important factor in the rebuilding of the country, saying that “when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, maybe even more. Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated” (114). Laila receives a formal modern education and, like Parvana, she is “one of the lucky ones” (*Breadwinner* 9) who can read.

However, Laila’s school does not solely focus on literacy and numeracy skills, but also on “propaganda teaching,” (133) as her modern teacher shares her controversially progressive ideas in her classes. For example, she teaches her students that the Soviets came to Afghanistan to “help [them] defeat these brutes who want [their] country to be a backward, primitive nation” (111) and, like Parvana’s father, she makes a controversial statement in relation to veiling: “She did not cover and forbade the female students from doing it. She said women and men were equal in every way and there was no reason women should cover if men didn’t” (111). Although the audience of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is more likely to be familiar with the burqa’s relation to religion than Ellis’ young audience, Hosseini also never links the burqa to the Islamic faith and, instead, depicts veiling as an act of oppression.

Indeed, Rasheed, Laila’s husband who I will address in more detail in section 3.2, explicitly links veiling to a “modern”/“traditional” binary. He states that some of his male customers bring their wives along and that “[these] women come uncovered.” (69) Rasheed links this reluctance to cover, not to irreligion, but to the fact that these male customers “think they’re being modern men, intellectuals, on account of their education” (69). The fact that this aversion to veiling is specifically linked to

“modern” Afghans is another important element in the discussion regarding the representation of the burqa in Western culture. Al-Saji argues that “rather than representing Muslim women, these [Western] images [of veiled women] fulfill a different function: They provide the foil or negative mirror in which western constructions of identity and gender can be positively reflected” (877). She points out that, by depicting “traditional” women as oppressed, these representations “foster the impression that women within western social orders are neither oppressed nor bounded by gender norms, i.e. that western woman is ‘free’” (889). The fact that these “modern” women in the novel resist the act of veiling shows that they live within these “western social orders” and that they are “free,” in contrast to the “traditional” Afghan women who are visibly oppressed by their veils. Both Parvana and Laila grow up on this “modern” and “free” side of Afghan society, having intellectual fathers, a modern education, and an upbringing that is in line with Western standards.

However, while Ellis solely offered the perspective of a “modern” protagonist, Hosseini juxtaposes Laila with a contrastively “traditional” second protagonist: Mariam. Laila’s perspective is not introduced until the second part of the novel; as the story is told in chronological order and Mariam is nineteen years older than Laila, the first part exclusively focuses on Mariam’s upbringing. Mariam is born in the spring of 1959, “the 26th year of King Zahir Shah’s mostly uneventful forty year reign” (11). Yet, this earlier history of Afghanistan is barely explored. Hosseini only mentions a couple of events from this period and Mariam’s perspective on them is never shared. In contrast to Laila’s upbringing, which is marked by the discussion of politics, these events that affect Afghanistan on a national level barely impact Mariam, whose life is dominated by suffering on a personal level. While this older and “traditional” second protagonist would allow Hosseini to cover a broader period in Afghan history and to explore more of Afghan culture, he does not take this opportunity.

Instead, Hosseini solely focuses on the contrast that the juxtaposition creates, using this “traditional” protagonist to reinforce the superiority of the “modern” one. To stress the contrast, Hosseini depicts two extremes, introducing a set of additional binaries to boost the “modern”/“traditional” one. In contrast to Laila, who goes to school and grows up in a two-story house in Kabul, Mariam grows up in abject poverty; until she is fifteen, she lives in a small deserted kolba with her mother, having no

income, and living off of the monthly delivery of groceries that Jalil, Mariam's father, sends them (13). This contrast shows that Hosseini has added a second binary to stress the "modern"/"traditional" one: "Civilised"/"primitive" (Haraway 35). Mariam gets a religious education from "the elderly village Koran tutor," (15) but she desperately wants to attend a "real school" (17). Mariam referring to "modern" education as "real" school introduces a third binary: "Truth"/"illusion" (Haraway 35). Returning to Haraway, these binaries are "historical systems of domination" (20) and, by enforcing a set of them onto the dual protagonists, Hosseini depicts the "modern" and westernised Laila as superior to the "traditional" Mariam.

Mariam's wish to attend a "real" school also demonstrates a characteristic of these binaries, namely Mariam's awareness of her inferior position. Haraway argues that these dualisms in Western culture are systematic to the "domination of all constituted as *others*, whose task is to mirror the self" (Haraway 35). Indeed, Mariam's desperate wish to attend a "real school" shows her desire to mimic the superior "modern" Afghan women. Mariam's reflection upon her inferiority persists throughout the novel. In the streets of Kabul, she sees "modern Afghan women married to modern Afghan men" and "she imagined that they all had university degrees" and "that they worked in office buildings" (74). While she looks up to them, "these women mystified Mariam. They made her aware of her own lowliness, her plain looks, her lack of aspirations, her ignorance of so many things" (74). Through the binaries, Hosseini illustrates, what Said calls, "the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority" (42). In the novel, this distinction is "ineradicable" indeed, as, while Mariam's awareness of her inferiority makes her want to mirror the Western "self," she is unable to do so as she is inextricably bound to the inferior side of the binaries.

Her admiration of the fact that these "modern" women might have jobs does not solely show her awareness of her inferiority, but it also introduces the most notable binary that Hosseini has added to the "modern"/"traditional" one: "Active"/"passive". When Mariam asks her mother if she can attend a "real" school, her mother refuses, as the only skill she will need in life is to "endure" (18). Mariam's life is marked by passivity, endlessly enduring unbearable pain and oppression, making her the ultimate representation of the Orient as presented in Said's *Orientalism*. Said argues that "the West is the actor,

the Orient a passive reactor” (109) and that, for “the Oriental [...] passivity is the presumed role” (308). This is exactly the role that Mariam takes on; she is a pawn that is constantly moved by other characters. When her mother commits suicide, she is temporarily moved to her father’s house, however, not considering himself suitable to take care of her, he instead marries her off to Rasheed, a suitor in his forties who lives in Kabul (46).

This marriage is where the two protagonists meet and where the “active”/“passive” binary is most evident. In contrast to Mariam, who is forced to marry Rasheed, Laila willingly agrees to the marriage. Indeed, Laila’s decision to marry Rasheed is a thoroughly motivated one, as she got pregnant out of wedlock and the marriage is an opportunity for her to pretend that the child is legitimate: “She made her decision quickly. Six weeks had passed since her time with Tariq. Any longer and Rasheed would grow suspicious” (213). Laila understands that it is “spectacularly unfair to Mariam” (213), yet she goes through with her plan, claiming her agency. Rasheed is abusive towards both of his wives, but they respond differently to it. When Rasheed tells Mariam to chew on grit, so that she will “know what [her] rice tastes like,” (103) she does as she is told. Indeed, Mariam has learned how to “endure”: “Over the years, [she] had learned to harden herself against his scorn and reproach, his ridiculing and reprimanding” (234). When Rasheed turns to physical abuse, Mariam becomes paralysed, “passive,” faced with “fear she had no control over” (234). In contrast, Laila remains “active”. When Rasheed raises his belt at Mariam, Laila responds by “lung[ing] at him” and “grab[b]ing his arm with both hands” (235), saying that she “couldn’t let him,” as she “wasn’t raised in a household where people did things like that” (243). These acts of resistance are fruitless because Rasheed has much more physical strength, however, it shows that Laila will never sacrifice her “active” quality. Through the contrast that Hosseini creates between the two characters, Laila becomes the western “self,” being “modern,” “civilised,” and “active,” whereas Mariam becomes the “other,” being “traditional,” “primitive,” and “passive”.

