‘The Kite Runner’ Critiqued: New Orientalism Goes to the Big Screen

By: Matthew Thomas Miller

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While The Kite Runner movie is now captivating audiences throughout the country—much as the book did four years ago—with its enthralling tale of “family, forgiveness, and friendship” and the promise that indeed “there is a way to be good again,” very little has been written critiquing this work and its prominent role in the New Orientalist narrative of the Islamic Middle East.

Iranian literature specialist Dr. Fatemeh Keshavarz (Washington University in St. Louis) has classified this book as one of the recent works that she argues constitute a "New Orientalist" narrative in her book Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran (3). (Dr. Hamid Dabashi of Columbia University also has written about New Orientalism and expatriates who serve as “native informers” or “comprador intellectuals” in respect to the Middle East). Keshavarz broadly characterizes the New Orientalist works thusly:

Thematically, they stay focused on the public phobia [of Islam and the Islamic world]: blind faith and cruelty, political underdevelopment, and women's social and sexual repression. They provide a mix of fear and intrigue—the basis for a blank check for the use of force in the region and Western self-affirmation. Perhaps not all the authors intend to sound the trumpet of war. But the divided, black-and-white world they hold before the reader leaves little room for anything other than surrender to the inevitability of conflict between the West and the Middle East (Banishing the Ghosts of Iran).
While *The Kite Runner* is perhaps less obvious in its demonization of the Muslim world and glorification of the Western world—what Keshavarz terms the "Islamization of Evil" and the "Westernization of Goodness"—than books like *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, these themes nevertheless clearly permeate the entire novel. While seemingly just a captivating story of Amir and his redemption through the heroic rescue of his childhood friend Hassan’s son, Sohrab, the entire plot is imbued with noxious stereotypes about Islam and the Islamic world. This story, read in isolation, may indeed just be inspiring and heart-warming, but the significance of its underlying message in the current geopolitical context cannot be ignored.

At the most superficial level, the characters and their accompanying traits serve to advance a very specific agenda: everything from the conspicuous secularity of the great hero, Amir’s father, Baba, to the pedophilic Taliban (i.e. Muslim) executioner and nemesis of Amir, Assef, clearly perpetuates the basic underlying theme: the West (and Western values) = ‘good,’ while Islam = ‘bad,’ or even, ‘evil.’ The inherent goodness of Baba and evil of Assef is repeatedly reified for the reader in some of the most dramatic and graphic scenes of the entire book. Baba valiantly lays his life on the line to protect the woman who is about to be raped, while Assef brutally rapes children and performs gruesome public executions in the local soccer stadium. Yet, perhaps the most telling attribute of these two characters is the particular national ideologies that they express affinity for: Baba loves America, while Assef is an admirer of Hitler.

The most pernicious element of this novel, however, is also the same aspect that American readers consistently have identified as the most heart-warming and inspiring: the story of the redemption of Amir thorough his harrowing and heroic rescue of Sohrab.
In short, Amir, the successful western expatriate writer must leave his safe, idyllic existence in the U.S.; return to an Afghanistan that has been ravaged by the Russians (our Cold War enemy) and the Taliban (the representation of our new Islamic enemy); and rescue the innocent orphaned son of his childhood friend from the incarnation of evil itself, Assef. Amir’s descent into this *Other World*, a veritable ‘heart of darkness,’ appears to be the only hope for its victims’ salvation.

This adventurous and engrossing story neatly functions as an allegorized version of the colonial/neo-colonial/imperial imperative of “intervening” in “dark” countries in order to save the sub-human Others who would be otherwise simply lost in their own ignorance and brutality. These magnanimous interventions, of course, have nothing to do with economic or geopolitical concerns; they are purely self-sacrificial expressions of the superiority of the imperial peoples’ humanity and ideology. When considered in this frame, the profound guilt that Amir suffers from his inaction during the violation of his innocent friend Hassan seems to represent the collective guilt of all “good” western or western-oriented people who watched idly while the Islamic bullies—epitomized by Assef—violated Afghanistan and the innocent western-oriented people like Baba and Amir. Of course, the implication then is that we also must redeem ourselves by returning and “rescuing” the people there from the Assefs of Afghanistan—this is our “way to be good again,” in the words Khaled Hosseini’s character Rahim Khan. This new recapitulation of the old “white man’s [now, western] burden” narrative, when combined with the “Westernization of Goodness” and “Islamization of Evil” clearly present throughout the novel, provides a superb ideological framework upon which to justify our present occupation and future military interventions in Afghanistan.
It certainly does not take much imagination to expand this story and its message to the entire Islamic Middle East—especially when we combine this work’s portrayal of Afghanistan with the other New Orientalist works on the Islamic Middle East, such as Azar Nafisi’s popular *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Asne Seierstad’s *The Bookseller of Kabul*, Geraldine Brooks’ *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women*, and even scholarly works like Bernard Lewis’ *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*. If what these works say about Islam and Islamic countries is the whole truth, then surely the continued and expanding U.S. military presence in that region is a good thing, right?

For anyone who has been to, or studies the Middle East, it is obvious that these accounts are gross distortions of the full reality on the ground there. It is not wrong to identify and write about the flaws of a particular country, religion, or ideology, but it is wrong and dishonest when an author’s writings systematically dehumanizes and reduces an entire culture and religion to the actions of its extremists. Especially, when these are the same people and countries that our leaders tell us *need* to be attacked and occupied by our military.

*Matthew Thomas Miller is a graduate student in Islamic and Near Eastern Studies at Washington University in St. Louis.*

Please see the following resources for a more detailed discussion of New Orientalism:


