



Literacy as Empowerment and Resistance in Jeanette Winter's The Librarian of Basra and Nasreen's Secret School

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Keywords

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| 1. Children's literature | 2. Jeanette Winter |
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Abstract:

Children's literature functions as a critical medium for engaging young readers with real-world challenges and the transformative power of literacy. This paper examines two children picture books by Jeanette Winter, namely *The Librarian of Basra* (2005) and *Nasreen's Secret School* (2009), both of which portray literacy as a tool of empowerment and resistance in conflict zones. Set against the backdrops of the Iraq War and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, these two works center on individuals defying systematic oppression to safeguard education and knowledge. Despite their distinct settings, both stories portray the notion of literacy as a cornerstone of empowerment. Drawing on Freire's (1970) conceptualization of education as a liberatory praxis, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theories of learning, Bishop's (1990) framework of literature as "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors," and through close textual and visual analysis, this paper analyses how Winter's narratives construct literacy as a fundamental human right and a catalyst for social change. Additionally, it examines how Winter's portrayals of the protagonists' actions, along with the broader sociopolitical contexts in which they operate, serve to elevate the importance of education—even at great personal risk. Ultimately, this study asserts that Winter's poignant portrayal of these struggles tends to amplify marginalized voices, inspiring young readers to recognize and defend the transformative power of literacy.

المعرفة كوسيلة للتمكين والمقاومة في قصتي جانيت وينتر أمينة مكتبة البصرة ومدرسة نسرین السرية

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الكلمات المفتاحية

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| ١. أدب الأطفال | ٢. جانيت وينتر |
| ٣. أمينة مكتبة البصرة | ٤. مدرسة نسرین السرية |
| ٥. المعرفة | ٦. التمكين |

الملخص:

يعمل أدب الأطفال كوسيلة حاسمة لإشراك القراء الشباب في تحديات العالم الحقيقي والقوة التحويلية للمعرفة. تتناول هذه الورقة قصتين مصورتين للأطفال من تأليف جانيت وينتر، هما: أمينة مكتبة البصرة (2005) ومدرسة نسرین السرية (2009)؛ واللذان تصوران المعرفة كأداة للتمكين والمقاومة في مناطق الصراع. تدور أحداث القصتين على خلفيتي حرب العراق وأفغانستان التي تحكمها حركة طالبان، وتركز على الأفراد الذين يتحدون القمع الممنهج لحماية التعليم والمعرفة. وعلى الرغم من بيئتيهما المختلفتين، تمثل المعرفة حجر الزاوية لفكرة التمكين في كلتا القصتين. بالاستعانة بمفهوم فريير (1970) للتعليم باعتباره ممارسة تحريرية، ونظريات فيجوتسكي (1978) الاجتماعية الثقافية للتعلم، وإطار بيشوب (1990) للأدب باعتباره "مرايا ونوافذ وأبواب زجاجية منزلقة"، ومن خلال التحليل النصي والبصري الدقيق، يدرس هذا البحث كيف تصور سرديات وينتر المعرفة كحق أساسي من حقوق الإنسان وكمحفز للتغيير الاجتماعي، وكذلك كيف أن تصوير وينتر لأفعال بطليتي القصتين، جنباً إلى جنب مع السياقات الاجتماعية والسياسية الأوسع التي يعملن فيها، يعمل على رفع أهمية التعليم — حتى مع وجود مخاطر شخصية كبيرة. وفي نهاية المطاف، تؤكد هذه الدراسة أن تصوير وينتر المؤثر لهذه الصراعات يعمل على رفع الأصوات المهمشة، مما يلهم القراء الشباب للاعتراف بالقوة التحويلية للمعرفة والدفاع عنها.

