MIDDLE EASTERN WOMEN’S ISSUES: AN ANALYSIS OF A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS AND THE NEW YORK TIMES

By

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Novels dealing with Middle Eastern women’s issues have become present on America’s literary landscape. The themes presented in these novels are also found in journalistic coverage of Middle Eastern women’s issues. This study involved the analysis of one of these world-renowned novels and its thematic similarity regarding the coverage of Middle Eastern women’s issues by *The New York Times*, the nation’s newspaper of record, and thus, a setter of the American mass media agenda. Centering on the subjects of sexism, human rights and gender status that these literary works have exposed to the American public, this study focused primarily on a textual analysis of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini – a best-selling novel that follows the plight of two Afghani women – and on a qualitative content analysis of *The New York Times*’ coverage of issues related to themes presented in the novel between 2007 (the date of *Suns*’ publication) and 2010.

The study found that there are, in fact, overriding themes that appear both in the novelistic and journalistic coverage of Middle Eastern women’s issues. As such, there are thematic similarities between the novelistic themes presented in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and those covered in *The New York Times* stories. With the knowledge
that much of what is being written about Middle Eastern women’s issues within the journalistic community is also being written in a specific groundbreaking novel, it can be determined that these themes are common to both genres.
CHAPTER 1
THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

Middle Eastern women’s fiction has become common within the American book club and bestseller arenas. The relevance and prevalence of such novelistic works cover a far-reaching American interest in terms of book sales. The harsh concepts presented in the books have hardly gone unnoticed. Two books in this genre include bestsellers Woman at Point Zero (El Saadawi, 2007), the story of a Middle Eastern prostitute awaiting a death sentence at a Cairo prison, and Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia (Sasson, 2001), the detailed account of the daily life of a Saudi princess dealing with gender inequality.

To expand upon the spreading influence and awareness that reading and disseminating these powerful pieces of fiction have on an American public, it is important to examine how the American journalistic community, an influence on the nation’s mass media agenda, have covered Middle Eastern women’s issues. As the availability of novels dealing with Middle Eastern women’s issues expands, the American press shapes its coverage to the public’s interest in popular novels (Ortiz & Philbin, 2009). Ortiz and Philbin (2009) found that the American media molds its news coverage to the content of bestselling novels. Since as early as the 1940s, they explained, appearance on The New York Times bestseller list has been “the mark of commercial success for any book. Authors with titles on the list can count on media attention” (Ortiz & Philbin, 2009, p. 1).

Nikki Keddie’s (2007) book, Women in the Middle East: Past and Present, critically assesses the lives of Middle Eastern women with respect to their oppressed financial,
familial, social, and geographical situations. Centering on subjects of sexism, human rights and gender status that these literary assessments have revealed to the American public, this study focused on the textual analysis of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini – a bestselling novel that follows the plight of two Afghani women – and on the qualitative content analysis of *The New York Times*’ coverage of issues related to themes presented in the novel.

Khaled Hosseini’s first novel, *The Kite Runner*, spent over two years on America’s bestseller lists (Penguin Group, 2010). And while *The Kite Runner* focused on male relationships (specifically, between fathers and sons), Hosseini’s second novel follows the plight of two Afghani women. Since the novel’s publication, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has sold over 3 million copies and spent 15 weeks as number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list (Penguin Group, 2010). *New York Times* book reviewer Michiko Kakutani (2007) wrote, “In the end it is these glimpses of daily life in Afghanistan — a country known to most Americans only through news accounts of war and terrorism — that make this novel, like ‘The Kite Runner,’ so stirring…”

This study concentrated its analysis between 2007 (the year of *Suns*’ publication) and 2010 (the commencement of the study). Given that *The Times* is a widely recognized national news publication, its content is an indicator of the general and overriding American knowledge of Middle Eastern women’s issues and the general amount of American coverage of those issues. As an agenda-setter, *The Times*’ power over deciding for American readers what is newsworthy presents several implications for Americans’ exposure to issues and their decisions about which issues are deemed important. Jamieson and Overholser (2005) examined the agenda-setting function of

1.2 Context and Textual Implications

The goal of this study is to show the similarities between the content published in The New York Times in terms of Middle Eastern women’s issues and the novelistic themes presented in A Thousand Splendid Suns. This study is also representative of the kind of coverage of Middle Eastern women’s issues taking place in both novels and nonfiction. An example of this is Lina Abirafeh’s article “Gendered Aid Interventions and Afghan Women: Images versus Realities” (2010). Abirafeh argues that news images of atrocities against Middle Eastern women became an excuse for American intervention in Afghanistan: “Media images of downtrodden women beneath the burqa helped to fuel the rhetoric of ‘liberation’ and ‘empowerment.’ However, women in Afghanistan might say that they have been neither liberated nor empowered, despite the rhetoric” (Shirazi, 2010, introduction).

Faegheh Shirazi’s (2010) book, Muslim Women in War and Crisis: Representation and Reality, points out that many Muslim American women have started to actively move towards reshaping their image in the media. She also mentions that woman after woman claimed to be proud to be pictured in a hijab, the traditional head covering worn by Muslim women (Shirazi, 2010). “The hijab itself came to represent a dichotomy between women as activists and women as passive victims” (Shirazi, 2010,
introduction). Wilkins (1995) concurs, “This covering serves to empower a woman by permitting more mobility by protecting her from sexual harassment in public spaces” (p. 58).

Furthermore, in examining *A Thousand Splendid Suns*’ thematic similarity in regard to news coverage of Middle Eastern women’s issues, this study demonstrated a similarity between the status of Middle Eastern women as depicted in *The New York Times* and the depiction of this status in a work of fiction. In light of this study, it appears that specific themes, listed later, are present in both *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The New York Times*. Here, it is important to mention that works of fiction contain fabrications. Thus, while they may highlight actual themes or events that journalists tend to cover, the themes and events depicted in fictional works are not considered factual.

A qualitative content analysis of *The New York Times* involved reviewing the components that “cue researchers to the context that should be examined in assigning content to categories,” (Fico, Lacy, & Riffe, 2005, p. 71). By removing specific themes from the novel under study, it is possible to decipher the meaning of the work as a whole while making important comparisons to other works – specifically, reportage of these themes – and to society as a whole.

Studying a novel such as *A Thousand Splendid Suns* required the application of literary techniques that involved combing through the subtleties presented in the fictional work in order to extract broad themes. For this reason, this study offers a textual analysis of the novel, delving deeper into the written work than a qualitative content analysis might. Since this study only looked at one novel, rather than a large assortment of written pieces (as *The New York Times* portion of this study aimed to
achieve), there was more room for critical examination and specification of the particular themes under examination.

The review of themes presented in a novel and their corresponding coverage in a nationally recognized daily publication has not been conducted in-depth. This study also expanded upon the possible effect that works of fiction can have on the journalistic community. In covering similar issues (Middle Eastern women, in this case), both journalists and novelists disseminate powerful information to the American public. A well-known example of this phenomenon is Upton Sinclair’s (1906) novel, The Jungle. Discussed in-depth later, The Jungle serves as one of the seminal examples of journalism in fictional form molding public perception and, eventually, government action (Blackwell, 1999).

In deciphering whether The New York Times coverage mirrors the novelistic intention of one of 2007’s best-sellers, we can determine future implications of writing fictional and/or nonfictional works about controversial and prominent societal issues. We can also solidify a deeper tie between the media’s dissemination of powerful information and the public’s exposure to those messages. If there is a thematic similarity in terms of issues covered in literature and those covered in the The New York Times, a reinforcement of themes is created – themes in the novel resemble themes in reportage.
2.1 Setting the Agenda

Understanding literary themes and their significance in the popular press is virtually impossible without understanding the major mass media theory of agenda-setting. One of the primary agenda-setting studies, McCombs and Shaw’s *The Agenda Setting Function of Mass Media* (1972), focused on the 1968 presidential election. Under Bernard C. Cohen’s assumption that “the press ‘may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about,’” (p. 177) McCombs and Shaw looked at the issues Chapel Hill, North Carolina, voters said were important and compared them to the actual content of mass media outlets that voters were exposed to. By sifting through the various content collected from television, newspapers, news magazines, and editorial coverage, the study found that several of the news sources were not covering major political issues, but rather, the daily back and forth of the campaign itself. The study showed that the candidates were busy speaking about each other and that the news focused on this rather than some of the more important issues, signifying a propensity towards agenda-setting (1972).

This concept can be applied to this study’s examination of Middle Eastern women’s issues in *The New York Times*. If readers are more concerned with what is being covered by the media than what is actually salient and important to each of them individually, a different value-set is created as to what is important to “think about.” Selection of topics by writers of both fiction and nonfiction make it so that the American public thinks *about* those topics as a result of exposure to them. Readers of *The New
York Times, therefore, upon being exposed to coverage of Middle Eastern women’s issues in the paper, may have differing ideas on how to think about Middle Eastern women’s issues. It is possible that New York Times writers, in their coverage of Middle Eastern women’s issues, create a pool of knowledge about the subject and shape readers’ minds in terms of what to think about Middle Eastern women’s issues.

The Internet also has a significant role on the agenda-setting function of the media. McCombs (2005) utilized the ideas presented in the 1968 study and took a look at the Internet and its overwhelming implications in terms of agenda-setting. In his 2005 discussion of Agenda Setting: Past, Present and Future, he asserted that some believe that agenda-setting will become obsolete as audiences “fragment and virtually everyone has a unique external media agenda that is a highly individualized composite” (2005, p. 544). It is vital, therefore, to understand the concept of the “scattering of public attention” as an example of a “large, fragmented Internet audience” (McCombs, 2005, p. 544). Many of The New York Times’ readers get their information online. Consequently, they can select which stories to read and can even search for certain key-worded topics. This implication suggests that readers are informed about issues based on what they choose to be exposed to.

Agenda-setting commonly leads to a discussion of “synergy,” the dispersion of the same main concept through various channels of mass media (McCombs, 1972). McCombs (1972) discussed that framing and attribute agenda-setting create much of what is absorbed by the public as well as much of what is dispersed among social circles and localities. Attribute agenda-setting, which involves the media’s representations of various attributes of particular objects such as newsworthy people,
places, and events, greatly sways the public’s opinion about public affairs. Attributes are aspects of the objects the media create to describe them. For example, during a presidential election, the candidates themselves are the objects, while the media’s description of the candidates and the influence these descriptions have on the public, are the attributes (McCombs, 1972).

Citing Rogers and Dearing, Dennis McQuail (2010) references the media’s agenda-setting function as the convergence of three agendas rather than one: the media’s, the public’s, and public policy’s. Agenda-setting, in effect, offers an alternative look at the previously accepted notion of direct media effect on public thinking. McQuail (2010) acknowledges, unlike some of his counterparts, that there is a similarity in concept among other theories, such as bandwagon theory, spiral of silence, diffusion of news, gatekeeping, etc. In order to understand agenda-setting in its rawest form, there must be an awareness of the surrounding and related theoretical models. For example, in covering Middle Eastern women’s issues, The New York Times serves as a gatekeeper of information, sorting and diffusing “news” as it sees fit to a vast and varied public audience.

Diverse forms of mass media create comparable forms of news (McQuail, 2010). McQuail’s Mass Communication Theory (2010) points out that agenda-setting effects tend to be superficial and fleeting. This means, in essence, that many of the issues that are considered prominent may not necessarily be relevant a month or even a week after their publication. Factors contributing to relevance of certain issues are circumstance and outside influences, which create salience of issues and sway the media about what to cover. According to McQuail (2010), even though emphasis is often placed on
media’s long-term influence on the public and on what the public thinks about, our preferences and our opinions are fairly subject to change. McQuail (2010) goes on to explain the media rarely affects opinion and attitude for various reasons including social environment, selective agreement, motives for attention to media, competing viewpoints, resistance to persuasion, and reinterpretation of the information doled out by media.

