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## Literature review for comparison of Deborah Ellis's Book series "Three wishes" & "The Bread winner" and Khaled Hosseini's novels "The kite runner" & "A Thousand Splendid suns"

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### General Note



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## ABSTRACT

This article considers Deborah Ellis's *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli children speak* and *The Breadwinner* series, works that have stirred lively debate about childhood, children's literature, and censorship. These two works are the product of Ellis's travels to Afghanistan, Israel and Palestine before and after September 11, 2001 and the experiential research she conducted by talking to women and children in those countries. Her literary work has been inspired by her activism and feminism. An engaged reading of these two works results in an in-depth analysis of children's and youth literature set in the Middle Eastern context written by a Canadian author. Usually, when unknown authors publish their first book and this book becomes a great success, the readers await impatiently if they are going to publish more books. And if they do, the following book has to face various comparisons from critics and the readers as well. The *Kite Runner* novel met a surprising success and spread through the word of mouth of readers and book clubs all around the world. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was often reviewed and often at least a short comparison with *The Kite Runner* appeared in those reviews.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This Article will focus on the representation of children in war-stricken countries in the works of award-winning Canadian children's and young adult writer Deborah Ellis. I want to provide the first concentrated study of Ellis's work in the context of related critical and theoretical writing. This project aims at providing an analysis of impact of war on children and their families, as well as a commentary of political events in the Middle East. In order to focus my article project on children in war, I will study Ellis's *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak* (nonfiction), and *The Breadwinner* tetralogy (fiction) as my central literary texts – both set in the Middle East and Greater Middle East. I will trace childhood, politics, race, gender and ethnicity in an attempt to provide an in-depth analysis of children's and youth literature set in non-Western context written by a Western author. The examination of myths of childhood innocence and the apolitical child will be of central importance to my article: I will draw from works that centre on the child as innocent but also from works that argue that children are active participants in the political lives of their communities. Drawing from critical race theory, critical literacy theory, critical readings of "the child," and the concept of intersectionality, I want to explore issues of race, gender and class as they relate specifically to the problems raised in and by Ellis's texts. Some of the themes developed include the intersectional representation of the child; the child in war (the child in Canada's war on terror, globalism, the globalised child); and the Canadian context for the critical reception of the works.

As a result of this interest people also started to find out various possibilities how to improve it. Basically, as Baron (2007) puts it: *A Thousand Splendid Suns* —is a work committed to helping living people in whatever ways fiction can: it is, in fact, a humanitarian novel. And not only it is committed to helping but it actually helps. In 2006, he received the Humanitarian Award from the U.N. Refugee Agency, and was named a goodwill envoy for that agency (Foster, 2007). But he did not settle only for this. The success of his fiction enabled him to create a foundation in 2009 to help fund education, build shelters and provide other aid to homeless refugees in Afghanistan (Ferrell, 2010). The Khaled Hosseini's Foundation is aimed at the Afghan people, especially women, children and refugees (The Khaled Hosseini Foundation, 2010). It is hard to imagine a better outcome of the books dealing with themes of morality and the fight of good against the evil. And it is no exaggerating, when it is stated, that Hosseini's books are rare examples of how literature can make people actually do something, and in this case something good.

## 2. COMPARISON OF THE BOOK SERIES "THREE WISHES" AND "THE BREAD WINNER"

The focal point of this article is the analysis of the representation of children growing up and living in war-stricken countries: Afghanistan, Palestine and Israel. The analysis is conducted in the context of relevant theoretical approaches: theories of childhood, critical literacy theory, critical race theory and intersectionality. The complexity of identities and inequalities depicted in both *Three Wishes* and *The Breadwinner* series proposes an integrated look into categories of gender, class, race, and ethnicity. The investigation of these categories is relevant for the analysis of identity formation and leads to interesting conclusions. In the course of this article (the myth of) childhood innocence will be reworked and reframed in the context of heterogenous childhood experience presented in Ellis's texts and the concepts of globalized child and universal childhood will be brought into question. Because Ellis's figurations of the child problematize not only race and culture but gender as well, a large part of this article will focus on issues around gender, especially in relation to *The Breadwinner* iii series. The issue of burqa and other types of veiling is mentioned in relation to the Western refusal of accepting veiling practices as voluntary and subversive. The narrative given by the Western governments and media which represents women as victims of brown men who need to be saved by white men is

deconstructed in this article in relation to gender. When it comes to *Three Wishes* it will be important to consider how the children's voice is posited within this work, and re-posited outside of it, in a wider political context—are these children perceived as the "Other," or as universal? Suicide bombing tampers in this work with presumed and expected children's innocence and makes us question our empathy.

The comparison of the two works, one fiction, and one non-fiction proves fruitful in the analysis of issues described above. This preliminary work reveals there is much to be done in reading the figure of the child in war and in future investigations of Deborah Ellis's important and understudied body of work. The focus on two bodies of works—one a body of work of fiction (*The Breadwinner* series) and the other a work of nonfiction (*Three Wishes*)—provides an opportunity to compare: two very different book receptions, critical and popular; two very different ways of reading; two different ways of thinking about what are adult approved insights for children and young adults; and, two different (but also in some ways very similar) geopolitical spaces.

We "read fiction while suspending reality in an effort to be entertained, to enter faraway places, or to escape. Non-fiction, on the other hand, informs us about events, people, statistics and facts, and we assume that it is correct and believable" (Baer 285). In general, "'non-fiction' is understood to be about something that exists or existed in the real world, and which can be subject to verification" (Rak 52). Thus, if *Three Wishes* is labelled as non-fiction, children's voices must be authentic and readers can believe what they hear. This book can be read as a "witness narrative in which ordinary people are witness to atrocities" (Rak 154)—only in this case it is not people, it is children, which makes it so much worse. This might explain why *Three Wishes* was challenged by the Canadian Jewish Centre (CJC): if it presents facts truthfully it should not be accessible to children because truth is too harsh, something I will talk more about in Chapter 1 of this article. Ellis claims there was no authorial intervention in *Three Wishes*, thus the reader should not doubt the truthfulness of the interviews. Moreover, Steffler writes that Deborah Ellis removes herself, to a great extent, as an intermediary or filter when she offers the actual voices of children in *Three Wishes*...thus eliminating the paternalism that can result from authorial constructions of implied relationships between characters and readers. Minimizing the authorial presence and interpretation in this book "connects rather than separates children from larger group, and renders this book, the one that caused all the commotion, among the least problematic and controversial of Deborah Ellis's work" (Steffler 121). Even though *Three Wishes* seemingly presents truthful and authentic children's voices "the book cannot deny the adult and cultural mediation it employs" (Hasan 6). The book opens with a map of the area, and each interview is foreshadowed with an informational preface in which the author teaches us about Israel or Palestine. Translation can also prove problematic as translator is always a mediator of ideas and something always gets lost in translation. Nonetheless, Ellis's nonfiction work does indeed provide "a space for those voices, ideas, and actions that tend to be colonized and treated with assumptions and paternalism in Canadian 'multicultural' and 'globalized' fiction, including her own" (Steffler 120). By not changing children's words, or embellishing them or adding to them, Ellis lets these voices be authentic. The geopolitical segment that follows in this chapter will look more closely in the issues of marginalization of "other" voices, but definitely so of this article. Although *The Breadwinner* series is labelled and read as fiction, it has a basis in real life: the main character Parvana is based "on a real character, [but] Deborah has never actually encountered her," admitting that she "just met the mother" (Jenkinson par. 16) at an Afghan refugee camp. Ellis also argues that each of the principal episodes in *The Breadwinner* [series] came from "people telling me that they had witnessed it or they had done it themselves" [girls disguising themselves as boys, harvesting organs from kids, kidnappings of refugee children, etc.]. The only thing that came from another source was the bone digging in the graveyard which [Ellis] got from *Time* magazine. [Ellis] hadn't actually met anybody who had done that. (Jenkinson par. 17), Its popularity in classrooms and among young readers points to the fact that interest is still high when it comes to the Middle East and the lives of the "Other." Ellis interweaves some true historical segments (e.g. different forces that invaded Afghanistan throughout its history<sup>4</sup>) in the fictional narrative. In this way she educates the Western reader about history without being too patronizing and does not shy away from presenting complex political backgrounds to children.

### 3. COMPARISON OF THE NOVELS "THE KITE RUNNER" AND "A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS"

Therefore, even this article is not going to avoid comparing Hosseini's two novels and in the following lines, a few notes on the similarities and differences of the novels together with the brief information about the practical assets of both novels provided at the end of this chapter. There are many differences between the two Hosseini's novels. Some are quite obvious, some more subtle. Many of them were mentioned in previous chapters, mostly when the themes of the novels were discussed. This and the fact that all those differences and similarities are interwoven are the reasons for which only the most important ones are going to be mentioned here. The first difference between the novels is quite evident. Whereas *The Kite Runner* is a story about the world of men, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* explores the world of Afghan women. This difference is connected with the reasons for which the novels were actually written. As Hosseini explains in an interview for an Academy of Achievement, the urge to finish *The Kite Runner* was more a literary one. —An urge of a newborn writer who wants to finish a book (Hosseini, in Academy of Achievement, 2008). When he

heard about the ban of kite flying, it inspired him to note down a short story, which —was intended to be a nostalgia piece about a favourite childhood pastime but grew in only a day or two in 1999 into a dark tale of loss, guilt and redemption (Ferrell, 2010). However, with the second book the reason was different. Hosseini says: I had decided already that I was going to write a book about women, and I wanted this book to be a fictional account, however narrow in its aim of what happened to these women in Afghanistan. So many people suffered in Afghanistan over the last three decades, but it's hard for me to find a group that has suffered more than women (Hosseini, 2008). Previously, he had been very successful with discovering the world of men, the story narrated by Amir was believable and alive. But now, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* presented a more difficult challenge. Determined to show the world the suffering of Afghan women, Hosseini started to work on a novel told by a woman. And as if it was not difficult enough, he chose to tell the story from the perspective of two, quite different women. However, Hosseini tried hard and eventually slipped his —feet into those shoes and live in that skin (Hosseini, in *Academy of Achievement*, 2008). And according to various critics, he was successful in this endeavour. This success was caused by Hosseini's refusing to regard his women characters as —only women but —as people, as human beings and he just focused —on what it is that they fear, what it is that they hope, how were they disappointed by life, what are their illusions, their disillusion and in this way —these women, these characters, were starting to speak for themselves (Ibid.). And in this way, they became understandable across the borders for women and even men. A male critic Ben Daniel (2007) says —The protagonists are women living in a land I've never visited, who survived two decades of warfare while being subjected to the worst kinds of domestic abuse imaginable, all of which is beyond my ken, making Hosseini's second novel vitally important for me to read (Daniel, 2007). And this aspect, this understandability is the thing connecting both novels, because as was mentioned many times in this article they both speak about the themes understandable for everybody. The themes are basically international. As soon as Hosseini understood this connective power of the written word and the interest raised by his first novel (the *Kite Runner* was not only it was successful literary, but it also helped the people understand more Afghan culture and see it not only as a country hiding Usama Bin Laden and fighting the United States). He also understood how he could make the western readers aware of Afghan background. Consequently, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* went further in explaining the characteristics of Afghan culture and history. It provided its readers with the detailed description of latest Afghan history and tried to explain the political turmoil affecting this country so precisely, it might resolve in the feeling the reader is having a history lesson (Walter, 2007).

Therefore, it can be said, that while *The Kite Runner* was more a personal story, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was dedicated to Afghanistan. Hosseini wrote *The Kite Runner* without the personal experience of war torn Afghanistan. When he visited his homeland, it made a huge impact on him and almost forced him into writing a new novel. He comments: —I went to Afghanistan in 2003 and met lots of women and heard so many sad, inspiring and horrific stories. All their stories came back to me when I began writing the book in early 2004. (Hosseini in Memmott, 2007). As a result, this book helped to understand the complexity of Afghan culture. In this way, both the books *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* raised the interest in the lives of people living and suffering in Afghanistan.

In the article, the novels *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* were discussed in details. The focus of the article is going to be more practical. As this article is written as a part of studies at the Faculty of Education, it is only appropriate to devote the first part of this chapter to the teachers appearing in the novels and to mention the role of teachers in Hosseini's novels. Therefore, the characters of the teachers from *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* will be identified and described with the emphasis on the role they play in the novel.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Even though both of these books rely on notions of "us vs. them," these books *do* bring about an improved sense of the kinds of lives people have in different countries. By providing little snippets of history in both *The Breadwinner* series and *Three Wishes*, Ellis educates the Western reader. Maps in the beginning of every book position the reader in relation to this country in a different part of this world. Providing maps does make sense for adults and children who are not very familiar with geography and might encourage them to do their own research. For children who only learn about other countries through Western media and are never provided geographical guidance, maps in these books serve as an indication of vastness of our planet. Despite this vastness and the West and East being so far away from each other, the globalization of education and economy brings us together, in that we are all alike. The notion of global and universal childhood plays into our concepts and expectations of what every child is entitled to. There are many references in Ellis's books to Western shows, books, and other cultural texts that provide a reference frame for the Western reader. Though circumscribed by Western humanitarian politics, Ellis's books bring an understanding of differences across the world, however short-lived.

The aim of this article was to present two novels written by Khaled Hosseini with focus on the moral aspects presented in the novels through their characters. Both of the novels written by Khaled Hosseini are situated in Afghanistan during approximately last forty years. This country torn by the constant wars, fighting and fanatic warlords creates a perfect scene for the difficult moral decisions and the characters described into the slightest details have to face the moments nobody would want to go through. However, these moral themes are not only to be applied to a war torn country. Hosseini works with the topics such as friendship, betrayal, lack of parents' love and the desire to be appreciated. These novels offer enough themes for the discussion about moral issues as well as for personal reflection. Moreover, the novels, although dealing with serious themes, are written in an easy and catching way, which might attract even those who do not perceive reading as their favourite free time activity and even might raise their interest in reading.

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