

## **Metropolitan Hybrid Identity in Nadia Hashimi's *A House Without Windows***

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### **Abstract**

The present article seeks to investigate the effect of colonial domination on Afghan society by analyzing Yusuf's character in Nadia Hashimi's *A House Without Windows* (2016). By theoretically framing the paper at *Orientalism*, the paper scrutinizes Hashimi's approach to exemplify the concept of metropolitan hybridity through mimicry and Othering; how Yusuf internalizes the value of the colonizer and believes in the inferiority of his own culture. The paper analyses how Yusuf represents a colonialist ideology that reinforces the binary opposition of the West and East, a hybrid Afghan and the native Afghan. This article engages with debates around Orientalism and the construction of Western power that schematizes the inferiority of the East. It questions the strategies that are used to represent Yusuf as a hybrid Afghan, the strategies that help to produce an Orientalist discourse. The article signifies Yusuf's imitation as a double articulation strategy: mimicking the Occident while disavowing and Other the native Afghans.

*Keywords:* Afghan society, hybrid identity, metropolitan hybridity, Nadia Hashimi's *A House Without Windows*, Orientalism, Postcolonialism

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## Introduction

The way a hybrid character's identity is developed plays a vital role in a story's colonial aspects. This development has its effect in illustrating the inferiority of the dichotomy of Occident and Orient, West and East and in further producing a colonial discourse. The current discourse of Afghan signifies a colonialist ideology that continues to reproduce the framed image of their society, rather than producing an original narrative. In this climate, it is significant for Afghan authors, and Muslims in general, to construct an authentic presentation of their society. Fatemah Keshavas (2007) asserts that such narrative "denies the value of listening. Instead, it contributes to the rising heat in the fiery East-West rhetoric" (...) "[t]hese narratives close the door on exchange between millions and millions of people inhabiting each hemisphere" (p. 11). The article addresses the problem of Orientalist identity formation by tackling Yusuf's character as a colonial subject.

The analysis of a colonial discourse requires a deeper reading than recognizing recurrent stereotypes. This is because colonial discourse is composed of complex significations and practices of social interactions between the colonized and the colonizer, and it illustrates these colonial relations from a Eurocentric perspective (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2013). Homi Bhabha (2012) defines colonial discourse as a range of inequities that inform "the discursive and political practices of racial and cultural hierarchization" (p. 96). The construction of colonial discourse is based on an arbitrary representation of racial, cultural, and historical otherness, which unsettles "intentionalist and nationalist" meanings (Bhabha, 2012, p. 97). Thus, its importance lies in an understanding of the process of subjectification such as the delimitation of a colonial subject which leads to questioning the mode of representation of Otherness.

To understand the mode of representation of Otherness, one needs to understand what Bhabha (2012) calls the strategies of desire that marginalize the Other and disavow its power. According to Bhabha, mimicry is an objective strategy that constitutes one of the most effective strategies of colonial representation and knowledge processing. Mimicry results in "a metonymy of presence", making a partial representation of the colonial subject, which articulates the disturbance of racial and cultural difference and "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other" (Bhabha, 2012, pp. 128-129). In the Third space of enunciation, the space where mimicry and cultural statements are constructed, cultural identity emerges.

The representation of the Other is reflected in Nadia Hashimi's *A House Without Windows*, as the novel is concerned with forms of political identity and cross-cultural contact. Hashimi is an Afghan American author and a pediatrician. She was born and raised in the United State to Afghan-born parents. Most of Hashimi's novels are historical fiction where she uncovers prominent social issues of Afghans living in their home country, or of those who immigrated to the West. Hashimi's novels are concerned either with Afghans immigrating to America and achieving the American dream or about American individuals who are originally Afghans and have a purpose to accomplish in their homeland. Hashimi's characters, consequently, signify binarism of East and West and an active desire for the representation of the Other.

## Literature Review

Despite the growing research on colonial ideology in postcolonialism, little attention has been devoted to the study of *Orientalism* as a colonial force in Afghan novels. In “The World of Post-9/11: Neo-Orientalism, Islamophobia, and the Crisis of Religious Identity”, Sultan Alghofaili (2018) highlighted Islamic key concepts that are perceived in Western countries as notions of fundamentalism and investigates the cause of this negative association. Alghofaili examined the neo-Orientalist representations of the Quran, praying in the mosque, the hijab, and the beard as sources of radicalism that Muslims struggle with within the West. Although the article utilised Orientalism as a theoretical approach, the focus is on fundamentalist notions that are linked to Islam, rather than colonial power and its influence on the identity formation of the colonial subject. The paper *Glimpses of Pashtunwali in Hosseini's The Kite Runner, A Thousand Splendid Suns, Hashimi's A House Without Windows and Ackerman's Green on Blue* by Rashid Jahan (2018) addressed the practice of Pashtunwali as an Afghan cultural code (girls are forced to dress and act like boys). Jahan approached the novels using sociocultural theory and finds that Afghans tend to implement cultural norms rather than religious ideals. Studying the presentation of Afghanistan in media production and literature is also analysed from the perspective of multinational authors and filmmakers. “Narrativizing Afghanistan: Outsider and Afghan Perspective in Modern Fiction and Films” by William John Kingsbury (2013) Kingsbury examined the foreign authors’ Orientalist depiction of Afghanistan and the notion of the progressiveness of the West. Kingsbury demonstrated how it is mistaken to think that “the modern world is absent in Afghanistan; it is simply that it reveals itself in ways we choose to ignore” (p. 12). While Kingsbury’s research and my article validate that the world needs to develop an understanding and respect of the Afghan culture to prevent presenting them as primitive people, Kingsbury focused on situating Afghanistan in Western media rather than studying discourses that are produced by Afghans. Most research in the literature is conducted on gender issues related to women’s emancipation in Afghanistan. To fill this gap, a study of colonial ideology and the hybrid identity in Afghan novels as a postcolonial discourse is crucial, as it is enriching to the academic literary field and constitutes a positive compassionate and humanitarian ground.

## Methodology

A textual analysis is followed from a structuralist perspective. This approach is a suitable method as it relies on an interpretation of underlying ideological and societal structures in the present time that is not apparent in the text (the novel). According to Lundy (2013), “[structuralism] refused to explain social phenomena by deferring to the conscious statements of a speaking subject. At all times, what was of greater significance were the structural constants to which such statements corresponded, in turn eliciting their true meaning” (p. 73). Therefore, a structuralist response aims at discovering the infrastructure of systems and general laws by unifying an image and its meaning, as they “are governed by laws of interdependence” (Harris, 1973, p. 293). Structuralism is a useful tool as it also examines the binary opposition between the East and the West, and how they are viewed in organizational structures. A structuralist approach views contrasts and parallels, such as: local and foreign, good and evil, or weak and strong as fundamental elements to the way humans process and perceive information (Barry, 2020). The

narrative structure will be analyzed as sets of recurrent patterns where the researcher presents a series of parallels to arrange a binary structure of the novel in the sense of Yusuf's metropolitan hybridity. In this way, the article will answer how these elements of structure construct a colonialist discourse. Are there any resemblances/ contrasts in what members of each binary do? And most importantly, from which side of the dichotomy is the story told?

Analysing Nadia Hashimi's novel *A House Without Windows* paves the way for examining regional literature and contributes to a process of investigating social factors related to colonial power by providing insights into clarifying how Hashimi's work is an exemplification of propagating a colonialist ideology. The paper is useful for individuals in Afghanistan and the Afghan society, the Afghan diaspora, and Muslims in general by calling attention to the importance of constructing a rather original narrative of them in the works of Afghan authors. This paper contributes to the theory of postcolonialism by providing a practical application of *Orientalism* and engages with debates around *Orientalism* and the construction of Western power that schematizes the inferiority of the East.

The question that this paper addresses is around the problematic literary representation in colonial discourse, particularly that of Nadia Hashimi as an Afghan diasporic author. The paper questions the strategies that are used to represent Yusuf as a hybrid Afghan, the strategies that help to produce an Orientalist discourse, and how the novel constructs a colonialist discourse in relation to the phenomena of Othering and mimicry.

### Analysis

*A House Without Windows* starts with a crime scene of a man with only his wife standing next to his dead body, holding a hatchet in her hand. The wife, Zeeba, is accused of murdering her husband, yet a confession of murder has not been elastically made. The novel then unravels Zeeba's lawyer, Yusuf, who travels from America with the motivation of fixing the law infrastructure in Afghanistan. Throughout the story, Yusuf represents the metropolitan hybrid identity who had gained his prosperity in America and is determined to rescue his homeland from a flawed legal system.

The story presents how living in America creates a critical dynamic evolutionary point for Yusuf. At the beginning of the story, anxiety and nightmares of Afghanistan used to haunt Yusuf, until he moved to America and accomplished his dream of becoming a lawyer there. Just then, his realization of rescuing Afghanistan started to grow. Yusuf's fear and agony, then, were healed by his belief in The American Dream, "Yusuf had lived and breathed the American belief that one person could make a difference (...) feeling angry was better than feeling afraid" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 23). Being an American citizen is hence the golden opportunity that made the revolutionary change in Yusuf's character. It is America that had given Yusuf the strength he needs to save Afghanistan, the bravery to fix the Afghan infrastructure system, and the prestigious law degree to make everything he demands plausible. Therefore, the binarism of West and East is respectively represented as opportunities in the West versus catastrophic living in the East.

The most prominent factor in the comparison between the two living circumstances, of America and Afghanistan, is the grant of rights and privileges to individuals in America. Escaping Afghanistan is presented as an escape from misery. In describing the difference between the two, Yusuf's homeland and host land, certain constraints are imposed on Afghanistan, illustrating an image of a powerless establishment:

[H]e could imagine his family or himself in every tragedy in this land. He could have been the ill-trained prosecutor, incapable of framing a true legal argument. His sister could have been locked up here. His brother could have been arrested for being caught with his girlfriend. (Hashimi, 2016, p. 541)

Therefore, living in Afghanistan comes with brutal unfairness and impossibilities, whereas America promises a better future.

Creating this binary opposition invokes Said's (1987) *Orientalism* as an anti-colonial discourse and style of thought. *Orientalism* "is produced and exists in an even exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with (...) power moral (as with ideas about what 'we' do and what 'they' cannot do or understand as 'we' do)" (p. 12). Said conceptualizes the structure of power through mode or representation produced and propagated by the West to justify colonial and imperial establishment, "based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident" (p. 2). "[T]he Orient is portrayed as "irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, "different"; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, "normal"" (p. 40). Both the Orient and the Occident should be scrutinized as conceptual knowledge that constructs power, forms identity for the West, and establishes Western authority (Abu-Lughod, 2001, p. 105). *Orientalism* hence consists of incomplete representations of the Orient that are based on "institutions, traditions, conventions, agreed-on codes of understanding for their effects, not upon a distant and amorphous Orient" (p. 23). Consequently, situating Nadia Hashimi's *A House Without Windows* in the context of *Orientalism* enables us to demonstrate a consistent colonial ideology that is represented through Yusuf's character.

When Yusuf comes from America to work at an international legal aid organization to help fix the judicial system in Afghanistan, he takes the upper hand to reconstruct and fix the Oriental Other. Yusuf's persistence in a dominant role in Afghanistan assimilates with the US political approach to the project of identity reconstruction after the Cold War. According to Radhakrishnan (1996), America did not want to be excluded from Third World identity construction projects; it was "unwilling to accept a non-leading like role" in the Third World. Radhakrishnan underscores this strategy as a "duplicitous take on nationalism", as it is considered a protection of the Western identity and a yearning for globalism (p. 751). Moreover, Yusuf's use of adjectives to describe Afghan law contributes to globalism by attributing uncivilization to Afghans rather than a critique of *Orientalism* or neo-imperialism. When Yusuf says, "I'm here because if we want the Afghan judicial system to have any kind of integrity, we have (...) give accused individuals their due process. I know you don't care much for due process but it's important" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 152),

he deprives the Afghans of moral principles and a sense of kindness to the accused, confirming their Otherness to the Western.

Yusuf's lack of commitment to anti-imperialism advocates foreign interference in the reformation of the Afghan legal system. For instance, he underscores how "Afghanistan's legal infrastructure had been destroyed over the years" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 218). As a result, international interference processed the law affairs in Afghanistan, and a reformation of the system has been created by foreigners. When Yusuf says, "a team of international players had taken on the rebuilding of it. They'd created a reasonable set of laws for the country", he establishes a justification for neo-imperialism (p. 218). The Afghan law is reconstructed by the Western's mission of civilization, where the visibility of the inferior savage justifies imperialism by claiming it elevates its culture (Mercer & Julien, 1988, p. 106). Such advocacy of neo-imperial power results in Othering the judges, prosecutors, and Mullahs, who are representatives of Afghan law. As a lawyer who "breathed the American belief", Yusuf has adapted the impulse to civilize and exploit the Other; "the imprisoned and the persecuted. Each injustice called to him as if he were the only hope" yet "[i]f he did not answer her call, who would?" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 30). Yusuf himself, therefore, has a civilizing mission of his own in Afghanistan that is of no interest to anyone in Afghanistan.