The reason why the “active”/“passive” binary is the most notable one in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is because it is the only binary that proves to be temporarily eradicable. While Laila would never willingly sacrifice her “active” status, she is forced into passivity at the climax of the novel, when Rasheed finds out that Laila is back in contact with Tariq: “[Rasheed] meant to suffocate her, and there

was nothing either of them could do about it” (339). Knowing that Rasheed will kill Laila, Mariam hits him with a shovel and “it occurred to her that this was the first time that *she* was deciding the course of her own life” (340-41). Indeed, for the first time, Mariam becomes an “active” character. However, immediately after killing Rasheed, she becomes “passive” again. While Laila plans on fleeing the country, Mariam remains fixed in place: “It isn’t right that I run. I *can’t*” (349). She remains in Kabul so that, when Rasheed’s body is found, she will be found guilty and Laila will be safe. She receives capital punishment for this crime and, when told to kneel at the stadium, “one last time, Mariam did as she was told,” (361) dying with the same passivity that she has lived with all her life.

Indeed, Mariam is not primarily “deciding the course of her own life” when killing Rasheed; she is deciding the course of Laila’s life. Mariam recalls the stories that Laila told her “with an air of gratitude, with the expression of a person to whom a unique and coveted privilege had been extended” (349). She is only able to pass the “active”/“passive” binary in order to save the superior “self”. As Haraway states: “The self is the One who is not dominated, who knows that by the service of the other; the other is the one who holds the future, who knows that by the experience of domination” (35). Indeed, Mariam holds Laila’s “future,” a future which is more important than the sacrifice. Rebecca Stuhr highlights this in her exploration of the novel, as she points out that “Mariam’s death, significantly, does not end the book. Rather than focusing on her action as sacrifice and martyrdom, the narrative continues and by doing so emphasizes the practicality of Mariam’s act” (62). Mariam’s sacrifice signifies Laila’s superiority, her “modern” life being portrayed as the more valuable one and the one that is more worthy of saving.

In the same interview that I referenced at the start of this chapter, Hosseini is asked what the biggest misconception about Afghanistan is, to which he responds: “That women never had a say in Afghan society” (“interview”). While he addresses this misconception in the novel, Hosseini only partially repudiates it as he places a binary onto it: “Modern” women had a say, but “traditional” women did not. Like Ellis, Hosseini places his “modern,” westernised protagonist in a position of superiority. However, whereas Ellis shielded herself from elaborating on the inferior side of these boundaries by merely depicting everything belonging to “traditional” culture as “strange,” Hosseini concretely

illustrates both sides of the binaries and explores the dynamic between them. As a result, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* does not solely assert that “modern,” westernised Afghan women are superior, but it also explicitly places the “traditional” Afghan women in a position of inferiority and passivity.

3.2 Afghan men and the Taliban

Through the female protagonists, the dichotomy between Afghanistan’s “modern” and “traditional” women is foregrounded, however, Hosseini has created a similar dichotomy between the male characters in the novel. Hosseini’s depiction of Afghan men is strikingly different from Ellis’; in *The Breadwinner*, Afghans are depicted as “the most welcoming, hospitable people on earth” (27) and, while the Taliban are portrayed as extremely cruel, the rest of the Afghan men in the novel are friendly and helpful. In the aforementioned interview, Hosseini states that another big misconception about Afghanistan is that “[Afghan] men are all like the Taliban.” Although he speaks out against this misconception, Hosseini attributes the wickedness that Ellis solely ascribes to the Taliban to a larger part of Afghanistan’s male society than merely the religious extremists.

Several scholars have analysed the male characters in this novel, most of the articles being related to this misconception. Coeli Fitzpatrick, who wrote one of the most influential articles on this subject, argues that “Hosseini has used almost every common stereotype of the Muslim man: Infinitely sexual, irrational, and cruel,” which leads him to conclude that the novel is “designed to portray misogyny simply as an innate characteristic of most Afghan men” (249). However, “most Afghan men” is a vague phrase to use for such a claim, especially because, as Melissa Lam argues in a response paper, “there are many other, in fact a majority of central male characters in *A Thousand* that are not brutal or given misogynistic tendencies” (258). For example, she notes that Tariq “resists Muslim stereotypes by not being overtly masculine and physical and is progressive in thought” (258). Indeed, while this extremely cruel behaviour is ascribed to a larger section of Afghan society than merely the Taliban, it does not apply to all the male characters in the novel.

Both Fitzpatrick and Lam refer to “Muslim stereotypes,” a notable phrase, especially taking into consideration how often it is used in articles about this novel. According to the Association of Religion

Data Archives, around 99% of Afghans were Muslim in the 1980s, which means that it is statistically safe to assume that all the characters in the novel are Muslim. However, while Mariam and Rasheed are explicitly linked to religion, Hosseini never confirms that Laila, Laila's father, and Tariq are followers of Islam, meaning that these three characters are potentially part of this 1% of Afghans that were not Muslim. They never talk about their relation to religion, they rarely appear in religious contexts, and, whenever they do, they are placed into it by other characters. For example, when Laila's daughter asks her mother to join her in the morning prayers, Laila shows no interest in the prayers themselves, but she decides to join her daughter because "the prayers, Laila knows, are Aziza's way of clinging to Mariam" (397). Accordingly, it is not surprising that these characters, specifically the male ones, "[resist] Muslim stereotypes"; the novel offers no reason why they should adopt them. This in contrast to Rasheed, who, as Fitzpatrick notes, is presented as a stereotypical Muslim man, supposedly having been able to adopt these stereotypes through his relation to the Islam. Lam rightfully notes that Tariq is "progressive in thought," but overlooks that this lack of religious motives is a marker of this progressiveness and that religion creates a solid distinction between the "good" men and the "Muslim stereotypes" in the novel. Indeed, this progressiveness shows that the central male characters are divided by a "modern"/"traditional" binary, just like Laila and Mariam, and that Islamic beliefs and Muslim stereotypes are placed on the "traditional" and inferior side. As with the misconception about female oppression, Hosseini only partially repudiates the misconception that "[Afghan men] are all like the Taliban." Instead, he forces a problematic dichotomy onto it: The "modern" Afghan men are not like the Taliban, but the "traditional" Afghan men are.

This connection between "traditional" Afghan men and the Taliban is strengthened by the timeline of the novel. The wicked behaviour that Ellis solely links to the Taliban is not only applied to a broader group of men in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, but also to a broader period in Afghan history. As the narrative stretches over 44 years, starting in 1959 with Mariam's birth and ending in 2003, the Taliban and their regime only make up a small section of the novel. However, Rasheed is depicted as cruel and abusive from the moment that he marries Mariam in 1974, showing that violent and oppressive behaviour long predates the Taliban regime. In addition to the constant physical abuse, "Rasheed's

demands and judgments rained down on [his wives] like the rockets of Kabul” (218). One of these demands is that his wives wear a burqa, however, not for religious reasons, as noted previously. Instead, he argues that only “modern men” (69) allow their wives to leave the house unveiled and, as he is a “traditional” man, he states that “it embarrasses [him], frankly, to see a man who’s lost control over his wife” (69). He forces his wives to wear burqas before the Taliban has even been founded. When the Taliban does capture Kabul in September 1996 and enforces the harsh application of Islamic law, Rasheed’s life barely changes. Indeed, the Taliban regime is merely a reinforcement of his own “traditional” ideals. When Laila speaks out against the regime, Rasheed responds by saying “you think this is some new, radical idea the Taliban are bringing?” (272). Again, Rasheed points out the binary, it is not “new” or “radical,” according to Rasheed, it is “traditional”: “Ever cared to visit the *real* Afghanistan [?] [...] I can tell you that there are many places in this country that have always lived this way” (272). The novel links “real” and “traditional” Afghan culture to the Taliban regime in such a manner, that extreme oppression and violence are depicted as a systemic problem of “traditional” Afghan society rather than an issue that is mainly linked to the religious extremists, which is how Ellis depicts it in *The Breadwinner*.