Reese and Shoemaker (1996) took the idea of agenda-setting a step further with their discussion of the hierarchy of influences model. This media model, named for the many influences on journalistic conduct and content, hinges on the principle that there are five different layers, or rings, of influence that most journalists encounter before deciding what and in what context to write about various newsworthy events. The levels range from personal preferences to current social and media standards (Ruigrok, 2005). “Although the specific details of a day’s events might be unique…the way journalists report the events is influenced by coverage of similar events in the past” (Ruigrok, 2005, p. 22). These journalistic influences create a system of story selection and delivery that work in tandem with the common perception of agenda-setting because journalists are constantly making decisions about the overall “social reality” they want to create and dispense to the public (Ruigrok, 2005, p. 21). In relation to this study, the rings of influence that affect journalists’ coverage of Middle Eastern women’s issues could stem from exposure to bestselling novels covering the same topics. Publicity about novels and their revelations can, in this way, affect journalistic decisions about how and what to cover in the news.
As previously mentioned, Upton Sinclair was one of the first journalists to test the effects of agenda-setting by producing his great American novel, *The Jungle* (1906). Sinclair’s attempt at blowing the whistle on the meatpacking industry, was filled with sordid accounts of how and by what means the meat industry did its business. Although the goal of Sinclair’s work was to expose and improve the conditions of people working in the meatpacking industry, it should be noted that the public and media attention drawn to the tainting of food products led to a much different outcome than Sinclair anticipated.

As a result of the novel’s publication, and of the public disgust that ensued, President Theodore Roosevelt signed a law that would eventually create the Food and Drug Administration (Blackwell, 1999). Sinclair’s great novel remains one of the principal examples of media agenda-setting, even though the particular agenda served was not the original one Sinclair had aimed for. Viewed as a socialist commentary and a journalistic novel, Sinclair’s book shaped much of what would be covered in the media at the turn of the 20th century. As a result of the efforts of Sinclair and other investigative reporters of the era who focused on a “literature of exposure” – exposing society’s pitfalls – President Roosevelt originated the term “muckrakers” (Blackwell, 1999).

### 2.2 Middle Eastern Women’s Issues

Several studies have examined the extent to which the American media covers Middle Eastern women’s issues (Mabro, 1991; Said, 1978; Shaheen, 1985; Shirazi, 2010; Wilkins, K. G., 1995). But rarely has research attempted to link this coverage to fictional literature on the same topic. The plight of Middle Eastern women may seem distant or unimportant to Americans who are removed or unaware of the status of women in Middle Eastern countries. When works of fiction explode onto our country’s
bestseller landscape, however, readers pay attention. This is especially true of *The New York Times* bestseller list, which serves as a good indicator of a novel's success (Ortiz & Philbin, 2009). “The list, compiled in a survey of thousands of book retailers, is a weekly reflection of what the American public is interested in reading” (Ortiz & Philbin, 2009, p.1). *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, a *New York Times* bestseller, is a representative example of how Middle Eastern women’s issues are being discussed within both fiction and nonfiction genres.

Marilyn Booth’s “Women and Globalization in the Arab Middle East: Gender, Economy and Society” (2003) touches on Middle Eastern women’s desire to provide for their families and the contradicting lack of jobs attainable by females within their respective countries. The article was published in *The Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, a publication whose existence illustrates the notion that knowledge of Middle Eastern women’s issues is important to providing a background for the status of women in the Middle East. The journal’s purpose is to “advance the fields of Middle East women’s studies, gender studies, and Middle East studies through contributions across disciplines” (2010).

Similarly, Erika Friedl, author of *Women of Deh Koh: Lives in an Iranian Village* (1989), uses a fictional village (“Deh Koh”) to illustrate real-life atrocities against women occurring in nearly thirty thousand actual mountain villages in Iran. Friedl’s fictional work focuses on the idea that even though women in Iran are receiving more education than in the past, they are still deeply tyrannized by men in their pursuits of jobs and middle-class standards of life. In “Deh Koh,” Friedl’s characters are prohibited from spending time with other women and are constantly considered unfit for employment. Faces
behind veils, women’s access to public places is restricted, and their husbands and government force them into submissiveness. In painting a historic overview of the oppression and mistreatment of women in Iran, and in the Middle East overall, Friedl provides yet another backdrop for Middle Eastern women’s issues presented in a work of fiction.

This interest in Middle Eastern women’s issues extends beyond what is written for scholarly and entertainment purposes and moves into the realm of roundtable discussion within homes and social clubs in the United States. One such discussion was conducted in 1997, in which the online journal the *Middle East Report* transcribed a roundtable of seven international female university-level teachers who asked pressing questions about the validity of discussing Middle Eastern women’s issues. Specifically, the women asked, “Should there even be such a field as ‘Middle Eastern women’s studies’ considering the problem of compressing such heterogeneous societies and experiences into the very categories ‘Middle East’ and even ‘women?’”(Canikar, 2007).

One of the women, Mrs. Kannaneh, in response to the inquiry, said:

On October 18, 1997 the New York Times published such an article, “Women Marked for Death, By Their Own Families,” on Pakistani girls in England threatened with death by their fathers and brothers because they trespassed rigid “ancient social customs.” Such stories are still acceptable to, even highly sought after by, American readers and viewers. To challenge such stories, activism, “outreach” and wider appeal beyond academia are essential (2007, p. 1).

One of the leading authors in the field of Middle Eastern women’s studies is Nikki Keddie. In her two scholarly books, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (2003) and *Women in the Middle East: Past and Present* (2007), she examines two country-shaking anthropological trends within the region. In the first, she provides a more generalized look at Iran and its environment of change. In studying wartime
practices, the effects of 9/11 and Iran’s ever-changing dynamic in relation to the United States, as well as the country’s predilection for mistreating women, Keddie (2003) opens up a realm of understanding.

Keddie’s (2007) second book presents a more critical assessment of the lives of women in Arab countries with respect to their status and position as members of the Islamic religion and their individual “economic situations, identities, families, and geographies” (preface). In describing the particular niche into which most women in Middle Eastern countries fall, Keddie allows American readers to perceive women’s issues in these countries as they become more prominent and pertinent within the American psyche. Keddie rejects the idea of women as “faceless victims, and assesses their involvement in the rise of modern nationalist, socialist, and Islamic movements” (2007, preface). With this more progressive view of the treatment of women in Middle Eastern countries, a contrary perspective is taken, providing a healthy converse to this research’s conjecture.

Meanwhile, a scant amount of research has been conducted examining American media’s coverage of the Middle East as a whole, rather than looking specifically at the female sector of the population. Dina Ibrahim’s dissertation, The Middle East in America’s News: A 20th Century Overview (2003), took a comprehensive look at America’s media coverage of the Middle East. It examined the following media giants: CNN, NPR, PBS, The New York Times, the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, the Wall Street Journal, Chicago Tribune, Chicago Sun Times and Detroit Free Press. And while it found oddly fluctuating coverage of Middle Eastern issues, the study did not cover anything about female oppression in the region. The significance of a
study of this kind, however, is that researchers are currently looking at trends in American interest in the Middle East, which means that there is room for a continuation of study on the specific facets of American exposure to news about the Middle East and its citizens.

Likewise, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press claimed “Record Public Interest in Middle East Conflict” in 2002, but did not specify whether the “conflict” had any ties to women’s issues. The Pew Research Center survey shows an extensive amount of American public interest in the goings-on in the Middle East, with almost half of all Americans having knowledge of the Middle East conflict and roughly a third of Americans tracking the story closely. Since this survey was taken in April of 2002, not long after the 9/11 attacks, it shows an increased interest in the Middle East, as it was the “most closely followed foreign news [story]...in the 16-year history of the Pew Research Center’s news interest index” (2002, p. 1). More specifically focused on women’s issues, Simona Sharoni reports in the *Middle East Report* (1997) that “before the 21st century, there was a “slump period’ from 1976 to 1983 when the number of [Middle Eastern women’s studies] diminished” (para. 3) and “the number of papers [on women and gender issues] dropped to 19 in 1985” (para. 3).

Forums for Middle Eastern women’s studies are in greater prevalence online now than ever. The *Journal of Middle Eastern Women’s Studies* “seeks to advance the fields of Middle Eastern Women’s Studies, gender studies, and Middle East studies through interdisciplinary contributions in the social sciences and humanities” (2004, introduction). A concrete medium of discussion, JMEWS takes a theoretical and methodological approach to the studies of women and the history of the fledgling
feminism that is appearing in the Middle East. Comparatively, Middle East Online allows
for the voicing of Middle Eastern women’s issues in a free and open Internet
environment from the Middle Eastern perspective, rather than an American perspective.
One such article on the site, called “Tehran to Introduce All-Women Minivans,”
describes the trend in Tehran toward harassment of women on public transportation.
The article mentions the current status of mixed-sex transportation and explains the
remedy to harassment by introducing women-only minivans (driven by women) to avoid
further bullying from men. Many of these public displays of harassment are also found in
A Thousand Splendid Suns as a narrative.

Of course, there are instances in which American popular press has included
coverage of Middle Eastern women as empowered and independent entities.
Forbes.com published a 2005 article titled “The 100 Most Powerful Women: Women to
Watch in the Middle East.” Women featured in the piece included Shikha Al-Bahar,
head of corporate banking of the National Bank of Kuwait; Hanzade Dogan (Turkey),
chief executive of Sanyo and Millyet Newspaper; Nehad Taher, senior economist at the
National Commercial Bank in Saudi Arabia; and Elham Hassan, senior partner at
PricewaterhouseCoopers in Bahrain. Additionally, ABC News posted an editorial piece
on its Web site describing the efforts by an investment bank in Abu Dhabi to acquire
wealthy female clients. The impetus for focusing its efforts on women, the article goes
on to say, is for the Al Bashayer Investment Company to provide an incentive for the
nation to cultivate its women’s wealth (Heavens, 2010).

A fairly recent article from the Associated Press, moreover, covered the issue of
women’s rights in the Middle East. The article mentioned, “Human rights require the
rights of women” (2005, para. 3). The journalist makes note of “extraordinary progress” for the Middle East as women gradually gain the right to vote, a country at a time (2005). At the time of the article’s online publication, all Middle Eastern nations allowed females the right to vote except Saudi Arabia.

2.3 Depiction of Middle Eastern Women in Media

In 2004, Shahira Fahmy conducted a content analysis that looked specifically at Afghani women depicted in Associated Press photographs. By studying the elements of “visual subordination, point of view, social distance, imaginary contact, behavior and general portrayal” (p. 91), Fahmy was able to distinguish and interpret a trend in the representation of Afghani women as reflected over AP wires and across the world. In the course of her research, Fahmy uncovered the idea that many Western media outlets found the women’s liberation movement after the fall of the Taliban to be a perfect public relations scheme. Specifically, the notion that many Afghani women removed their burqas created the stir that women, in showing their faces, felt empowered to do so (Louw, 2003; Fahmy, 2004). In 2001, furthermore, CNN broadcast news that women were removing their “all-enveloping” burqas (Fahmy, 2004, p. 92; Stephens, 2001), their pictures appearing on front pages of several international newspapers (Bagnall, 2001; Fahmy, 2004). Months later, though, Afghani women were pictured again wearing their burqas, supporting the idea that perhaps the women’s liberation movement of global PR campaigns was not really happening. The media representation failed to recognize the deeply rooted heritage involved in wearing burqas. The finding suggested that, to these women, wearing burqas was an honor, not a punishment (Pazira, 2003).

Fahmy’s (2004) study ultimately found that the vast majority of photos (99 percent) portrayed women wearing burqas and full-body coverings. Her report went on to explain
that, in less than ten percent of the data sets examined, Afghan women were pictured from a low angle, “giving them an impression of empowerment” (p. 101), and that over half the data sets portrayed Afghan women from a profile angle or from the back. “This angle, according to Leeuwen and Jewitt (2001), objectifies the woman and portrays her as the ‘other’” (Fahmy, p. 101, 2004; Jewitt & Leeuwen, 2001). With the results of her study pointing heavily in one direction, Fahmy concluded that, “To maintain news credibility, a more complex perspective [of Afghani women] must be mediated” (2004, p. 110).

Closely related to Fahmy’s study is the 1995 article by Karin Gwinn Wilkins, “Middle Eastern Women in Western Eyes: A Study of U.S. Press Photographs of Middle Eastern Women.” Wilkins’ study hoped to uncover more about Westerners’ perceptions of Middle Eastern women. Wilkins (1995) states, “Eastern women have most often been described in Western literature and popular media as subservient figures, suffering from ethnic or religious oppression” (p. 51). After examining several photos, Wilkins found that the majority of the women pictured were in positions of passivity (several women were portrayed as observers, not engaged in any professional or media-seeking capacity), while the men pictured were frequently engaged in activity (as law enforcers, professionals, or law breakers) (1995, p 57). Mabro (1991) explains, “Although most of what has been written has been from male perspectives, Western women have tended to adopt the male categorizations of Eastern women, ‘frequently describing the women they met as children, in the same way men did’” (Mabro, 1991, p. 13).

2.4 Research Question

It is vital, at this juncture, to realize that knowledge is power. Novels like A Thousand Splendid Suns generate knowledge because they impart a sense of reality
through their depictions of fictional characters dealing with real-life issues. This
knowledge, in turn, can be imparted on the journalistic plane and on American society
as a whole. Thus, this study asked the following question:

Research Question 1: Have American journalists at The New York Times covered
Middle Eastern women’s issues thematically similar to those in A Thousand Splendid
Suns?
CHAPTER 3
METHOD

3.1 Textual Analysis

This study involved a textual analysis of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini and a qualitative content analysis of *The New York Times*’ coverage of issues related to themes presented in the novel. Alan McKee (2003) describes textual analysis as a method by which a researcher analyzes a text and “makes an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text” (p. 1). By delving into the content of any text, analysts can make inferences about the culture, time, place and meaning of that text, thereby outlining much of what is not depicted on the written page. In this study, a textual analysis was used to extract meaning from a work of fiction, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, by pinpointing several literary themes that weave together the novel’s storyline. Textual analysis hinges on the premise that a text can be fragmented (in this instance, into themes), analyzed, and put back together in a fluid and digestible explication of that text itself (McKee, 2003). In doing so, researchers can evaluate a text’s components to give an informed and well-rounded elucidation of the text’s many intricacies and its meaning as a whole.

It is important to note here that, in performing a textual analysis, there is no “correct” interpretation of a text (McKee, 2003, p. 63). When doing a textual analysis, it is essential to create an examination of the most likely interpretation of given themes, rather than to limit oneself to finding the “right” interpretation of those themes (McKee, 2003, p. 63). In the instance of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, this study compiled a pool of themes that were interpreted through novelistic literary cues and context, and, more
importantly, themes that could thematically be related to real-life content found in *The New York Times*.

### 3.2 Qualitative Content Analysis

According to Patton (2002), a qualitative content analysis can be defined as “any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (Patton, 2002, p. 453).

Qualitative content analysis goes beyond merely counting words or extracting objective content from texts to examine meanings, themes and patterns that may be manifest or latent in a particular text. It allows researchers to understand social reality in a subjective but scientific manner (Wildemuth & Zhang, 2009, p. 1).

While traditional quantitative content analysis focuses strictly on counting specific pieces of information (words, phrases, etc.) within a medium, qualitative content analysis gives the researcher a more interpretive role: “The goal is to identify important themes or categories within a body of content, and to provide a rich description of the social reality created by those themes/categories as they are lived out in a particular setting” (Wildemuth & Zhang, 2009, p.11). Another key difference between quantitative content analysis and qualitative content analysis lies in the collection of data. Quantitative content analyses require random sampling or other methods of gathering information that will ensure validity of the scientific inference being made. Qualitative content analysis, meanwhile, is conducted through the deliberate selection of certain material that then creates the basis for the research questions under study (Wildemuth & Zhang, 2009).

Berg (2001) makes the point that qualitative content analyses differ most distinctly from quantitative analyses because their results are expressed in the form of
explanations or depictions, with the ideas and conjectures of the researcher and the producers of the text seen as actively relevant. Qualitative content analysis, in essence, elucidates unique overarching themes, rather than creating a statistical analysis of the incidence of specific words or concepts. “Qualitative content analysis involves a process designed to condense raw data into categories or themes based on valid inference and interpretation” (Wildemuth & Zhang, 2009, p. 2). The typical unit of analysis in a qualitative content analysis, therefore, is the theme (Minichiello et al., 1990).

A preliminary study took a comprehensive look at further literary points of reference – the novel itself (A Thousand Splendid Suns), journals, and dissertations to find out what has already been covered on the topic. A secondary study focused on The New York Times and its coverage of Middle Eastern women’s issues that reflect those presented in the novel (male supremacy, dehumanizing atrocities against women, implications of Islam, as well as economic, familial and social identities – specific themes are listed in Appendix A).

Most research was done on The New York Times’ Web site using the search terms “Middle Eastern women,” “oppression of Middle Eastern women,” and “Middle Eastern women’s issues.” A Thousand Splendid Suns was read critically, as novelistic themes were selected and documented. The qualitative content and textual analyses served as a basis for deciphering common themes. According to Fico, Lacy, and Riffe (2005), “the researcher must decide whether the paragraph around the assertion, several paragraphs, or the entire article is the appropriate context unit” (p. 72). Using this as a roadmap, it is imperative to this research to understand that all New York Times articles containing content clues regarding Middle Eastern women’s issues are
not necessarily relevant or applicable to the research topic at hand. It is, however, important to note that, when dealing with many of the themes, tangible and intangible, within the text of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, there are journalistic endeavors within *The Times* that exactly match the novel’s themes (see Appendix A).
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

This study found nine relevant articles published in *The New York Times* between 2007, the year of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*’ publication, and 2010, the year this study commenced. Qualitative content analysis, explained above, deals with the sorting of thematic elements into categories that the researcher finds thematically pertinent to the study at hand. *The New York Times* articles selected were the most thematically similar to the themes coded from the novel. Of the nine articles examined, each one fit into one or more of the coding categories. Because qualitative analysis allows researchers to place a theme into more than one category at a time (Tesch, 1990), many of *The New York Times* articles fell into multiple thematic categories. Of the nine theme categories, all of them matched the themes presented in one or more of *The New York Times* articles (see Appendix A). Below are the detailed summaries of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The New York Times* articles thematically related to the novel.