Introduction:

Children's literature has developed greatly over time, growing from oral storytelling traditions (Simsek & Kartal, 2022) into a powerful tool for education and cultural reflection. In the Enlightenment era, changing views on childhood (Henríquez & Stauss, 2023) helped shape it into a structured genre. By the 20th century, it became its own field, addressing important issues like gender roles, race, and identity, while also embracing imaginative stories and series (Luttermann, 2022). Today, children's books promote inclusion, resilience, and cultural understanding, helping kids build not just reading skills but empathy, critical thinking, and emotional awareness (Al-Matrafi, 2023).

More than just entertainment, children's literature helps shape young minds. As scholars like Nikolajeva (2014) and Zipes (2013) explain, it supports language development, moral reasoning, and social awareness. As Nodelman (2008) points out, it's an adult-created medium aimed at shaping young minds with idealized perspectives—yet its true strength lies in allowing kids to explore diverse realities, solidifying its place as a vital educational tool and a spark for lifelong curiosity. Theories from Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1962) show how shared reading between children and adults builds understanding and supports cognitive development. Picture books, in particular, help children navigate complex ideas, emotions, and social situations in a way that respects their intelligence.

Literature also helps children understand themselves and others. Bishop's (1990) idea of books as "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors" shows how stories can reflect personal identity and offer views into other lives. Books like *Sad Book* by Michael Rosen (2004) help children build emotional resilience (Oatley, 2016), while stories like *The Giver* by Lois Lowry (1993) raise important moral questions. Through these stories, children learn to empathize, reflect, and think deeply—skills that are essential for growing up in today's complex, media-filled world. As Huck (1964) notes,

today's children live in complex media environments that require more sophisticated interpretive abilities and therefore require literature not just for children but literature that respects their developing intellectual capacities without resorting to oversimplification (p. 469).

As children navigate the emotional journeys of characters, they not only enhance their empathy (Mar et al., 2009) but also cultivate metacognitive strategies to manage their own emotions (Denham et al., 2012), showcasing the profound impact literature can have on shaping ethical, emotional, and intellectual growth.

Jeanette Winter is an American children's book author and illustrator who has dedicated much of her work to sharing the stories of remarkable individuals from around the world. Two of her most powerful picture books, *The Librarian of Basra* (2005) and *Nasreen's Secret School* (2009), focus on the lives of women in the Middle East who risk everything to ensure access to education and the preservation of knowledge during the Iraq War and Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Through these works, Winter shows that reading and learning are not just basic skills, they are powerful acts of resistance, ways to stay strong, and ways to stay connected to one's identity and culture.

The Librarian of Basra tells the true story of Alia Muhammad Baker, a librarian in Iraq who worked to save thousands of books when war threatened her city in 2003. *Nasreen's Secret School* tells the story of a woman in Afghanistan who opens a hidden school for girls after the Taliban banned them from going to school. Though the events of these two stories are taking place in different countries, both books show how important reading and education are when people face fear, war, and injustice. In children's literature, literacy is shown as more than just reading and writing—it's a path to knowledge, freedom, and the power to make choices. Characters who learn to read often grow stronger, face challenges, and inspire change around them. UNESCO (2019) explains that education helps people make responsible

decisions for a better world, while Helen Berents (2014) points out that even during war, education offers hope and a way to plan for the future. Jeanette Winter's picture books, *The Librarian of Basra* and *Nasreen's Secret School*, powerfully illustrate the theme of literacy as a form of empowerment. In these true stories, people risk their lives to protect books or attend school, showing how education can fight poverty, injustice, and fear. Lempke (2009) notes that Winter uses her stories to remind readers—especially in the West—that education is a powerful and often hard-won right. Through symbols like Alia's rescued books and Nasreen's hidden classroom, she highlights that preserving culture and education is a powerful act of defiance, reminding us that even in the darkest times, "there is always light" (Winter, 2009). As Huck (1964) suggests, children's books should share deep truths and meaningful messages that stay with readers for life.