Indeed, the Taliban are barely present, even in the part of the novel that is set between 1996 and 2001. This can be attributed to the fact that the story is written from the perspective of two female protagonists, both of whom are housebound under Taliban-rule. As part of the regime, the Taliban ordered that all women should “*stay inside [their] homes at all times. It is not proper for women to wander aimlessly about the streets. If [they] go outside, [they] must be accompanied by a mahram, a male relative*” (271). While Parvana was able to wander the streets of Kabul as she was, initially, accompanied by her father and, after his arrest, able to disguise herself as a boy, both Mariam and Laila are only able to go out on the few occasions that Rasheed accompanies them. They hear the news about the Taliban on the radio, they listen to the stories that Rasheed tells them, and they feel the impact that the Taliban has on the country – for example through the lack of food and money. Their conception of the Taliban is mostly based on hearsay and the negative consequences that affect them on a domestic level.

There are a few direct encounters between the female protagonists and the Taliban, but there is only one moment in the whole novel where Hosseini offers an elaborate account of such an encounter: Mariam's trial. The way in which Hosseini depicts the Taliban in this passage is striking, as it has a similar effect on the overall portrayal of the Taliban as Parvana's encounter with the crying Talib. Although the trial ends in Mariam's death, the Taliban are portrayed as notably kind and sympathetic; Mariam states that the Taliban "did not address her with spite or accusation, but with a soft tone of apology" (355). Indeed, the Taliban do not want to punish her, yet they do so out of fear of displeasing God: "'What frightens me, *hamshira*, is the day God summons me before Him and asks, *Why did you not do as I said, Mullah? Why did you not obey my laws?*'" (357). Their final words to Mariam are "'may Allah forgive you'" (357) and, when she is transported to the stadium, a kind Talib tells her that "it's normal to be scared. It's nothing to be ashamed of, mother" (359). As with the depiction of the crying Talib in *The Breadwinner*, Hosseini's depiction of these sympathetic Taliban creates a slightly more ambivalent attitude towards the extremists. By contrasting their extreme violence to their expression of human emotions, both Hosseini and Ellis humanise the Taliban.

The key thing to note in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, however, is that Rasheed is never portrayed in ambivalent terms; he is only depicted as thoroughly wicked. Indeed, Hosseini's novel does not show that "traditional" Afghan men "are all like the Taliban"; according to the narrative, these "traditional" men are worse. The Taliban are absent for most of the novel, yet the themes of suffering and oppression are present throughout. In addition, the rules that are forced upon women by the Taliban were already largely forced upon Laila and Mariam by their husband and, while the Taliban regret having to punish Mariam, Rasheed never shows remorse before or after his violent episodes. Hosseini depicts Afghanistan as a nation that is not solely – or even primarily – suffering under the Taliban regime. Instead, oppression and violence are depicted as timeless aspects of Afghan society, an intrinsic part of the "traditional" culture.

3.3 The West and post-9/11 intervention

As, according to the novel, the problem is inherent in Afghan culture, the solution to this problem must be found elsewhere: The West. Throughout the novel, the West is placed in the dominant position, not solely through the “modern,” westernised characters, but also through the elevation of Western culture. The reason why fifteen-year-old Mariam runs away from her mother is because her father “had let on that an American film was playing at his cinema. It was a special kind of film, what he’d called a cartoon” (25). Mariam’s desperation to see this film, which turns out to be *Pinocchio*, clouds her judgment and, ignoring her mother’s warnings, this visit ends disastrously for all the characters that are involved. Strikingly, the novel brings up another Western film which creates a sense of delirium among Afghan society. In the summer of 2000, “*Titanic* fever gripped Kabul” (296). Although both TVs and films were forbidden under Taliban-rule, “people smuggled pirated copies of the film from Pakistan” and “after curfew, everyone locked their doors, turned out the lights, turned down the volume, and reaped tears for Jack and Rose and the passengers of the doomed ship” (296). While *The Breadwinner*’s Parvana looks to her Afghan idol Malalai of Maiwand as a source of hope and courage, in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Afghanistan collectively manifests a hero from the West: “‘Everybody wants Jack [...] Everybody wants Jack to rescue them from disaster’” (296-97). At one point, Hosseini explicitly demonstrates the dynamic he creates between Western and Afghan culture. Rasheed calls Laila and Tariq “‘Laila and Majnoon,’ referring to the star-crossed lovers of Nezami’s popular twelfth-century romantic poem – a Farsi version of *Romeo and Juliet*, Babi said, though he added that Nezami had written his tale of ill-fated lovers four centuries before Shakespeare” (161). Indeed, the poem is *not* a Farsi version of *Romeo and Juliet*, if anything, it is the other way around. However, as with the “modern,” westernised characters, Hosseini consistently places Western culture in the dominant position.

Even the discussion of Afghan history is tailored to indicate Western superiority. For example, when comparing Parvana’s list of invasions to the one offered in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, there is a striking difference; Parvana lists “the Persians [...] Alexander the Great came, too, followed by the Greeks, Arabs, Turks, British, and finally the Soviets” (11); Hosseini’s list goes as follows: “Macedonians. Sassanians. Arabs. Mongols. Now the Soviets” (144). Indeed, Hosseini has omitted the

British invasion. In addition, Hosseini has cherry-picked events in Afghan history that were significant to the West, the most notable one being the Taliban's destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan. Several scholars, like the architectural historian Michael Falser, argue that the theatrical destruction of the Buddhas was an act of "performative iconoclasm" aimed at the West. According to Falser, there was "an immense international protest" (160) when the Taliban announced that they were going to destroy the Buddhas. UNESCO attempted to stop the destruction and "Western institutions and museum directors, such as Philippe de Montebello from the New York Metropolitan Museum, offered to buy the statues" (160). These efforts did not have the desired results and "both Buddha statues were dynamited by the Taliban on March 11th 2001, in front of the heritage community. Later, the destruction was put on the internet by journalists who filmed the destruction" (160). The Taliban meant for the images to spread globally, as, "some days later, the Taliban invited journalists to Bamiyan to take photographs of the giant empty niches that circulated around the world and filled the front pages of international newspapers" (160). Falser argues that "the act of iconoclasm at Bamiyan was not directed against religious worship, but against an imposed Western concept which viewed these works as 'cultural heritage of humanity'" (163). By all means, it was a momentous event in Afghan history, however, the fact that Hosseini highlights the Buddhas of Bamiyan's destruction as a major loss for Afghanistan primarily shows that *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, like *The Breadwinner*, provides a "translated" version of Afghanistan that is aligned with the Western perception of it.