4.1 Summary of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a four-part novel that takes place in Afghanistan. It centers on two women, Mariam and Laila, their stories interweaving throughout the work. Mariam, the elder of the two, is shunned by her father, Jalil, and treated as an illegitimate daughter. She watches as he acts as husband to three other wives and father to several other children, while he only visits her on Thursdays. When he misses one of their meetings, on Mariam’s fifteenth birthday, she goes to his house. Her father refuses to see her; she falls asleep, deeply hurt by her father’s rebuff, outside his gate. When she returns home, Mariam finds her mother has killed herself, terrified that Mariam had left her for good. Mariam then goes to live with Jalil, who arranges a
marriage between her and Rasheed, a man far her senior. Rasheed is a shoemaker and forces Mariam to move to Kabul, where she has seven miscarriages and Rasheed abuses her violently every day.

A young girl, Laila, lives in Mariam’s Kabul village. Laila’s friend Tariq is in love with her, but is respectful of the boundaries boys and girls must keep within their communities. When war breaks out in Afghanistan, Kabul falls under rocket attack and Tariq and Laila make love as they bid each other goodbye – Tariq’s family must flee. As Laila’s family makes their escape from the city a rocket destroys their home and her parents are killed. Laila is injured, but taken in by Rasheed and Mariam. Their stories collide.

Laila soon realizes that she is pregnant. As a way out, Laila marries Rasheed and becomes the younger, more vibrant addition to the home. When Laila’s baby (whose father is Tariq) is born, she names the newborn Aziza. Laila has been told that Tariq is dead and endures physical and mental abuse from Rasheed daily. Mariam and Laila eventually become allies and decide to flee Kabul and Rasheed forever. The pair only makes it to the bus station before Rasheed discovers them. Rasheed proceeds to sadistically beat them and deny the two women water for days, nearly killing Aziza, who is still an infant.

Time passes and Laila becomes pregnant again with Rasheed’s son, Zalmai. Kabul is a decrepit and poor city now, as the Taliban has grown in strength and Rasheed’s shoe shop is burned down. He forces the women to send Aziza to an orphanage. Laila soon discovers that Tariq is not dead when he shows up at her home. Zalmai tells his father about Tariq’s visit and Rasheed retaliates, brutally striking Laila.
Mariam, fed up and terrified, hits Rasheed with a shovel, killing him. Laila and Tariq run away to Pakistan with her children. Mariam turns herself in to authorities for killing her husband and is sentenced to death. Laila and Tariq come back to Afghanistan after the Taliban loses power and discover that Mariam’s father has left her a parcel. Laila reads the included letter and learns that Jalil is remorseful about shunning Mariam and sending her away. Laila and Tariq vow to repair and restore the orphanage, where Laila becomes a teacher. Upon discovering that she is once again pregnant, Laila implies that the baby’s name will be Mariam (Hosseini, 2007).

4.2 Themes Presented in A Thousand Splendid Suns

A textual analysis of the novel revealed several literary themes: a sense of community, a tie to the Middle East (specifically, Afghanistan), the emotional struggle to maintain hope, the deep sense of shame felt by men and women in the community, friendship, love versus hate, etc. And while these themes flow throughout the piece, some more concrete concepts are prominently presented as a commentary on the treatment of Middle Eastern women.

The novel covers 40 years in the lives of two Afghan women who have very different upbringings, but who eventually end up in the same situation as many of their female predecessors. Mariam, the book’s protagonist, was born an illegal child and was prohibited from attending school. At age 15, she was forced to marry Rasheed, an ugly, abusive man who forces her to wear a burqa against her wishes. Mariam is harshly oppressed throughout the novel. She is never made to feel like a first-class citizen by her father or her husband.

Laila is an attractive girl who lived just up the street. She was born to educated, liberal parents and enjoyed the freedoms Mariam was restricted from. During the wars
of the 1980s and 1990s, a rocket destroyed Laila’s home with her parents in it. This tragedy and unexpected pregnancy forces Laila to become Rasheed’s second wife. Rasheed savagely beats Laila, as Afghan women in general are stifled and forced to suffer the consequences of being born the inferior gender. With every rise and fall of political regime, the country’s men become more and more hostile towards their wives and children. The women in the novel are not permitted to show their faces and are not permitted outside the home without permission. The novel’s main characters are also forced to have sex with Rasheed and are punished when they do not produce strong, healthy sons. Female value in Afghan culture, furthermore, is determined by the ability of women to produce males.

The novel’s heroines, Mariam and Laila, become a symbol of female bonding and rebellion against the sexist nature of their country. Although they are both forced to marry Rasheed, they find happiness in each other and their children. Aziza, Laila’s daughter, serves as the attempt to change status quo. Mariam and Laila are determined to educate her in the Koran and in becoming literate and aware. At the end of the novel, Zalmai, Laila’s son, and Aziza are sent to school together. After an initial rivalry, Mariam and Laila become best friends. \textit{A Thousand Splendid Suns} gives insight into daily life in Afghanistan through the eyes of two very different women who become the closest of allies.

A textual analysis found nine themes as unique categories for examination (see Appendix):

- Educational oppression
- Male domination
- Physical and mental abuse
- Sexual abuse
• Body coverings
• Restriction
• Childbearing
• Female bonding
• Attempts at rebellion

4.3 **New York Times Articles Thematically Related to *A Thousand Splendid Suns***

This study found nine *New York Times* articles between 2007 and 2010 that include content directly related to events depicted in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (see Appendix A). These specific articles were selected because of their similarity in coverage of the themes and issues depicted in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

4.3.1 **Male Domination**


This video, accompanied by an article, from The New York Times web site discussed women who have attained leadership positions within various fields in Afghanistan, specifically in the Bamian province. This shedding of the traditional gender roles, designated by the male-dominated upper echelon in those societies, is indicative of progress for women in the Middle East. During the time depicted in Hosseini’s novel – 1960 through 2003 – an Afghan policewoman would have been a nonoccurrence. Now, as shown in the video, Nahida Rezai is a policewoman and is getting paid for her services.

