# Redefining Children and Women as Heroes in the Children Books about War

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**ABSTRACT---** When children in the 20th century were enlightened by books that were vividly portraying the violence of the Holocaust and the miserable life of Asians who were interned in North America, the realm of children's literature undoubtedly enriched the awareness of the meaning of certain concepts such as freedom and safety in different cultures. In the 21st century, again, children's books have become the primary medium for most children to understand the unsafe world we live in. After the 9/11 tragedy, children were drawn by books into confronting the war against terrorism, yet instead of being subjected to political preferences or bias, they were offered several outstanding works that reveal the multicultural awareness, which has the potential to eradicate the erroneous prejudices and stereotypes towards other cultures. Remarkably, the books under consideration were written by authors who come from quite distinct roots: Deborah Ellis and Rukhsana Khan.

This study will focus on three books: Ellis' *The Breadwinner* and *Parvana's Journey*, and Khan's *Wanting Mor*. These books help their readers to embark on a journey which reveals the impressive nature of the lives of those children in Afghanistan who do not want to become involved in the war. Both writers in this study have chosen young girls as the heroines of the stories. This choice of protagonists , which is unlikely in today's culture in Afghanistan, constructs an unusual perspective for the novels. By deconstructing the creation of these characters, this study will also try to point out discrepancies between these constructs and probable reality, in the attempt to show how these books offer the child reader an alternative understanding of what is meant by 'the war against terrorism'.

**Keyword---:** feminine, child hero, maturity, authenticity, insider-outsider, first person narration

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy, the idea of violence seems to be in some ways shifting in different directions. Children's books in the twentieth century and after were nourished by such concepts of violence and war related to different themes, notably world war I (e.g. Jean Little's *Brothers Far from Home*), the holocaust (e.g. Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars,* Uri Orlev's *The Man from the Other Side* and *The Island on Bird Street* ) and of narratives of Asian internment in North America (e.g. Joy Kogawa's *Naomi's Road and Obasan*, Shichan Takashima's *A Child in Prison Camp*, and Yoshiko Uchida's *Journey to Topaz*). Other themes are also notable in demonstrating violence and war such as those concerning children who were evacuated during world war II (Nina Bawden's *Carrie's War*), boys surviving in bombed cities (Robert Westall's *The Machine-Gunners),* the Pearl Harbor attack (e.g. Adam Pelko's *A Boy at* War), and even the struggle of a girl during the civil war in Sierra Leone (Mariatu Kamara and Susan McClelland's *The Bite of the Mango*). Although violence has been deliberately attached to the realm of children's literature,as far back as fairy tales and folk tales which were delievered in oral traditions, the themes of war in many novels in the twentieth century can be said to have undergone a transformation into a consideration of violence in a deeper perspective.

Indicative of this is the way in which, after the 9/11 incident, children's books have tended to convey more complexities on this topic. As has been apparent to everyone, the 9/11 tragedy has really shifted our world view as far as understanding the 'war against terrorism' is concerned. It is perhaps more accurate to say while terrorism was present long before 9/11, it has come to involve different players after 9/11. As a result of world politics and social changes, children books have been increasingly influenced by particular themes such as war and multicultural issues.

Nevertheless, these two themes raise quite sensitive issues because books about them are inevitably concerned with several significant matters. A case in point is the books about children who are actually involved in war. Some critics consider the illustration and description about war are inappropriate in children's books. They are also aware that this topic is particularly sensitive for children whose family members are refugees from conflict areas such as Afghanistan and Iraq. But these arguments are flawed because they fail to see the benefits of children's books about war. It is important that children, particularly those who live in safe countries, understand that whatever the justifications put forward for acts of war, they always bring about more negative than positive outcomes. Children's books about war are also a tool for children in safe countries to be connected with global issues so that they can reflect on them in the context of their own lives at home and in the communities in which they live. Children's books about war also foster essential feelings of empathy which aid in the growth and development of children's morals. Even though children's books about war tend to evoke sensitive issues for children whose families are refugees of the said conflict countries, it is nevertheless

important for these children to be connected with the realities of their home-culture, cultural heritages and identity. Even though they may come to these safe countries to forget the unbearable quality of their past lives, those memories and traumas will still be there for them to carry, regardless of book content or context. Perhaps these books may also be a bridge for these children to give them hope of a better life than they have now, to let go of the trauma and build their own lives with new hope in a safer environment.