Through the consistent glorification and prioritisation of Western culture and the constant vilification of Afghan culture, the novel sets the stage for Western intervention in 2001. In *The Breadwinner*, Parvana is hesitant about whether foreign intervention would solve anything, looking at the nation's long history of interventions and noting that "'if someone comes into our home or our country and acts like our enemy, then we will defend our home'" (27-28). When Shauzia argues that "'maybe someone should drop a big bomb on the country and start again,'" Parvana replies that "'they've tried that [...] It only made things worse'" (138). In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, however, this intervention is what the novel has been insisting on, as it is the only way in which the suffering caused by "traditional" Afghan culture can be contained.

Throughout the narrative, characters like Mariam invest their hope in the “modern” Afghan characters, but looking at both the novel and the previously explored statistics, this group is a tiny minority of Afghan society; the nation needs external help. While Laila and Tariq have some concerns regarding the intervention, they quickly accept that “it may not be such a bad thing” and that “this is necessary” (374-75). Failing to address that the intervention was controversial and that the US air strikes on Afghanistan caused a large number of civilian deaths, the novel then skips to Kabul in April 2003, showing a “modern” and “free” city. Indeed, the zenith of freedom has been reached, as “at last, *Titanic* was openly screened for the people of Kabul” (397). Laila has renovated the orphanage, created a classroom, and the “walls are covered now with posters, of dinosaurs, cartoon characters, the Buddhas of Bamiyan, and displays of artwork by orphans” (400). There are flowers in windowsills, people “planting saplings, painting old houses, carrying bricks for new ones,” and there is “music at Kabul’s street corners” (400). At last, in the hands of the West, Hosseini’s Afghanistan is “free”.

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini provides a retrospective exploration of pre-9/11 Afghanistan, however, this exploration is coloured by his knowledge of the “event”, as the narrative leads up to the Western intervention in 2001. While Ellis solely asserts the superiority of Western values, Hosseini also explicitly indicates the inferiority of “traditional” Afghan ones, depicting Afghanistan as a nation that is suffering under its own culture. The violence that Ellis solely ascribes to the Taliban is portrayed as an inherent part of “traditional” culture in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. While “traditional” culture is vilified, the West is consistently placed on a pedestal through the “modern” characters and the dominance of Western culture, causing the gap between the extremely harmful “traditional” Afghan culture and the superiority of the “modern” West to widen as the novel progresses. Returning to Said, Hosseini’s novel captures the essence of Orientalism, “inviting the West to control, contain, and otherwise govern (through superior knowledge and accommodating power) the Other” (48). While *The Breadwinner* denounces the idea of foreign intervention based on Afghanistan’s history, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* presents external help as the only feasible way to end the oppression that is internal to Afghanistan’s “traditional” culture. Through the juxtaposition of the “modern” and the “traditional,” the

novel leads up to Western intervention, which Hosseini depicts as a desirable option which, at that point, appears to be entirely justified.

4. Elliot Ackerman's *Green on Blue* (2015)

When Elliot Ackerman returned to America after having served five tours of duty in Afghanistan and Iraq as a U.S. Marine ("About"), he found that his experiences in Afghanistan did not align with the way in which the country was presented in Western culture. In an interview with *The Rumpus*, he states that he "came home and [...] saw the way Afghans are portrayed: They're corrupt, they steal money, they'll stab you in the back, they're all high on opium all the time. None of the nuance ever gets conveyed" (Klay). Writing from the perspective of an Afghan boy named Aziz, Ackerman tries to convey this nuance in his debut novel *Green on Blue* (2015), set during the War on Terror. The title of this novel is a term used by NATO to signal an "insider attack": "'Blue' indicates friendly NATO (foreign) forces, and 'green' denotes friendly local (Afghan) security forces" (Ahmad 4). Giving away the climax of the novel, Ackerman does not intend to focus on the attack itself, but on Aziz's journey towards the event: "I wanted to take the reader on a journey such that, by the time that action is happening at the end of the book, not only will you see why he does that at the end, but you will actually see why he couldn't do anything else" (Klay). However, I argue that the focus of this novel is not on Aziz's journey at all but, instead, on the role of the West in the War on Terror. Drawing on the same binaries that I have previously identified in *The Breadwinner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Ackerman offers a protagonist that comes across as "traditional," but who is fully tailored to gain the sympathy of the novel's Western audience. By simultaneously reinforcing stereotypes about Afghan society and making the audience feel sympathetic towards Aziz's actions, Ackerman presents Afghanistan as a nation that is unable to "fix" itself and is in need of "active" external intervention, just as Hosseini did in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

4.1 A "faux-traditional" protagonist

In contrast to *The Breadwinner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Ackerman does not offer a "modern" protagonist. In fact, the "modern"/"traditional" binary is not as concrete in *Green on Blue*. Aziz is not brought up in the same Western luxury as Parvana and Laila, but instead he grows up in a kolba, just like Mariam: "Our mud-walled house was small, two thatch-roofed rooms with a courtyard between

them” (4). However, he is also not “traditional” in the same way as Mariam, as he and his brother “both had little education. When [their] mother was a girl, she’d learned how to read and write in a school by the Russians. She taught [Aziz and Ali] how, but nothing more” (5). While Ackerman calls this “little education,” the fact that Aziz and his mother are literate is a significant “modern” detail, as I have established in the previous chapters. Like the “modern” Laila and Parvana, Aziz is “one of the lucky ones” (*Breadwinner* 9) when looking at his education, however, like the “traditional” Mariam, he grows up under primitive conditions.

Ackerman continues to blur the “modern”/“traditional” binary when describing the madrassa that Aziz attends. According to Bergen and Pandey, “madrassas became linked with terrorism in the months that followed [the 9/11 attacks],” (117) as many Taliban were madrassa-educated. However, they note that the term is widely misused, as “in Arabic, the word means simply ‘school’” (119). Although the West has linked madrassas to extremist religious education, “they can be a day or boarding school, a school with a general curriculum, or a purely religious school attached to a mosque” (119). This particular madrassa that Aziz attends teaches two subjects: “The Holy Qur’an” and “math” (15). Indeed, a “traditional” subject and a “modern” one, hence it is not a “purely religious school.” However, taking into consideration that the novel’s audience might be aware of these Western connotations of the madrassa and not of its context in Afghanistan, they might not notice this “modern” element, meaning that the nuance that Ackerman provides is bound to go unnoticed.

Another “modern” aspect to Aziz is his lack of religious convictions, which also marked the central “modern” characters in Hosseini’s novel. When Aziz describes his begging routine, he states that “five times a day, after the faithful finished namaz, Ali would wheel [him] to one of the city’s mosques” (10). The fact that he refers to this group as “the faithful” implies that he is not one of them, however, the novel never makes this explicit. The lack of religious discourse is one of the main issues raised in Tom Bissel’s *The New York Times* review about this novel. Bissel, who made a trip to the Northern Alliance in 2001, notes that he “recalled a magnitude more God talk from those men — for whom ‘God willing’ functioned, essentially, as a comma — than Ackerman allows his otherwise traditional-minded narrator”. Not only does Ackerman leave out religion itself, but also important religious customs like

the burqa. While Ellis and Hosseini manipulated their representations of the burqa by linking it to oppression rather than religion, Ackerman completely avoids having to represent the act of veiling at all. He does not form a position on it, as there is only one female character in the entire novel, who is “still girl enough to go without a burka” (67). Ackerman responds to Bissel’s critique in an interview with Tyrell Mayfield from *The Strategy Bridge*, saying that leaving out religion was “a choice [he] had to make as an author.” He argues that if he would have made religion a significant aspect of the novel, he would “create a narrative which was impenetrable to most readers,” adding that “much of writing is distilling a narrative down to its essential elements, knowing what to include and what to leave out to make the story the most true”. However, this reasoning is paradoxical: When creating a narrative about a war in which religion is one of the key factors, it cannot possibly become more “true” by leaving this aspect out.