4.3.2 **Sexual Abuse, Childbearing, Attempts at Rebellion**


Dexter Filkins covers a monumental event in Kabul, Afghanistan – 300 women marching against a violent and turbulent group of men. The march took place on the streets of the capital, as the women demanded “…that Parliament repeal a new law that
introduces a range of Taliban-like restrictions on women, and permits, among other things, marital rape.” This piece depicts the most relevant coverage of Middle Eastern women’s issues. The march relates to *A Thousand Splendid Suns* because of its close resemblance to the male dominance presented in the novel.

### 4.3.3 Educational Oppression


In Thomas Friedman’s New York Times piece, he discusses the opening of a school for girls in the Hindu Kush Mountains of Afghanistan. Friedman also discusses why we should continue to care about Afghanistan and the Taliban – “…with its women disempowered, and those who want to embrace modernity, open Islam to new ideas and empower Muslim women as much as men.” In this piece, as with many others, there is an obvious agenda towards pushing Middle Eastern women’s rights in *The Times* as well as, assumedly, several other American print journalism media outlets. In doing so, the American journalistic community is mirroring themes from *Suns*. This would include, particularly, the lack of choice women possess in the matters of marriage, abuse, childbearing, and independence in general.

### 4.3.4 Male Domination, Physical and Mental Abuse, Attempts at Rebellion


Carlotta Gall reports on the brutal murder of Safia Amajan in Kandahar, Afghanistan. A force in the women’s rights and education effort to enlighten and enrich women’s lives, Amajan’s was the “highest-level assassination of a woman…since the Taliban were ousted from power.” It is important to note that, while this is a tragic occurrence, there are much worse and longer-standing atrocities against women
happening every day, at any minute in the Middle East – much of which is depicted and explained in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

### 4.3.5 Male Domination, Restriction, Female Bonding


Carlotta Gall presents the image of the Afghanistan province, Bamian, where the Taliban has fallen, and where women drive cars, take up positions in public office, and “push the boundaries.” Many of the province’s people, moreover, are Hazaras (a sect that is brought up many times in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and is, in fact, the reason for much of the murderous atrocities in the novel), who “are more open than most” to Afghan women working outside the home.

### 4.3.6 Male Domination


Denise Grady profiles Ms. Pashtoon Azfar, director of Afghanistan’s Institute of Health Sciences and president of the Afghan Midwives Association. Azfar is a much-needed and much-admired member of Afghan society. She is a frequent visitor to Capitol Hill and a citizen of Kabul. This article is important to this research because *A Thousand Splendid Suns* deals heavily with mothers and childbirth in Afghanistan and the lack of care designated for birthing activities. It is possible that *The New York Times*, and Americans in general, have been exposed to a deathly occurrence, happening daily to women in the Middle East.

### 4.3.7 Educational Oppression, Male Domination, Physical and Mental Abuse

Humayoon and Nadery reflect on a November 2008 incident where “extremists on motorbikes opposed to education for women sprayed acid on a group of several students from the Mirwais School for Girls in Kandahar, Afghanistan.” The girls, some severely burned, returned to school within a few weeks for fear that they would be behind on their studies. This is extremely relevant to this study because it deals largely with a need for progress within Afghanistan’s female community, especially within the realm of education.

4.3.8 Body Coverings, Restriction, Attempts at Rebellion


Gayle Tzemach Lemmon describes the Women’s World Market (2007), which allows women in Afghanistan to open “their own shops, earn income and learn about business in a secure, women-only environment.” Located in western Kabul, the shops never flourished because of their distant location and lack of customers. The idea behind this empowering endeavor is a commendable one: create long-lasting developments for Afghan women to build upon and, thus, create a platform for these women to enhance and grow. The U.S. continues to pump $570 million into programs for Afghan women and girls. There is an obvious link between women in the Middle East and an American effort to empower them.

4.3.9 Male Domination, Body Coverings


This article focuses on Mingora, Pakistan, where the Taliban forced women to wear burqas in February. Since the demise of the Taliban in this area, women are now able to go back to their normal jobs – teaching, nursing, etc. The premise of the article
is that women are still terrified that such an occurrence could happen again. In conjunction with this study, these events are relevant. The practice of wearing burqas ties into the ideas of sexism, human rights, and male domination in several Middle Eastern countries. Illustrative of this is: “When the Taliban fled, our burqas went with them,” said Shahin Begum, 40, an elementary school teacher, who returned to work on Aug. 1, 2009.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

In reference to the research question formulated at the beginning of this study, *The New York Times* is certainly covering Middle Eastern women’s issues that are thematically similar to those presented in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. There is a distinct similarity between the novelistic themes presented in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and those covered in *The New York Times*’ stories. By presenting several examples of the newspaper’s coverage since the book’s publication in 2007, many of these themes may or may not have been brought to light by the publication of the novel. While almost impossible to prove that one led to the other, it is completely plausible to make a comparison between the actual content of each of the nationally recognized publications and generate a parallel between the literary themes presented in each.

So, what does this mean in terms of the agenda-setting function of *The New York Times*? News organizations, agenda-setters by nature, are often caught between a rock and a hard place. Simply by virtue of editing and selection, news stories carry the specific spin of their parent news organizations. Shaheen (1985) makes the argument that “The omission of information may form false perceptions” (p. 170). This suggests that, because news media cannot cover every aspect of every story, certain information about any given subject will be omitted, creating a biased image of, in this case, Middle Eastern women’s issues. In addition, each large media owner has an agenda to push. Gadi Wolfsfeld (1997), in his book, *Media and Political Conflict: News from the Middle East*, concludes that many news media outlets feel pressured to “stay in character” (p. 119). He writes, for example, “Abused women… get much more sympathetic coverage than feminist movements who fight for women’s rights” (p. 119).
Similarly, Rainey, Morelli, and Hakki (1996), argue that journalists cannot be faulted for pushing certain agendas. They contend that writers simply do not know enough to take part in any type of news conspiracy. In the case of Middle Eastern women’s issues, journalists are faced with a lack of information and continue to cover what the public wants to read. Journalists, in this way, may view novelistic revelations and concepts as means of informing their writing. If the public is interested in the concepts presented in a work of fiction, it is possible that readers will want to read more about these concepts in a journalistic format. With both genres (fiction and nonfiction) covering similar themes, this study proposes that there are parallels between the two genres that may provide the public with a better-rounded perception of Middle Eastern women’s issues.

