Proposal for Final Project:

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Thesis Statement:

Since the nineteenth century, critics have called into question the literary merits of sentimental fiction for its seemingly unskilled rhetoric and inauthentic sentiment. Although the aesthetic purpose of sentimental literature has been repeatedly trivialized by literary critics, sentimental imagery, language and themes have been effectively utilized by various authors in the past to critique controversial social, historical and political practices of the times, such as slavery in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), and continue to be effectively utilized by contemporary authors, such as perceptions of Afghanistan and its people in Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* (2003).

Background/Significance of Project:

Since September 11, 2001, the media and American public have been obsessed by all things Islamic and Middle Eastern, as the war on terrorism has been essentially waged against various countries and peoples believed to be “supporters” of terrorism, including Afghanistan. Since America’s declaration of war on terrorism, people have been flocking to bookstores to read up on topics like Islam, terrorism, the conflict in the Middle East, and more. While there have been many books, newspaper articles, magazine articles, and documentaries published on the Taliban, Osama Bin Laden, and women’s rights in the region, there were still no works of fiction in English published by an Afghan author until 2003.

Khaled Hosseini is the first Afghan-American writer to publish a work of fiction in English in the United States. *The Kite Runner* is Hosseini’s first novel, and his book has achieved a significant amount of success since its publication in 2003—now in its seventeenth printing with
over 1.4 million copies sold—and has repeatedly appeared on the *New York Times* Best Sellers List over the last three years. Even though bookstores and libraries have been inundated with literature about Afghanistan and Iraq (post-9/11), none appear to have achieved the same amount of recognition or success as *The Kite Runner*.

Moreover, Hosseini’s book has received numerous positive reviews, including a movie deal from DreamWorks studios on his book (scheduled to be released in 2007). However, doubts have been raised about the literary merits of this novel that are strikingly similar to those voiced in the past by critics of “sentimental” literature.

**Description of Project:**

I plan to address some of the negative comments made by critics/reviewers about *The Kite Runner*, such as his undeveloped metaphors, undeveloped female characters, heavy reliance on archetypal characters, selective (if not simplistic) depiction of the Afghan conflict, reliance on melodramatic coincidence, “utilitarian” prose style, “overly-explicit musings” that should be implied rather than stated, and Hollywood-style ending. I plan to juxtapose these criticisms with other criticisms written against sentimentalist writers of the nineteenth century, with a particular focus on Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In this discussion, I will provide background information on the definition of sentimentalism, sentimental literature, and some of the common criticisms of the forms and techniques, which have evolved over time.

Given that Hosseini’s novel was published in a post-9/11 environment—a complex environment of warring political, social, religious, and economic agendas—I thought it might be appropriate to draw comparisons between the popularity of Hosseini’s novel and its depiction of the culture
and suffering of the Afghan people, particularly the ethnic Hazaras, with the popularity of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which depicts the harsh reality of slavery. Although overtly religious tones are not present in Hosseini’s novel, like Stowe’s novel, the theme of redemption is alive and well in *The Kite Runner*, as the narrator’s past sins can only be atoned by undergoing a perilous mission to Afghanistan (during the Taliban regime) involving the rescue of a sexually abused orphan and subsequently bringing the boy to America where he can live and thrive with a lovingly adoptive family. Saving the boy does not only enable personal salvation, but also helps the narrator re-discover religion and regain a sense of purpose in life.

In the paper, I will discuss the reasons of why Hosseini’s book clicks so powerfully with American audiences. I will examine the social and political context in which his novel was published, looking at the predominant views in American society of Afghanistan, paying particular attention to the “hot topics” of the time, such as Islamic fundamentalism, Taliban, and Afghan women’s rights, as well the stereotypes. I will look at whether Hosseini’s novel reflects and addresses those concerns and stereotypes in his novel, and the rhetoric used to depict the atrocities committed by the Taliban. Specifically, I will look at how Hosseini’s novel contains feminist undertones. For instance, I think it’s important to note that while Hosseini’s female characters have been characterized as “flat” characters, they are also not portrayed as stereotypical burka-clad, sexually oppressed women. In fact, there are two women characters in the novel who runs away from home to engage in sexual liaisons with men, and the consequences of such actions are dire. Sexual violence in Hosseini’s novel is also not aimed at the female sex, but at the male. I would like to point out that Hosseini questions the masculinity of the Taliban, by portraying them as hypocritical pedophiles, rather than intelligent, religious fanatics scheming for global destruction (as portrayed by the U.S. media).
Research Strategies:

I will use book reviews published by scholarly journals as well as major and minor newspapers to analyze the popularity of the novel, including its literary strengths and weaknesses. I will use interviews with Hosseini to determine authorial intention as it relates to reader response. Some scholarly articles on Afghanistan published shortly after 9/11 will be used to provide a social and historical context for Hosseini’s novel. Lastly, I will use both scholarly articles and books to explain the concept of “sentimentality” and “emotional narratives,” and their cultural importance, which will help me further articulate my critical approach to Hosseini’s text.

Annotated Bibliography


This review explains how Hosseini’s story “mirror[s] Afghanistan’s political, social and religious tensions and complexities.” The review also discusses how Hosseini believes that “storytelling must be privileged in the novel” and how the intent of the author is to “keep Afghanistan and its travails in the public’s consciousness.” It emphasizes that this is a novel about “personal salvation and the recognition of self,” which helps strengthen my argument about the novel’s striking similarities with Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin.