Vandergrift (1993) has clarified some issues about multicultural children's books. One of them is that of outsiders versus insiders, whether or not the books are by or just about members of the minority culture (355). This issue is addressed as a matter of authenticity. The other issue is that of uniqueness versus universality. The argument on this issue is the requisite for multicultural children's literature to address the significance of uniqueness in this genre equally from either universality or commonality. The concept of uniqueness in this case emphasizes themes such as heritage, conflicts and issues within the minority community, together with culturally specific developmental issues (Lachmann-Miller (1992) in Vandergrift, 356). This last aspect was mentioned by Vandergrift, and may be either literary or aesthetic. Vandergrift argues that "members of the dominant culture have often excluded works by talented minorities on the basis that they do not meet accepted literary standards without recognizing or acknowledging that aesthetic standards are themselves cultural" (Vandergrift, 356-357).

Among all of the issues noted above that relentlessly reveal the complexity of this particular genre of children's books, there is a unique and interesting concept, that of the hero, which is an aspect that also surprisingly enriches these books.In particular, the three books to be discussed here focus on the female hero, which is still less frequent than the male.

This study focuses on the three books: Ellis' *The Breadwinner*(2000) and *Parvana's Journey*(2002), & Khan's *Wanting Mor*(2009).These three books tell the story of the lives of children, particularly young girls living in the war zones of Afghanistan. The portrayals of the hero in these books are relatively similar in some ways, including those of race, gender, age, the idea of identity and freedom, hopes and ambitions. Though there are individual differences in how these authors describe the female protagonists, they both initially start from similar conventions.

## "No prince is coming to save you in the war zone"

To begin exploration of these three novels, it should be noted that Ellis' novels are a trilogy of which two (*The Breadwinner and Parvana's Journey*) are being discussed here; the remaining one (*Mud City*) is a separate story of Parvana's friend, Shauzia, who embarks on her own journey to survive in the war torn environment. In Ellis' *The Breadwinner* and *Parvana's Journey,* the stories bring to light a young girl's struggles in the war of Afghanistan to survive and discover the meaning of life throughout her journey while trying to find her family. Parvana is portrayed as an eleven year old young girl who has to disguise herself as a boy in order to survive since this gender disguise gives her more freedom. Essentially she was born the daughter of an educated family, and she learnt all her knowledge of the world from her father. Then unfortunately fate pushed her and her family to live a humble life, and she came to realize that life is not only about gaining the highest level of being civilized, but rather about understanding and surviving in life itself. Shortly after, she was left behind by her mother and her siblings in Kabul to go to Mazar E-Shariff for her sibling's marriage business. She has to stay in Kabul just in case the Taliban release her father from prison. The second novel, Parvana's journey is the continuation of the first novel where Parvana and her father have decided to meet her mother and siblings in Mazar E-Shariff. Her father dies on their journey, thus leaving Parvana to continue searching for the rest of her family on her own. On her journey, she meets several friends and even takes care of a baby like her own brother. She grows to be more mature in this sequel and starts to accept the world of war surrounding her wisely and responsibly.

Khan's *Wanting Mor* also brings to light a young girl as the hero of this story, Jameela, who clearly departs from the comforts of home and her mother's warm embrace at the same time. The shadows of her mother's nurturance keep her spirit elevated to be brave and continue her life. Her depressed father decides to end their miserable existence by marrying a rich woman in Kabul. Jameela believes she will have a motherly figure who is just as nurturing as her deceased mother. However her stepmother treats her as a servant and thinks Jameela as a burden in the family. Though her step brother is a nice young boy, she is still thrown and left by her father in the market in despair. Being abandoned by her father in the market, she embarks on a journey of understanding which exposes her to the truths of life which is far from the comfort of parents and home. She manages to continue her life and even gets to earn an education in the orphanage. Her understanding of a family has been redefined with the communal sisterhood in the orphanage that encourages her to refuse her father's wish to take her back.