Indeed, Ackerman’s wish to make the story “true” does not indicate a desire for total accuracy, but a desire for the story to be realistic, yet relatable and penetrable for his Western audience. As he stated in his interview with *The Rumpus*, he wrote the novel with the intention of making the West understand the decisions of this Afghan boy, so that “by the time that action is happening at the end of the book, not only will you see why he does that at the end, but you will actually see why he couldn’t do anything else” (Klay). Indeed, if the protagonist would not be relatable or likeable, Ackerman would not be able to succeed in his mission. Taking the rise of Islamophobia after the 9/11 attacks into consideration, Ackerman’s decision to neglect religion does not show a wish for a “true” story, but the wish for a relatively uncontroversial one that his audience will be able to read without religious prejudice against the protagonist.

In itself, it is not problematic that Ackerman blurs the “modern”/“traditional” binary. Haraway argues that these binaries are “all in question ideologically” (22) and that there is “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries” (8) as, in reality, they “can be dispersed and interfaced in nearly infinite, polymorphous ways” (23). Creating characters that fit neatly into these binaries, which is what Ellis and Hosseini have done, is an unrealistic thing to do and Haraway would applaud Ackerman’s confusion of the “modern”/“traditional” binary. However, the issue at play in *Green on Blue* is that Ackerman never

acknowledges that some of Aziz's characteristics are not "traditional" and that he cannot expect his Western audience to know enough about Afghan culture to identify these elements themselves. Never acknowledging that Aziz's literacy, education, and lack of religious convictions are extraordinary elements for an Afghan boy, Ackerman presents a "faux-traditional" protagonist who comes across as authentic but is entirely designed to gain the compassion of the Western audience.

4.2 The "green on blue" attack

In addition to the disguised "modern" characteristics, Ackerman also presents Pashtunwali, the primary "traditional" element to Aziz's character and the motivation behind his actions, in a manner that is familiar to the West. Australian Infantry officer Jonathan Hawkins defines Pashtunwali as "a series of tenets on how a Pashtun must live. These tenets define how the tribe interacts and provide guidelines for normative behaviours in living a Pashtun lifestyle" (17). While the novel mentions several of these tenets, for example *melmastia* (hospitality) and *shura* (council), Ackerman places the focus of the novel on two specific ones: *Nang* and *badal*. As a kid, Aziz is taught by his father that "a man, a Pashtun man, had an obligation to take *badal*[, revenge,] when his *nang*, his honour, was challenged" (7). Hawkins points out that "the Pashtunwali code links back to the 17th century, possibly earlier," and that "any notion of instantly understanding the complexity of Pashtun customs would be naïve" (25). However, by picking these two tenets, Ackerman has used the custom exactly in order to create this sense of understanding.

Ackerman uses Pashtunwali to create a punishment frame that shows remarkable resemblance to the Western intervention in the Middle East after the 9/11 attacks. In *Vengeful Citizens, Violent States*, Rachel Stein theorizes that "by framing the use of force as a punishment that the adversary deserves to suffer in return for some prior transgression (real or invented), political elites, and particularly national leaders, can transform a complex international crisis into a simple and familiar narrative," (9) causing the individual citizens to be more supportive of the war. Stein argues that these "punishment frames" can be established through the identification of three criteria, all of which the War on Terror meets. The first criterion is that one can identify "a clear act of wrongdoing that causes undeserved harm to a victim

or victims” (92). Both for the War on Terror and for Aziz, this act of wrongdoing is related to a terrorist attack. In the case of Aziz, it is the Taliban attack on Orgun bazaar in which his brother is killed. In the case of the War on Terror, it is the fact that the Taliban refused to “hand over leaders of the al Qaeda network” after their attack on the World Trade Center, as President Bush states in his speech on the 7th of October 2001. The second criterion is that there is “a clear perpetrator (an individual, group, or state) who is responsible for that act of wrongdoing” (92). In both cases, this is the Taliban. The third criterion is that there is “a proposed military response that will cause some harm or injury to the perpetrator” (92). For the War on Terror, President Bush announced in this same speech on the 7th of October 2001 that “the Taliban will pay a price” and that “on [his] orders, the United States military has begun strikes against al Qaeda terrorist training camps and military installations of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan,” a mission designed to “bring [the terrorists] to justice”. In *Green on Blue*, Aziz joins the US-funded militia to take badal and “strike back at Gazan,” (27) the Taliban leader that was responsible for the attack on the bazaar. As a result of these similar punishment frames, the audience will be able to understand and relate to Aziz’s motivations as they are familiar.

When Aziz joins the US-funded militia, they appear to be fighting for the same cause. However, there is a key difference which becomes a major complication in the alliance: The scale of the punishment frames. While Aziz solely wants to take revenge against a single Taliban leader, the US wants to dismantle the Taliban as a whole, a mission in which Aziz’s Taliban leader plays a key role. The Special Lashkar has Gazan under its thumb as he has become financially dependant on the US-funded group, an issue to which I will return in section 4.3. Looking at the large-scale US mission, Mr Jack, the American adviser, notes that “[Gazan’s] position is of great value to [them],” as he can “provide information to [them] about other Taliban and Haqqani militants” (241). Gazan is completely worn out, “his body was meagre as a boy’s,” (191) and he states that he wants to quit being the Taliban leader because “he is tired” (240). Ackerman humanises this Taliban leader just as Ellis and Hosseini did with the crying Talib in *The Breadwinner* and the friendly Taliban judges in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. However, although Gazan is on his last legs, Jack and Sabir do not allow him to quit because he is of great importance. While Aziz was recruited with the promise of badal, he would never be allowed to

kill Gazan under US orders, as he is simply too valuable. Returning to the idea that Ackerman wants his audience to understand why Aziz resorts to a “green on blue” attack, the different scales of the punishment frames and the clash of missions play a significant role in the decisions that Aziz makes.

However, there is a problem with Ackerman’s narrative which makes all attempts to understand Aziz’s journey towards the event futile: The “green on blue” was not premeditated. While the novel thoroughly explores Aziz’s motives and offers several reasons why this Afghan boy would dislike his American supervisor, none of this information is relevant in relation to Jack’s death. On the evening of the attack, Aziz is meant to meet and kill Gazan and Atal, as per Commander Sabir’s orders: “Gazan for [his] badal, Atal so the Special Lashkar may prosper” (219). Indeed, he is acting against the orders of the American, but he does not intend to kill him; Jack is neither part of this plan nor Aziz’s punishment frame. The only reason why Jack dies is because he has made the unfortunate decision of showing up unannounced at this very meeting. Aziz confirms this when reporting back to Commander Sabir, saying that “he was at the meeting [...] it was unplanned” (250). Aziz first kills Gazan and, acting against the order of the American, who is “fumb[l]ing with his rifle” (242), Aziz understands that either Jack will kill him or he has to kill Jack. While the fact that Aziz shoots Jack makes his death “green on blue” per definition, I argue that the attack itself is not, as it was aimed at Gazan to take badal. In a way, Jack’s death is merely collateral damage.