With the knowledge that much of what is being written about Middle Eastern women’s issues within the mass media community is reflective of concepts presented in a specific groundbreaking novel, it can be assumed that future works of fiction will have a similar relationship to coverage of controversial and timely issues. In this way, novels also possibly serve as agenda-setters, outlining a dominant subset of the many possible themes related to Middle Eastern women’s issues. There is, therefore, power in the hands of novelists, both stateside and abroad, who have the ability to choose a factual basis for their stories. In uncovering certain atrocities through the eyes of fictional characters, authors create a commentary on controversial topics without having to report them factually, as journalists would be obligated to do.

says, “construct a certain reality based on real-world factors” (p. 21), which is mirrored in news coverage. It is the journalists, then, who select the news items that the public is exposed to. The hierarchy of influences refers to all the factors that contribute to journalists’ selection of certain topics as newsworthy. Concentric rings on the hierarchy of influences model include journalists’ past experiences and journalistic tendencies as well as the media’s general criteria for news stories (relevance, story length, and truthfulness) (Ruigrok, 2005). Similarly, knowledge of a novel dealing with a particular segment of the news – in this case, Middle Eastern women’s issues – can serve as a ring on the hierarchy as well. If a journalist has read or is aware of a novel dealing with a particular newsworthy issue, the novel could directly or indirectly influence that journalist’s coverage of that issue. Novels, in this way, can potentially inform news writers’ coverage of certain subject matters.

This study was designed to point out a similarity between the presentation of Middle Eastern women’s issues in a work of fiction and the presentation of those same issues in a nationally recognized newspaper. In doing so, the study exemplifies the fact that, while the genres are very different in terms of delivery of content, they are both platforms for the same topics. Because Middle Eastern women’s issues are being covered on both of these platforms, this study examined the notion that perhaps fiction acts as an agenda-setter to the media.

The implication remains that journalists cover the topics and events that are relevant to their readers’ interests and concerns. Since journalists paint the backdrop for goings-on in society, they retain vast amounts of power in determining what is relevant and how much to cover. It is nearly impossible to say with complete certainty that works
of fiction have the ability to change the landscape of journalistic coverage in our country, especially for a paper like *The New York Times*. It is not unreasonable, however, to identify possible ties between what is being covered in *The Times* and the general themes depicted in a modern novel. As a trend, novelists of the future can vicariously, indirectly, and, often, unintentionally, push their agendas by writing popular works of fiction and nonfiction, creating a stir that will latch journalists to cover these same issues.

**Limitations and further research.** The commonality among topics presented in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and those presented in *The New York Times* is apparent. One limitation of the study, however, was that only small samples were used in the form of only one novel and one newspaper. Perhaps in a future study, a larger sample could be examined by exploring several works of fiction dealing with Middle Eastern women’s issues as well as several nationally recognized news publications. Another limitation of the study was the inability to find distinct research that proved that novels, in fact, influence news writers in their selection of stories and topics for coverage. Further research could examine whether novels are, in fact, direct or indirect agenda-setters, providing a basis for what the public thinks about Middle Eastern women’s issues.

Future research could also examine a direct link between whether *The New York Times* writers had read the novel – or, at least, coverage and reviews of it – before selecting topics to write about. Interview, focus groups, or survey studies could also be conducted to discover whether the novel had a prevailing influence on editors’ choices of stories to be published in the newspaper. Before conducting further research, perhaps quantitatively, in terms of a direct relationship between the book’s publication
and coverage in the *Times*, in-depth interviews must be done to prove a cause-and-effect relationship between the ideas presented in the novel and those written about in *The New York Times*.

Specific examples from 2007 (the date of *Suns*’ publication) until 2010 provide a broader platform for further research as to whether a direct connection exists in a cause-and-effect study. Since it is very difficult to prove cause-and-effect without speaking directly to every *Times* writer covering Middle Eastern women’s issues, the connection, for now, remains rooted in content.
APPENDIX
THEME CATEGORIES

I. Theme Categories, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

1. **Educational oppression**
   - Mariam is never permitted to go to school.
   - Home schooling is not permitted. Any religious or scholarly teaching must be done in secret.

2. **Male domination**
   - Mariam, Laila and Aziza are treated as second-class citizens because of their gender.

3. **Physical and mental abuse**
   - Rasheed savagely beats Laila.
   - Afghan women are forced to suffer the consequences of being born the inferior gender.

4. **Sexual abuse**
   - The novel’s main characters are also forced to have sex with Rasheed.

5. **Body coverings**
   - The women in the novel are not permitted to show their faces.

6. **Restriction**
   - The women are not permitted outside the home without permission.

7. **Childbearing**
   - The women are physically punished when they do not produce strong, healthy sons.
   - Female value in Afghan culture, furthermore, is determined by the ability of women to produce males.

8. **Female Bonding**
   - The women secretly teach each other to read.
   - The women form a secret bond against the sexist nature of their country and their husband.

9. **Attempts at rebellion**
   - Mariam and Laila are determined to educate Aziza in the Koran and in becoming literate and aware.
   - At the end of the novel, Zalmai and Aziza are sent to school together.

II. Theme Categories, *The New York Times*

1. **Educational oppression**

2. **Male domination**


3. Physical and mental abuse


4. Sexual abuse


5. Body coverings


6. Restriction


7. Childbearing


8. Female bonding


9. Attempts at rebellion


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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lindsay Shapiro is a Miami native who has worked as Assistant Editor at Ocean Drive magazine and as a frequent contributor to city and style magazines such as Six Degrees and 944. Lindsay is an avid Gator fan and has also served as Executive Editor of the Orange & Blue magazine. In 2004, Lindsay graduated summa cum laude from the University of Florida's College of Journalism and Communications with a major in telecommunication. She returned in 2009 as a master's student and will graduate in December 2010 with a Master of Arts in Mass Communication degree, specializing in journalism.