These three books clearly reproduce the concepts of the use of a journey, moving from one place to another as one of the story archetypes that have been employed throughout the ages, from Homer's O*dyssey* to Pullman's *The Golden Compass,* and even Sendak's *Where The Wild Things Are.* Hourihan (1997) clarifies this issue as follows,

> This is the message not only of fantasy adventures but also of the *bildungsroman* in which the hero's journey is primarily a progress through time as he moves from the uncertainties and powerlessness of childhood, through the difficulties of adolescence and the hostilities of the external world, to arrive finally at some form of successful adulthood.(Hourihan, 48)

The linear journey that Parvana and Jameela take to find their new homes is paralleled by their travels as heroines. Although it is not a new thing to see heroines embarking on a journey in a violent world, such as the holocaust, internment and war, we still see the challenging progress of their journeys. Both Parvana and Jameela are heroines who are forced to involve themselves in various tests in their journey without the nurturance of their mothers. To show the readers how they survive their daily lives, the authors have used the patriarchal customs of Afghanistan as the medium in which the two heroines find their new homes.

However, their journeys certainly empower the girls from the dependence on patriarchal power towards independent feminine power. In the last part of her journey, Parvana is shown the lively environment of a refugee camp that is run by female volunteers. She is shown new hope in the camp and it is an incredibly empowering new vision of feminine freedom in the war zone. This vision of freedom in female roles in war zones is also shown in the last phase of Jameela's journey. Instead of returning to her father, she decides to free herself from her father's dominance, becoming an independent person who works for humanity with her female friends in an orphanage. In many children's books, heroines are seen as the companion of the male heroes, both of them somehow working to achieve his goals; alternatively they may be portrayed as powerless orphans who are waiting for their 'prince' to come and save them. Many fairytales, such as Cinderella, Ariel, Belle and Snow White depict such a position for female characters (Baecker 2007, 197).These books by Ellis and Khan deal with issues of multiculturalism and violence but at the same time these books also offer a way to see freedom from patriarchal dominance through the 'sisterhood' of women in a feminine environment such as refugee camps and orphanages.

## Female as the Human Norm

Hourihan's (1997) deconstruction of the hero in several fantasy children's books reveals that most children's books in the past decades have conceptualized the male as the 'norm' for being human. She states:

> Hero stories inscribe the male/female dualism, asserting the male as the norm, as what it means to be human, and defining the female as other—deviant, different, dangerous. The essence of the hero's masculinity is his assertion of control over himself, his environment and his world.(68)

Parvana is clearly the typical heroine who is undeliberately controlled by the customs of Afghanistan's patriarchal culture. In order to achieve her goals, she must disguise her feminine identity under the masculinity of a boy. Women as the subject and heroines of stories have been transformed in western children's stories in the past decades; though they are depicted as the main protagonists in many stories, they are still trapped within the male norms. We can clearly see this in several works such as lewis' *Narnia*: both of the girls among the four children are sent to fight and have to behave like boys to achieve their goals. (Hourihan, 67)

Therefore, in this children book the concept of reading another 'world', set in different cultures from the western world, is redirected in seeing female heroes trapped within the male norms. A similar process occurs in the books by Ellis and Khan; even though they are portraying these girls as heroes, the girls still need to behave in a manner that follows the male norms. Therefore, it is easy to draw upon parallels between the two girls of *Narnia* (Susan and Lucy) and the two girls in *The Breadwinner* (Parvana & Shauzia). As Hourihan says of the former:

> These stories rather reaffirm the reader's preexisting sense of cultural identity, asserting the traditional patriarchal values, the fundamental dualisms which underlie Western culture, as each crisis in the story results in the hero's victory. (Hourihan, 46)

This coherent correlation of western and Afghan patriarchal norms creates the perceptions of a global sense of cultural identity in understanding traditional partiarchal values. Although Afghan society contributes more conscious male norms than the western society, the commonality of cultural identity becomes more apparent by understanding that both societies require the male norm for young girls to achieve their goals: the only acceptable perspective for Susan and Lucy to contribute in helping the Narnians is by having masculine attributes, while Parvana and Shauzia are also required to have masculine attributes by disguising themselves as boys in order to help their families.