The use of the term “green on blue” becomes even more problematic when Aziz reflects on the attack. Looking at how all the characters are – primarily financially – linked to each other, Aziz says the following: “I then recalled how Commander Sabir kept Gazan in business, and how the Americans kept Commander Sabir in business. And as I thought of all the ways one could be killed in this war, and of all of those who could do it, I couldn’t think of a single way to die which wasn’t a green on blue. The Americans had a hand in creating all of it” (244). There is a key issue to address here, which is that a “green on blue” attack always involves two specific parties: “‘Blue’ indicates friendly NATO (foreign) forces, and ‘green’ denotes friendly local (Afghan) security forces” (Ahmad 4). Although “the Americans had a hand in creating all of it,” it would not be a “green on blue” attack if there were no foreign NATO forces involved. While Gazan, Sabir, Atal, and Aziz have a connection to America, this

does not make them “blue” forces, but “green” ones. Taking that into consideration, the fact that Aziz says that “[he] couldn’t think of a single way to die which wasn’t a green on blue,” is problematically complex. In this passage, Ackerman’s definition of the term “green on blue” becomes slippery: Aziz cannot both commit a “green on blue” and be the victim of one. Bending the definition of the term, Ackerman instead suggests that when Aziz kills an American (Mr Jack), he belongs to the “green” Afghan camp, but that if he were to be killed by a fellow “green” Afghan, he would belong to the “blue” American camp. Essentially, all harm done against Afghans with affiliations to the US becomes an attack on America, whilst, when the exact same Afghans are the ones committing the attack, any relations to the US are denied and it is blamed on “traditional” Afghan culture.

By calling his novel *Green on Blue*, Ackerman reveals that the novel is not about the Afghan boy. Looking at the punishment frame and the accidental character of Jack’s death, for Aziz, the “green on blue” is not an important element of the story. Indeed, if the novel were truly about Aziz, the emphasis would be on the fact that he is able to take his revenge and kill Gazan. Instead, Aziz’s victory is buried under the importance of the loss of an American and the definition of a “green on blue” attack is – as with Aziz’s “faux-traditional” characteristics – inexplicitly altered, in order to favour the West.

4.3 The absence of the West

While Ackerman places the West in this dominant position, the novel also provides a critique on the American military approach in the War on Terror. This critique is best understood in terms of the “active”/“passive” binary which was also prominent in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. In line with Haraway’s explanation that these binaries serve as a way of domination, the West and the “modern” characters in Hosseini’s novel were continuously described as superior by way of their “active” status, whereas “traditional” culture was marked by passivity. While the War on Terror was initiated by America as a response to the 9/11 attacks, suggesting that they are the “active” party in this war, Ackerman suggests that they have outsourced warfare to such an extent that it has reversed the binary, making the West “passive” and Afghanistan “active”.

Although the story is about a US-funded militia, the US is strikingly absent. Jack is the only American character in the novel and, like the West itself, he is mostly invisible. Aziz states that “when Mr. Jack came to [their] firebase, he came at night,” that he “spent these days in a special building tucked in the perimeter’s far corner,” and then “left at night” (82). There are only a couple of occasions on which Aziz actually sees Mr. Jack and, on these occasions, it becomes clear that Jack is disconnected from both the war and the Afghan boys that are fighting for him; he wore “no uniforms, just regular clothes,” “he whistled to himself some happy tune,” (36) and “his friendliness, American Pashto, and awkward wardrobe made him ridiculous” (234). I noted before that, although they are not his motivation for killing him, there are several reasons why Aziz would dislike the American, his absence, ignorance, and disconnection from the war being the main ones.

The reason why Jack and the West still hold a dominant position despite their “passive” attitudes is because they have claimed their presence and “active status” through a different medium: Money. Like Mariam, Aziz grows up in abject poverty. The money that he and his brother earn after their parents’ death is barely enough for them to survive on and when Ali is seriously injured in the Taliban attack on the bazaar, the only way for Aziz to save him is by fighting for the US. In the hospital, Taqbir, a higher-up with “many gold teeth,” (24) expensive American Marlboro Red cigarettes (25), and a “clean American uniform,” is waiting for him with the promise that the Special Lashkar will give him the opportunity to take badal and that “as long as [he] fight[s], Ali will be cared for here” (27). As the story progresses, it becomes clear that every soldier has been brought to the Special Lashkar with the promise of revenge and financial stability for their family members: “Tawas, Qiam, Yar, even Commander Sabir, the burdens of [their] past led [them] here” (128). Rather than being “active” themselves, the US reassigns this “active” status to the most vulnerable and vengeful Afghan boys for whom the proposed opportunity is a Hobson’s choice, as the money that the US offers them is their family’s only chance for survival. As Aziz states, “Mr. Jack funded the Special Lashkar, too, and by that measure also owned us” (89). Profiting from the harm that is done to these boys, the US attempts to create a position of power in which they are in control of the “active,” whilst being entirely “passive” themselves.

While this plan fails as a result of the aforementioned absence, ignorance, and lack of supervision, there is a key issue with the “active”/“passive” binary that should be highlighted. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, both the “active” Laila and “passive” Mariam are given a voice through Hosseini’s use of dual protagonists. In *Green on Blue*, the entire narrative is presented from Aziz’s point of view, who has been assigned this “active” status. The problem with passivity is that, unless it is voiced as explicitly as it is in the case of Mariam, it is essentially not voiced at all. While the narrative inexplicitly blames the West for its total absence, this is not the message that the novel makes explicit. Indeed, instead of explicitly placing the blame on the West for their “passive” role, Ackerman explicitly demonstrates why it is a problem that the Afghans are placed in an “active” one, reinforcing all the misconceptions about Afghans that he argued needed nuance, namely that “they’re corrupt, they steal money, [and] they’ll stab you in the back” (Klay).

The character who best illustrates this issue is Commander Sabir, who has clandestinely changed the entire course of the war for his own profit. Sabir’s intentions are obscure throughout the whole novel, but it is evident that he has ulterior motives and that he is not solely following US orders: “In Pashto, Commander Sabir’s type of war is called ghabban: This is when someone demands money for protection against a threat they create” (107). Reinforcing the superiority of America, Ackerman adds that “for this type of war, the Americans don’t have a word,” (107) presenting it as an issue that is entirely foreign to the West and solely tied to “corrupt” Afghan culture. Initially, Aziz and the fellow soldiers think that Sabir is not actively hunting down the Taliban because he desperately wants to build an outpost in the village Gomal, an outpost which would drastically increase the Special Lashkar’s income, “money that Commander Sabir pilfered” (107). Promising the villagers of Gomal, who have voted against the outpost, protection against the Taliban in exchange for their co-operation, he “allow[s] Gazan’s mortar attacks into Gomal,” understanding that, as their need for protection increases, the villagers might “chang[e] their minds about [their] proposal” (107). All the elements that Ackerman argues need nuance are present in the character of Sabir, who steals, corrupts, and places his own priorities over those of his fellow Afghans, even if this causes them significant harm.

However, it is not until the end of the novel that it becomes clear how far Sabir has truly led the American mission astray. Indeed, it turns out that he has not solely been allowing Gazan's attacks, but that he is responsible for them; Sabir has used the US funds and materials to sustain the Taliban leader, using him as a pawn in his own plans. During a trip to Gomal, Aziz and some fellow soldiers find a trench which is the hiding place of one of Gazan's men: "Scattered around the trench were blankets, a small plastic jug of diesel, and [...] a bag of uncooked rice, stamped USAID. [...] These are our supplies, said Mortaza" (80). While Sabir punishes Naseeb, the supply commander, and creates a plan to prevent the theft of supplies in the future, at the end of the novel, Sabir admits to Aziz that he has given all these supplies to Gazan: "War is a contest of wills. If I supply my opponent, I control his will, and the war with it" (218). In charge of the money that the Special Lashkar receives from the US, Commander Sabir has singlehandedly turned the War on Terror into a corrupt revenue model, in which the enemy – the Taliban – becomes his colleague and the US his oblivious investor.