This article briefly addresses how the U.S. media used gendered imagery and language to describe the situation in Afghanistan, specifically how Afghan women were the victims and the men (particularly the Taliban) were victimizers. The authors emphasize the danger behind this dichotomous view and analysis of the situation in Afghanistan. This is an important point to make in my paper because Hosseini’s representation of Afghan males and females is unique because it does not fall prey to the gendered stereotypes of Afghan women and men.

Cline, Rob. “New Novel Impossible to Put Down.” Iowa City Press-Citizen 6 Jun. 2003: 5B. This is an excellent article because it both criticizes and praises Hosseini’s book. Cline argues that The Kite Runner “should be a disaster of a novel” because it is filled with “stock characters traversing a tired plot driven by well-worn themes, a not-so-surprising plot twist and several staggering coincidences,” but it’s “just the opposite” because it “offers a surprising reward: an understanding of, and empathy for, the people of Afghanistan.” In the end, Cline argues that Hosseini’s novel “chang[es] the way readers think and feel about this country that is so often in the news.” This article will help my argument about the power of sentimental literature to sway public opinion and gain popularity by capitalizing on the moral dilemmas of the modern times.

Dobson, Joanne. “Reclaiming Sentimental Literature.” American Literature 69.2 (1997): 263-288. This article gives a good look at literary history of sentimental literature in America. It includes the criticisms launched against this type of genre, and how sentimental writings have often been used to advocate for change in society.
Dobson makes distinctions between good and bad sentimental literature. I will use Dobson’s article to describe the various “sentimental” qualities of the novel and describe how his text should be viewed not only as a form of cultural discourse but also as a legitimate form of literary expression.


This article discusses the various ways in which Hosseini makes his novel accessible to the average American reader. This will help me explain the popularity of the novel among American audiences.


This article will be used in my argument for the novel being viewed as a work of sentimental literature. Even though Gezari states that one of the greatest strengths of the novel is the sympathetic portrayal of Afghans and Afghan culture, Gezari also heavily criticizes the novel, like many nineteenth century critics, for its lack of literary finesse.


This article gives statistics on the amount of books Hosseini has sold in the United States and goes into some detailed discussions of how the book was discovered by independent booksellers and then by customers. It discusses why the book is so popular among the public, especially women, and how the political climate of the times has helped spur book sales.

This article will help me explain how the media and Hollywood’s obsession with Afghanistan and women’s rights in the post-9/11 environment helped spark an interest in the American public’s imagination about Afghanistan. It enables me to explain how the political rhetoric of the times helped rally the public behind the moral imperative that the United States and its people must serve as a “defender of liberal freedoms.”


This interview is useful because the author specifically states his purpose in writing the text: “I hope this story resonates with the people and that it emotionally is a story that people will think about long after it’s done.” Hosseini states that he hopes his book “gets people to keep talking about Afghanistan and to remember that Afghanistan is still there…” Thus, this article will help me make a connection between authorial intention and Hosseini’s appeal to sentiment and emotion in the text.


This primary text will be analyzed for this project.


This article discusses how the perspective on emotion itself has changed over time, from the nineteenth century forward. Howard talks about how literary historians must begin to view these texts as “culturally powerful and historically resonant.”
She explains why sentimentality is always viewed as suspect, if not stigmatized, arguing that the “packaged quality of emotion” appeals to people on a personal and public level, but renders it “trash” in the eyes of literary critics.


Kipen criticizes the book for failing to develop the metaphor of the kite and for its overly explicit narration on Amir’s thoughts and feelings, describing the book as “middlebrow but proficient.” Even though the literary merits of the book are questioned, Kipen lauds the book as “informative, sentimental, but nevertheless touching popular fiction.”


Lorber’s article examines the “propagandistic demonization of Muslim men and the sentimentalization of Muslim women” in the complex gendered politics of post-9/11. This is important to note because Hosseini, in fact, attempts to break the conventional gender categorization of Afghans in his novel by sentimentalizing the plight of Afghan men, who, under the Taliban rule, are portrayed in *The Kite Runner* as just as weak and helpless as the women.


Noor criticizes the novel for presenting the Afghan conflict in a “selective, simplistic, even simple-minded picture,” claiming that there is no “Hollywood-style solution to such grave problems of a nation steeped in the Middle Ages.”
Noor states that the novel can only be viewed as a “soaring debut” if we consider it just as a novel about “sin and redemption.”


This article states that emotional responses often add to the reading experience because it helps the reader “get into” a book. Pence explains that the “rhetoric of emotions serves as an authorial device that operates in the register of persona” which can help establish an author’s fame and credibility. In fact, “the rhetoric of emotion, through the elaboration of an ethos,” he argues, can produce an “effect of authenticity,” which, in turn, can press against moral and social structures of the place and time. I plan to tie the concept of the rhetoric of emotion into my discussion on sentimentality to further elaborate on the authenticity of emotion in fiction produced under a certain social context.


This is an excellent article on the history of sentimentalism and the inability of numerous critics to appreciate the complexity and scope of sentimental literature like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or to account for its enormous popularity and success. Tompkins argues that critics refuse to see sentimental novels as “works of art” simply because of their direct appeals to emotions and their use of accessible, simple language. She argues that sentimental literature should be recognized and lauded for its attempts to address culture’s central concerns, mold the values of the
times, and perhaps even influencing the course of history through its use of simple, uncomplicated rhetoric.


Wyatt’s article discusses the various emotional responses that Hosseini’s novel has elicited in its readers. He also mentions how literary magazines such as *The New Yorker, Harper’s, and Esquire* all rejected the short story version of the book. Wyatt briefly discusses promotional techniques and endorsements of the novel and the reasons for its continuing popularity nation-wide.
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