Yet, we still see how Ellis exposes this traditional value in order to emphasize how this patriarchal value leads Parvana to understand that she must show her feminine attributes in order to be more civilized and human. Though she was disguised as a boy, Parvana can show her feminine attributes to her family and friends in order to survive the war. Parvana uses her feminine characteristics such as taking care of her siblings, friends and even her lifeless mother after her father was taken away by the Taliban. She even shows her mothering qualities in nurturing the baby she finds during her travels. It emphasizes an understanding for Parvana that being trapped under the dominance of masculinity makes her invisible in society, yet she is able to act in conformity with her true identity as a female by showing her feminine behaviour against the violence of war.

Though Jameela does not need to disguise as a boy, she still has to hide her face as a girl. It is not only because the patriarchal norm requires her to cover her face, but also because she has a cleft palate, that she has to hide even in the presence of other women. In this story, the power of her mother's advice seems to strengthen her to face the world on her own.

> She looks peaceful and beautiful to me. She always said, "Jameela, if you can't be beautiful you should at least be good. People will appreciate that" (Khan, 12)

Thus quite distinctly from all the customs surrounding these girls, they show their feminine values as the norm to be human.

## Independent Child Hero and Maturity

Though it could be argued that the roles of mothers are mostly discussed in fantasy genre of children's literature, realistic texts also offer some critical consideration of the relationship mother-child. In particular the physical absence of a mother forces a child hero to mature quickly in order to complete missions throughout the journey. In fairytales and folktales, the mothers are often introduced only at the beginning of the story as the symbol of 'home' for the child heroes and a source of inspiration for them to look back in order to strengthen the children in their journeys (e.g. *Jack and The Beanstalk, Cinderella* etc). Consequently, the archetype of independent children (A child hero with a physical absence of a parent) as heroes has become a convention of many genres in children's literature, including young adults' novels about war and violence. However, this archetype is also enriched with additional notions associated with the mother-child relationship. Either the mother does not exist (e.g. *Pinocchio*), is deceased (e.g. *Snow White*). Alternatively the story may develop the notion of the 'evil' mother (e.g. Neil Gaimon's *Coraline*), or even reveal the complexity of the psychological relationship between mother and child heroes (e.g. Philip Pullman's *The Golden Compass*). Furthermore, young adults' novels seem to employ the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship as Coats (2001) points out in her book review,

> One of the most complicated aspects of growing up female is negotiating and renegotiating one's relationship with one's mother, and girls often look to books as one avenue of figuring out the complex dynamics of the daughter-mother relationship (Coats, 107)

It is apparent here that children's books with a war setting often omit the significance of the mother's role in the hero's transformation into maturity. These books address several issues about the non-existence of motherhood in the journey of a hero who tries to survive the war and achieve her goals. Smith (2001) reviews a study conducted by James Marten, as cited in Smith concerning significant fatherhood roles that substitute for motherhood roles in American Civil War Children.

> As Civil War children learned about the battlefront and the "minutiae of military life" (84) through their fathers' letters, they also absorbed their fathers' concern, affection, patriotism, and moral leadership, which may not have been articulated as clearly outside of the wartime separation. Unfortunately, Marten offers no parallel chapter describing the effects of the war on mothers' relationships with children. Instead, he reads motherhood through the lens of fatherhood. (Smith, 2001: 245-246)

Moreover, the mothers' absence is not only emphasized in the children books about war. Folktales and fairytales have often shown this. Hero conventions show the necessity of the hero to be an orphan or at least removed from the parents. It is important for the hero to complete missions without parental involvement. Thus, the hero will grow up and be transformed into a mature individual. This process is described by Hourihan (1997):

> As the hero story is, at one level, the story of a boy's journey to maturity, Mrs
> Varley (Dick Varley's mother from R.M.Ballantyne's *The Dog Crusoe)* and her like also signify the all-giving mothers of the child's preoedipalstage. The hero must go forward without her, survive without her constant nurturance, since that is his essential developmental task. (p163)