This study delves into the dual themes of literacy as both a means of liberation and a form of political resistance in Winter's *The Librarian of Basra* and *Nasreen's Secret School*. It uses a mix of literary analysis, visual interpretation, and theory to explore how Jeanette Winter's picture books *The Librarian of Basra* and *Nasreen's Secret School* show the powerful role of literacy in times of conflict. Through the brave actions of Alia and Nasreen's grandmother, Winter shows how education can challenge injustice and give people hope. These stories help young readers develop empathy and think critically, while also adding to important conversations about education and social justice. By focusing on non-Western voices and the strength of marginalized communities, Winter's books highlight how reading and learning can remain powerful tools even in the hardest of situations.

Thesis Statement:

This paper argues that Jeanette Winter's *The Librarian of Basra* (2005) and *Nasreen's Secret School* (2009) employ culturally grounded visual-textual strategies to position literacy as a vehicle for empowerment. Additionally, it

shows how Winter's stories emphasize the powerful role of education in helping people resist injustice and bring about change. In such difficult situations, learning becomes a way to fight back and win freedom. Her books show that literacy is not just a skill, but a brave act that brings hope to entire communities.

Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative approach to analyzing the selected stories, combining theoretical frameworks, textual and visual examination, and comparative study to examine the representation of literacy as a means of empowerment in Jeanette Winter's *The Librarian of Basra* (2005) and *Nasreen's Secret School* (2009). The methodology includes:

1. Theoretical Framework

- **Critical Theory:** The paper draws on certain theories, such as Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (literacy empowerment), Lev Vygotsky's Theory of Development (Sociocultural Learning), and Rudine Sims Bishop's "Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors" (representation in children's literature). These theories and frameworks are used to guide the interpretation of the notion of literacy as a central theme in the selected stories.
- **Trauma Studies:** Concepts from Joosen's work (2018) on children's literature and trauma inform analysis of how war and oppression can be portrayed in ways that are age-appropriate.
- **Historical Contextual Analysis:** Examines the influence of the historical settings of each book on their theme. Winter's experiences and motivations as an author provide essential background for interpreting her works.

2. Thematic Analysis

The study juxtaposes the two books to identify the theme of literacy as praxis of empowerment and resistance, as follows:

- Defining Literacy as Empowerment

- Literacy as Empowerment in *The Librarian of Basra*
- Literacy as Empowerment in *Nasreen's Secret School*
- Close Reading: Detailed examination of key passages to unpack the theme of literacy
- Comparing Literacy as Empowerment in Both Books

3. Visual Semiotic Analysis

Analysis of Winter's folk-art illustrations, including colour symbolism and spatial composition to assess their role in reinforcing representations of literacy and its transformative power.

Rationale

Choosing to focus this research paper on Jeanette Winter's children's books *The Librarian of Basra* and *Nasreen's Secret School* is rooted in their profound exploration of the notion of literacy as a mechanism of empowerment within oppressive sociopolitical contexts. These works provide a unique and valuable lens through which the vital role of education and knowledge, especially in conflict zones, can be examined.

The research on this topic is significant for several reasons:

- Raising up marginalized voices and their experiences: This highlights the real-life stories of courageous women in *The Librarian of Basra* and *Nasreen's Secret School*, drawing attention to voices that are often ignored in mainstream literature.
- Showing the power of literacy: The study attempts to show how literacy can help people stay strong and connected to whom they are, especially during wartime and hardship. It proves that reading and learning can be life-changing.
- Encouraging cultural understanding: By focusing on stories set in Iraq and Afghanistan, the study encourages deeper

understanding of Middle Eastern cultures and histories.

- Inspiring civic courage and social responsibility: These narratives show how ordinary people can take bold and principled action, offering powerful role models for readers, especially young people, to recognize their own strength to face challenges.
- Enriching Children's Literature Studies: The paper explores Jeanette Winter's picture books and shows how they make a difference, filling a gap in academic studies.