Not only does Ackerman present the stereotypes which he openly speaks out against without nuance, but his portrayal of Afghan men is also entirely in line with another common misconception, namely the one introduced by Hosseini in the previous chapter: "That [Afghan men] are all like the Taliban" ("interview"). In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* the treatment of this misconception was problematic because Hosseini forced a dichotomy onto it, depicting the "traditional" Rasheed as utterly wicked, whilst the "modern" men were progressive and kind. In *Green on Blue*, there is a total lack of "modern" characters. While the characters in the novel are given a strong personal motivation for having joined the Special Lashkar, ultimately, they are all like Rasheed: "Traditional" men, depicted as violent, vengeful, and – while fighting on the US-side of the war – "like the Taliban". Yet, the bigger problem is that Aziz is not only "like the Taliban". After Gazan's death, Sabir needs someone to assume his identity because he was a valuable pawn in his plan and because he was not supposed to be killed per US orders. With the promise that Sabir will continue paying for his brother's treatment, Aziz accepts the offer and "become[s] Gazan" (259). Indeed, reinforcing the Western misconception even more strongly than Hosseini did in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Aziz becomes a Taliban leader.

By reinforcing these stereotypes and misconceptions about Afghan men and by demonstrating that their “active” role is a problem, Ackerman’s novel shows strong connections to Orientalist discourse. The war completely escalates in the hands of the Afghan Commander and, like in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the country suffers under its “traditional” culture, which applauds violence and corruption. Instead, the West should claim their “active” status, as they did at the end of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, to keep the situation under control and suppress harmful “traditional” culture by placing it into the “passive” position. This idea and the use of the “active”/“passive” binary strongly relates to an idea that Said presents in *Orientalism*: “There are Westerners, and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated, which usually means having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power” (36). Indeed, they are depicted as a society that should be “dominated by a race that knows them and what is good for them better than they could possibly know themselves” (35). This is exactly the message that Ackerman conveys in *Green on Blue*; Afghan culture is marked by violence and corruption and, therefore, cannot be trusted with an “active” role, even if it is their own country. Instead, Afghanistan’s only hope for a peaceful future is if the West were to claim this “active” role and dominate and suppress “traditional” Afghan culture.

In *Green on Blue*, Ackerman presents an Afghan protagonist who is seemingly authentic and “traditional,” offering a unique perspective on the War on Terror. However, without acknowledging it, he has assigned a set of uncommon and “modern” characteristics to this protagonist, as well as a strikingly familiar punishment frame; the “faux-traditional” protagonist is entirely designed to gain the sympathy of his Western audience. As in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, where Rasheed’s violent behaviour was attributed to “traditional” culture, *Green on Blue* uses “traditional” Pashtunwali to illustrate that violence and corruption are inherent in Afghan culture, offering none of the nuance that Ackerman argued he aimed to provide in his interview with *The Rumpus*. By simultaneously making the audience sympathise with Aziz, Ackerman depicts “active” Western intervention as a favour to the nation. While the West is largely invisible in the novel, it is placed in the dominant position, for example in the discussion of the green on blue attack, making it the topic of this novel despite its absence. As Hosseini

did, Ackerman justifies the War on Terror, portraying Afghanistan as a country that can solely be saved by external intervention, encouraging a more “active” strategy in order for the mission to be successful.

5. Conclusion

In his 2003 preface to *Orientalism*, Edward Said states: “I wish I could say [...] that general understanding of the Middle East, the Arabs and Islam in the United States had improved somewhat, but alas, it really hasn’t” (xii). Unfortunately, neither Deborah Ellis’ *The Breadwinner*, Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, nor Elliot Ackerman’s *Green on Blue* will help create the sense of understanding that Said wishes for. All three novels offer a restructured version of Afghanistan that is tailored to Western values and they present this version as a truthful and authentic representation to an audience that cannot be expected to recognise their manipulations. As this thesis shows, these manipulations are not new to the Afghanistan-set fiction published after 9/11. *The Breadwinner*’s protagonist is a “modern” girl who could easily be mistaken for a Western child, Ellis fails to give sufficient context to understand customs like the burqa and the practice of bacha posh, and the dominant “normal”/“strange” binary in the novel continuously asserts the superiority of the West. However, while Ellis’ pre-9/11 novel shows Orientalist characteristics, the scale on which these manipulations have been applied in the two post-9/11 novels and the effect that they have on those narratives is drastically different.

Taking the punishment frame for the War on Terror into consideration, my hypothesis going into this research was that the depiction of the Taliban would have undergone drastic change after the 9/11 attacks. However, this hypothesis proved to be entirely wrong. Indeed, the depiction of the Taliban is the most consistent element in the novels used for this thesis. In all three texts, the Taliban are depicted as wicked and violent, but each of the novels also provides a passage that turns this negative impression into a slightly more ambivalent one by humanising the religious extremists: Parvana’s encounter with the crying Talib, the Taliban judges at Mariam’s trial, and Gazan’s wish to quit the Taliban as he is completely worn out. The depiction of the Taliban in the post-9/11 novels is identical to the depiction of the Taliban in *The Breadwinner*.

Instead, it is the depiction of Afghanistan’s ordinary society that has undergone drastic change. In *The Breadwinner*, Parvana and her “modern” ideas are constantly depicted as superior, but as a result of the “normal”/“strange” binary, which Ellis uses as a way to shield herself from the exploration and

explanation of Afghan culture, the reader is never explicitly told what her “modern” values are superior to; Ellis offers the “self,” but not the “other”. In the post-9/11 works, the introduction of “traditional” characters places the “other” in a prominent position. These characters appear to have a strong bond to Afghan culture that the “modern” characters, like Parvana and Laila, completely lack. While the introduction of the “other” gives a voice to characters who would otherwise be marginalised, these “traditional” voices are manipulated to fit a Western audience’s expectations, meaning that they are not “traditional” at all. For example, Ackerman’s “traditional” Aziz shows several disguised “modern” characteristics and Hosseini’s Rasheed is entirely designed according to Western “Muslim stereotypes”. In addition, these characters are juxtaposed with “modern” Afghans who are not representative of the country either, as they are essentially Westerners. In the post-9/11 works, the authors have forced a “modern”/“traditional” binary onto Afghan society, creating a division which is neither fair nor accurate, as both sides of the binary are fabricated.

Indeed, this “modern”/“traditional” binary serves a different purpose than education on Afghan culture, namely, the degradation of its traditions. Both Ackerman and Hosseini have linked their “traditional” characters to authentic elements of Afghan culture, for example Islam and Pashtunwali. However, these cultural elements are never objectively explored. Instead, they are depicted as the source of harmful “traditional” behaviour, the reason why Afghanistan is suffering. Indeed, Afghan culture is no longer solely portrayed as “strange,” as is the case in *The Breadwinner*, but it is depicted as “wrong”. This can primarily be seen in the portrayal of Afghanistan’s “traditional” males. While the men in *The Breadwinner* are kind and helpful, the wickedness that Ellis solely ascribes to the Taliban is ascribed to all the “traditional” men in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *Green on Blue*; Rasheed, Commander Sabir, even Aziz, all of them are marked by corruption and violence, oppressing Afghanistan’s female society and fuelling the war. Although this change is significant in and of itself, it becomes truly problematic in comparison to the depiction of the Taliban, which has been consistent. The vilification of the Taliban would have been an expected development in literary representations after the 9/11 attacks as, looking through the punishment frame, they were the “clear perpetrator” in this scenario. Instead, it is

“traditional” culture and all “traditional” Afghan men who are vilified in these post-9/11 works, placing innocent people and Afghanistan as a whole in a bad light.