In the books under consideration here, both Ellis and Khan also depict their heroines as orphans. Both Parvana and Jameela are not only undertaking the hero's extraordinary journey, but they also have left the comfort and warm embraces of their parents. In the case of the mother-daughter relationship, Parvana and Jameela show their unique relationships with their mother in different ways. In *The Breadwinner* and *Parvana's Journey*, Ellis does not depict Parvana's mother as a strong woman, capable of coping with her existence in a war torn environment. For the most part, Parvana has been trapped in the shadow of her late brother, a theme which provides an intercate way to show her mother's grieving after loosing her son. Ellis is not implying that her mother does not love her, rather she is using this issue to give the hero, Parvana, the opportunity to develop the insights needed to be an adult female in the war. The unavailability of mentally strong grown ups in the war is shown in the context of her mother's weakness and a lonely wailing woman encountered in Parvana's journey, and these incidents force her to grow up in a different way.

On the other hand, Jameela shows the significance of her strong relationship with her mother through remembering her late mothers' advice. Khan depicts the importance of a mother in Jameela's struggles to survive and strengthen herself to grow up into maturity. Khan clearly shows insights into afghanistan's domestic life in *Wanting Mor*. I think that through the power of the mother-daughter relationship, Khan makes a clear distinction from the father's role, making it somewhat weak and insignificant. The context of Jameela's father means that he can be seen as a villain in this story, thus strengthening the value of Jameela's relationship with her late mother. Although the presence of her mother is

not indicated, this story lends a sense of empowerment to the concept of motherhood in Jameela's transformation in becoming an independent and mature woman.

## Authenticity: Insider-Outsider and First Person Narration

Authenticity has become an important issue in multicultural children's books that address the sensitive issue of originality in cultural descriptions. This is particularly relevant to the question of authorship. Does he or she represent the local culture in the stories correctly? Or does the culture of the author influence the stories in some ways?

Other aspects also point to the question of how the culture of Afghanistan is depicted, in conditions where most of the time the voice of Afghan women is silent, making it very hard to determine their hopes, dreams and expectations. Thus, in writing these books Ellis and Khan inevitably raise the issue of the extent to which they represent Parvana and Jameela as the voice of the young Afghan girls. Since both authors are adults who come from different cultural backgrounds, Canadian and Pakistani, from their subjects, we are faced with the question of authenticity.

Authenticity is often seen from two perspectives: sociocultural and philosophical point of views. The complexity of authenticity from a sociocultural perspective leads the reader to ponder concerning possible insider and outsider discrepancies in authorships. Meanwhile philosophically, Bishop (2003) states that the definition of authenticity itself is quite undefined and can be detected it through feelings.

> Even then, defining authenticity was a complicated issue. For some, it is one of those terms that they cannot define verbally, but they "know it when they see it." (quoted in Short and Fox, 27)

However, Mo and Shen (2003) argue that authenticity can be defined through values, facts, and attitudes that are embodied in the texts through the implication of their being worthy of acceptance or belief (quoted in Short and Fox, 374). Out of many debatable criteria of how to evaluate authenticity in a literary work, there are two aspects that are discussed which show how Ellis's and Khan's works are unique and varied.

The major problems in authenticity are the insider and outsider issues which are endlessly debated with consideration being given to who has the most right to depict a certain culture, an aspect which usually stirs up sensitivity in the 'owner' of that particular culture. Thus, in order to avoid the misinterpretation of cultural stereotypes and prejudices, the author who comes from the inside or closer to the cultural background is usually given regarded as possessing authenticity and is considered politically correct in conveying the cultural issues. Yet it is unfair to give inadequate credit for the 'outsider' authors who portray other cultures as a matter of author freedom. Guavara (2003) also states that a biracial perspective creates rigid boundaries through appearances and experiences, so that cultural complexity can be seen as a factor in creating literature that is enriched and varied (quoted in Short and Fox, 375).