Though Yusuf is presented as an Afghan American lawyer, the ambivalence of mimicry makes his identity shattered by its lack of personal identity and originality. His act of imitating the West does not only destroy the possibility of creating an authentic identity but also illustrates the binary opposition of the Self and the Other and highlights areas of difference between the Occidental West and Oriental East. As a result of this limitation of representation, the colonial subject has a partial, incomplete presence. Through his imitation, he is not exactly mirroring the identity and lifestyle of an American; he is "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, 2012, p. 123). At the same time, Yusuf had never grasped his cultural identity nor had he yearned to be quite the Afghan, which emphasizes the areas of difference between the colonized and the colonizer.

The creation of binary opposition of the Self and the Other results in positing a world of privileged and another of agony. The Self, or the Occident, is constructed in positive terms, representing the civilized self. Conversely, the Orient is the Other, which is constructed as the negative reflection of the proper self (Moosavinia et al., 2011). The distinction between the Orient and Occident is "man-made, which further supports the creation of the Other that strengthens the identity and superiority of the Occident. (Said, 1978, p. 5). As a colonial novel, Hashimi views how the Occident and the Orient can belong to the same homeland, but their level of transculturality to the colonizer is what makes the distinction. Hashimi (2016) represents Yusuf as the familiar who has the power to describe, marginalize, and fix the Other.

Yusuf's tendency to Otherize the Oriental continues as he devoids lawyers in Afghanistan of initiatives and energy to help. While Yusuf is struggling to achieve the purpose of his visit to Afghanistan, he yet sees himself as a positive reflection of the native lawyers in Afghanistan. His

decision to work in Afghanistan creates a sense of superiority over the Afghan lawyers whose motives are far less integral. "These were the challenges that made him want to come to Afghanistan in the first place. If it had been easy (...) The lawyers here could have managed" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 323). Yusuf, as the proper self, has the determination and bravery to elevate the Afghan law infrastructure, whereas the native lawyers are incapable of handling the difficulty that this entails. Therefore, the process of Othering Afghan lawyers presents them as devoid of strength and nobility, making Yusuf's identity of heroism and supremacy.

The act of mimicking Western and Othering Afghans alters Yusuf's identity from an Afghan to a hybrid. When differentiating between versions of hybridity, Radhakrishnan (1996) demonstrated the differences between postcolonial hybridity and metropolitan hybridity, where the former is signified by articulations of pain and anguish over dislocation, and "[the person] is in a frustrating search for constituency and a legitimate political identity" (p. 753). Metropolitan hybridity, on the other hand, is characterized by an immense sense of joy in the new location, which assimilates with Yusuf's feelings toward America. To Yusuf, joyance is in blending the self with the American society to become one of them to get elevated from the inferiority of his native culture; "[it] had taken him that many years to feel like the girls around him wouldn't see him as foreign or inferior" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 25). Consequently, Yusuf's metropolitan hybridity is reflected in escaping being the Other in America, through his sense of admiration for their cultural identity.

Although Yusuf's traits of metropolitan hybridity were initiated in America, his realization of it, however, does not occur until he visits Afghanistan. Yusuf's touristic acts such as photographing the locals and exorcizing Afghan cultural norms are reflective of his identity reformation, "[h]ow exotic, he thought, feeling fully Western as it occurred to him" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 300). Nonetheless, the problem of hybridism is not associated with the act of mixing cultures, it is rather related to the complex interconnection of the hybrid himself and his feelings towards his culture (Radhakrishnan, 1996). Therefore, how the hybrid reacts to his native culture and its people is crucial when investigating a work of hybridity.

## Conclusion

This paper looked into hybridism in Nadia Hashimi's *A House Without Windows* through Yusuf's character and his interaction with people of his culture, and his views of Americans. Regarding the latter, the paper demonstrated how Yusuf views the Afghan culture as subservient to the foreignness of America. The paper scrutinized Yusuf's act of imitation as a double articulation strategy: mimicking the Occident while disavowing and Other the native Afghans. Metropolitan hybridism signifies Yusuf's attitude toward his native culture; he is not aiming to construct a political identity or a sense of joy in Afghanistan. Thus, the paper hypothesizes that, because of colonial domination, *Orientalism* can be in-between people of the same land and is in accordance with the level of association with the West.

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