This degradation of Afghan culture is deepened through the cherry-picking of events and customs that either place the West in the dominant position or highlight distressing elements of Afghan culture. These manipulations are not a new introduction to post-9/11 works, as they are also present in Ellis’ work, for example in the depiction of the burqa as a symbol of oppression and in Parvana’s version of the legend of Malalai of Maiwand. However, in *The Breadwinner*, these manipulations are not linked to the “modern”/“traditional” binary, meaning that they assert the superiority of the West, but not in a way that directly influences the narrative. This is entirely different in the two post-9/11 novels, where the manipulations are tied to the “modern”/“traditional” binary and are used to increase the gap between the inferior East and the superior West, a gap which is necessary for the plot of both novels. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini constantly places the West onto a pedestal through this cherry-picking, for example through his focus on *Titanic* and the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan. Here, too, the burqa is portrayed as a symbol of oppression, but one that is explicitly linked to the oppressive character of “traditional” culture. In *Green on Blue*, a notable manipulation is that Ackerman focuses on two tenets of Pashtunwali, both of which bear a strong relation to violence. While these two tenets are most important to his story and make the complex code more accessible to a Western audience, it compresses “traditional” Pashtunwali into a code of cruelty, which it is not; Ackerman merely neglects other tenets like kindness and hospitality.

In addition, a second dominant binary is introduced in the post-9/11 novels, namely the “active”/“passive” binary. The reason why this binary is important is because it does not solely reinforce the “modern”/“traditional” binary, but because both authors also use it to demonstrate that these West-dominant Orientalist binaries should remain fixed, unless it would benefit the West to cross them. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam’s life is marked by passivity. Yet when the Western Laila is in trouble, Mariam happily sacrifices her own life by becoming “active” and saving the superior “self”. After temporarily becoming an “active” character, she immediately retires to her “passive” status again. In *Green on Blue*, Ackerman shows that the overly “passive” attitude of the West has caused the binary to

switch, turning Afghanistan into the “active” party, a disastrous development according to the novel. However, while the narrative discourages placing Afghans in an “active” position, Ackerman’s twisted definition of the term “green on blue” also shows that there is an exception to that rule, namely when an “active” Afghan fights for US causes. These narratives are not at all about the exploration of Afghan culture, they are about asserting the superiority and dominance of the West.

Through the cherry-picked events, the vilification of “traditional” culture, and the West-dominant binaries, both Hosseini and Ackerman depict Afghanistan as a nation that is suffering under its own culture, a problem which can only be solved by intervention of the superior West. In *The Breadwinner*, Parvana denounces the idea of foreign intervention based on her knowledge of Afghan history. While the novel consistently asserts the superiority of the West, Parvana knows that the nation has had a long history of foreigners invading her country and she believes that another foreign intervention would not solve anything. This is drastically different in the two post-9/11 novels. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini focuses on the Western intervention in 2001, which is the event that the novel leads up to. As the narrative progresses, “traditional” Afghan culture is distanced further and further from superior Western values, depicting violence, cruelty, and oppression as vices that are inherent in Afghan culture. As a result, Afghanistan’s only hope for a peaceful future is external intervention. When the West, which has been placed on a pedestal throughout the novel, arrives in Afghanistan in 2001, this intervention is depicted as entirely necessary and justified. Picking up where Hosseini left, Ackerman’s novel is set during the War on Terror and, while it is a critique, it is not a critique on the Western intervention itself. Like Hosseini’s novel, Ackerman’s novel shows the necessity of Western intervention. Indeed, the critique is on the fact that the West has been too “passive” and should be encouraged to take a more “active” attitude in this war. Through his exploration of Pashtunwali, Ackerman too demonstrates that “traditional” culture is extremely harmful and should be suppressed by the West, as Afghanistan could never be a peaceful nation as long as unsupervised “traditional” Afghans take an “active” role in their country. In contrast to *The Breadwinner*, the post-9/11 novels focus on the justification and encouragement of Western intervention in Afghanistan, depicting it as a necessity in order to free the country from its own harmful “traditional” culture.

To establish whether the changes that I have identified between the pre- and post-9/11 novels in this thesis are coincidental or whether this encouragement of Western intervention is a trend in post-9/11 Afghanistan-set fiction, further research is necessary. A myriad of Afghanistan-set novels were published after the 9/11 attacks that could be included in further research. In addition, both post-9/11 novels used in this thesis are American. If further research would show that these changes are, indeed, a trend in American literature, it would be interesting to see whether these changes are at all visible in international works, such as Åsne Seierstad's *The Bookseller of Kabul* and Yasmina Khadra's *The Swallows of Kabul*. Lastly, this research could be infinitely improved through collaboration with a scholar in the field of Middle Eastern Studies, with a more extensive ready knowledge on Afghanistan. While I have done extensive research, there are likely elements in these novels that I have completely missed out on. However, these manipulations that require substantial knowledge of Afghanistan to identify are equally significant; the harder they are to find, the less likely it is that the reader will notice them, which is the final problem I want to highlight.

In the introduction, I pointed out that these novels set in Afghanistan took on an important educational role when the Taliban recaptured Kabul in August 2021. I specifically noted *The Financial Times*' article: "Five Books that Help Explain What is Happening in Afghanistan." However, *The Financial Times* was not the only one that inspired its audience to read these fictional novels as factual accounts; there were many more influential newspapers and webpages that did the same thing: *The Archive* wrote an article "7 Essential Books About Afghanistan: As news about the Taliban continues to unfold, satisfy your curiosity about instability in the region;" *Beyond Pink* published "Nine Authors Who Will Teach You About Afghanistan;" and *Electric Lit* shared a "Literary Guide to Understanding Afghanistan, Past and Present." Looking at the research I have had to do to be able to establish the manipulations in these novels, I find it worrying that they are recommended to casual readers as a way of "understanding" the situation in Afghanistan; they are brimming with inaccuracies and manipulations. Fictional novels are not factual accounts and should neither be recommended nor read as such, even when they are based on real events and come across as realistic.

Still, the fact that the reader should be more careful when reading these novels is not a get-out-of-jail-free card for the authors of these texts. They provide a simulacrum of Afghanistan; a representation of the country which they present as the truth whilst it is manipulated and, therefore, not representative. The authors have created their simulacra for the consumption of a Western audience, incorporating stereotypes and adding to them, creating a stream of new stereotypes and misconceptions. These Afghanistan-set novels reflect the Western conception of the Orient, a conception which is by no means a reflection of the Orient itself. Returning to Said's wish to improve general understanding of the Middle East, these novels could have the extreme opposite effect, as they could cause significant harm. Through the manipulations, Afghanistan is silenced rather than given a voice, limiting interaction between the East and the West. In addition, the binaries create distance rather than a sense of understanding. The audience is left with a false conception of the country which they have been at war with since 2001. Those who read these novels to "understand" the war are tilting at windmills. Indeed, if this is the war they think they have been fighting for the past 20 years, then their enemy is their own flawed Western perception, which is what these novels truly reflect.

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