In the case of Ellis as the 'outsider' author, the justification is clear that she can provide a possibility of seeing other cultures within her perspectives as a western female author, and thus opening them up to readers of similar backgrounds. Furthermore, when utilizing her perspective, Ellis depicts violence and gender roles in Afghan culture in a more sensitive way. Ellis clearly adheres to her social responsibilities as an author to depict Afghan culture without bias, free from stereotypes and negative prejudices. She also offers two perspectives for two different cultures: North American and Afghan culture in order to create an understanding which may bridge the socio-cultural boundaries, particularly after 9/11. Without reading those novels carefully, one may have a negative assumption towards Ellis' works and may give more cultural tribute to Khan's *Wanting Mor.*

However, in many segments of the novels, I must say that Ellis displays social responsibilities through the lens of humanity in order to avoid cultural biases. By offering two ways to view certain aspects in her novels, she cleverly makes the critics face up to the ideas of encountering stereotypes by seeing characters as human beings. A case in point is how we usually perceive the Taliban as a savage regime as it relates to their treatment of the Afghan people. When Parvana's father is abducted and sent to prison for being educated from a western country, Parvana and her mother go directly to search for him and find a way to free him. But instead of finding her father, she has to see several incidents involving Taliban policies such as beating a woman (her mother) and the death penalty for the convicts. Nonetheless, Ellis provides more insights into their attitudes so that the reader can see the members of the Taliban as humans when Parvana has to work in the absence of her father. Parvana is stunned to see a Taliban member shed tears after she reads him a letter from a family member.

> Parvana stopped reading. The Talib was silent beside her. "Would you like me to read it again?"
>
> He shook his head and held out his hand for the letter. Parvana folded it and gave it back to him. His hands trembled as he put the letter back in the envelope. She saw a tear fall from his eye. It rolled down his cheek until it landed in his beard.
>
> "My wife is dead," he said. "This was among her belongings. I wanted to know what it said".....
>
> Parvana took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Up until then, she had seen Talibs only as men who beat women and arrested her father. Could they have feelings of sorrow, like other human beings? (Ellis, 79-80)

Considering the use of first person narration, Clapp-Intyre (2007) affirms the possibility of judging the degree of authenticity by looking at the strong representation through this narration technique. She points out,

> Another challenge is how to authenticate and empower the voices of young people who were mostly silent during this time period. Many young-adult writers are turning to the first-person narration technique to allow the fictional YA voice to be immediate and honest, and to allow the experience to be truly from the young-person's perspective... First-person narration can thus establish empathy with the reader and extend the fictional writer's power to the young-adult reader (p154)

The argument here is to allow young readers to share the main character's experiences. In the context of reading about other cultures, I would say that the first person narration is definitely an easier way for non-native children to understand the other culture consciously, particularly in the case of Afghan culture, about which these three books are written for the global readers; it seems to present so many difficulties for other children who come from different cultural backgrounds. For that reason, Khan's *Wanting Mor* should give more insight into the cultural context, not only because of the first-person narration that allows the reader to experience the Afghan domestic culture, but also because it allows readers to judge its authenticity, especially because the author's background is that of a Pakistani Muslim, which is very close to the Afghan culture.

However, I would say that instead of comparing the authors' backgrounds, it is best to see what these authors' works have in common. In my opinion, though Ellis' works show the idea of Afghanistan through the eyes of a Canadian, she poses more global concepts about humanity for children. This is not surprising if we judge it from her own life experiences with Afghanistan women and children during her trips. She embodies the global ideals we expect to see and which we want children to understand about war and violence as well as a very basic issue, which is freedom. Perhaps, both Ellis and Khan's ideas are representing the ideas of how we want to see the world globally in order to show, as Kellner (2000) states, ''what kinds of society we want, and to oppose the society we do not want''(Kellner in Stewart M. P., 2002: 96)

## 2. CONCLUSION

Parvana and Jameela are two heroines who not only represent the ideas of feminine heroes in stories, they also represent Afghan women and children in facing the dangerous world they live in. Through different techniques of narration and cultural insights, Ellis and Khan succesfully depict the circumstances of Afghan women and children from different perspectives. These works definitely complement each other. They also depict a powerful communal women's sisterhood which is illustrated in the latter part of the hero's journey. Hope for a better world can now be seen from the involvement of the feminine aspect as part of the norm of being human. Thus, these works undoubtedly offer readers alternative ideas rather than being trappped within the confines of patriarchal values.

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