Data Analysis and Discussion

This study employs two complementary theoretical lenses to examine the conceptualization of literacy in Jeanette Winter's *The Librarian of Basra* (2005) and *Nasreen's Secret School* (2009): Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory (1978). Together, these frameworks illuminate how Winter's narratives construct literacy:

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: Literacy as Empowerment

Freire (1970) emphasizes literacy as a tool for empowerment and social transformation. In both *The Librarian of Basra* and *Nasreen's Secret School*, literacy is portrayed as a means of resistance against oppressive forces. Alia and Nasreen, embody Paulo Freire's conceptions of critical pedagogy, resistance, and liberation: Alia's rescue of 30,000 books during the Iraq War epitomizes Freire's rejection of the "banking model" of education, with knowledge being intensively deposited into students by their oppressors. Treating texts as living vessels to transmit Iraq's Abbasid-era intellectual heritage is a way in which she converts literacy into "dialogic praxis"—consciousness-raising action or reflection countering culture erasure. Her shadowy comings and goings in concert with neighbors in a human chain fulfill Freire's stipulation that liberation must come forth from communities standing together to name and transform reality. In her metaphor, "A library is

a river of knowledge", Alia performs critical transitivity: she faces the "limit-situation" that is war from the vantage of preserving collective memory as radical resistance (Dresang 1999). This achievement accords with Freire's thinking on how education must protect cultural identity from forces that threaten to dehumanize it. Preservation then evolves into a political act of hope: literally a river flowing into hope and sustenance for future resistance. Nasreen's attending those secret classes under the Taliban rule actualizes the key feature of Freire's "conscientization": To forge critical awareness in order to regain some form of agency in the face of oppression. The hidden school or clandestine classroom is a "cosmopolitan space" (Campano & Ghiso, 2011), rejecting the Taliban attempt at imposing ignorance through problem-posing education: teachers and students engage in co-creation of knowledge through dialogue, thereby prompting a collective interrogation of the patriarchal tyranny. Nasreen's emotional healing, where "stories and hope fill the empty space inside her," demonstrates that literacy, a Freirean notion, restores humanity by linking cognitive liberation with affective liberation. Nasreen's resilience is an example of "praxis", where she supercedes her trauma via action, which is learning, and reflection, which is consciousness of liberation. Nasreen, defying the Taliban's edict banning girls' education, thus becomes the manifestation of Freire's principle that the oppressed can no longer "house the oppressor," using literacy as a form of psychological and political resistance. Both narratives shall merge, joining Freire's fundamental premise: "literacy is revolutionary when rooted in love, critical hope, and collective action". Alia weaponizes cultural preservation against historical erasure; Nasreen weaponizes silenced voices against gendered violence. Their acts change education from mere skill acquisition to "counter-conduct" (Foucault, 1977) the breaking of oppressive systems through everyday acts of resistance. Winter casts their story as testimony to Freire's vision of pedagogy that "does not adapt to the world but transforms it," nurturing what Giroux (2011) calls "educated hope." A river of knowledge for Alia and a reclaimed

voice for Nasreen say that literacy in situations of political violence is both shielding-protecting identity- and weaponizing, changing the power relations, thereby asserting Freire's assertion that "hope is an ontological need" for liberation.

Lev Vygotsky's Theory of Development: Sociocultural Learning Theory

Vygotsky (1978) argues that learning is inherently a social behavior shaped by cultural and community interactions. Both Alia and Nasreen align with Lev Vygotsky's socio-cultural learning principles:

Alia treats books as cultural tools embodying Iraq's intellectual heritage (e.g., Abbasid-era knowledge). Her metaphor "A library is a river of knowledge" reflects Vygotsky's view that language and symbols mediate cognitive development. By rescuing 30,000 books, she preserves semiotic mediation tools that enable future learning and cultural continuity. Alia's achievement was not hers alone: her human chain of neighbors illustrates socially shared cognition, weaving neighbors' support into a lifeline that stretched beyond her solitary limits to rescue their shared heritage. Working together to move books while under fire turned their layered efforts from individual's effort to community's strength, bringing Vygotsky's idea that "what a child can do with help today, they can do alone tomorrow" but here for the community. So too, this is an example of "internalization": Alia's move from being a participant to being the leader in their effort was social practice. Nasreen's journey is an example of Vygotsky's model of "learning as socially constructed development". The covert classroom—a social situation of development—provided scaffolding through peer dialogue and teacher guidance, enabling Nasreen to achieve literacy skills (decoding text, critical analysis) she could not master alone. This aligns with Vygotsky's theory, where knowledge is co-created through interaction. Her psychological healing "stories and hope fill the empty space inside her" also follows this model of shared experience as a source of self. Her stories and hopes became psychological tools to turn trauma into resilience. Vygotsky believed that

social speech can become inner speech, and Nasreen's transition from silence to self-expression can illustrate this process. The Taliban's oppression created a crisis, where literacy, repurposed as a tool of defiance, showcases Vygotsky's emphasis on how socio-historical contexts shape learning needs.

Both stories end at the same point. They both say that Vygotsky was right. He said higher thought and feelings start in social activity. Alia used her group work to keep her culture tools. Nasreen used her scaffolded writing to keep her voice. In contexts of war and oppression, crises amplify the transformative power of socially mediated learning. Cultural tools like books and stories evolve into vital conduits for preserving identity, anchoring communities to their heritage amid erasure. Social acts, like Alia's neighbors working together or Nasreen hiding children in her classroom, turn pain into something shared. They show how working together gives a group strength. Through these acts, people learn how to draw strength from their community. They turn shared pain into strength for each person. So, hard times themselves become the forge where cultural tools, common effort, and mental strength all meet to keep both the community and the self-alive. As Vygotsky asserted, "Through others, we become ourselves" a truth embodied in these stories.

The Influence of Historical Settings on the Portrayal of Literacy in *The Librarian of Basra* and *Nasreen's Secret School*

Jeanette Winter's books, *The Librarian of Basra* and *Nasreen's Secret School*, are deeply intertwined with real-life conflicts, namely the 2003 Iraq War and the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan, respectively. Critics often praise Winter for her talent in transforming complex historical events into simple yet emotionally impactful stories that resonate with children. These historical backdrops are not just settings; they actively influence the urgency, stakes, and significance of literacy as the main theme. By

anchoring her stories in specific sociopolitical contexts, Winter highlights the transformative power of resistance while critiquing oppressive systems. The historical contexts politicize literacy, presenting it as a vital tool for survival and defiance. In *The Librarian of Basra*, the threat posed by the Iraq War to Iraq's intellectual heritage—a legacy that dates back to the Abbasid Golden Age—elevates Alia's mission beyond just saving books. By rescuing texts amidst bombardment, Alia stands against the erasure of Iraq's history.

In *Nasreen's Secret School*, the Taliban's crackdown on girls' education turns literacy into a revolutionary act. As Freire (1970) points out, gaining access to education is not just about acquiring knowledge; it's also a crucial means of "conscientization"—the process of developing critical awareness and the ability to make one's own choices. The story aligns with Nussbaum's (2010) view that education is vital for democratic engagement and personal agency. The secret school becomes a "cosmopolitan space" (Campano & Ghiso, 2011), where Afghan girls reclaim their agency through stories and math. Winter's vivid imagery of girls huddled in a dimly lit room, quietly sharing lessons, critiques the Taliban's historical efforts to silence women. Nasreen's gradual reawakening—"Stories and lessons and hope began to fill the empty space inside her"—beautifully illustrates how literacy can serve as a form of psychological and cultural healing. Bishop's concept of "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors" (1990) fits perfectly here: literacy provides Afghan girls with "mirrors" reflecting their resilience and "windows" that open up to global solidarity. Said's *Orientalism* (1978) critiques the way Western narratives often exoticize or overlook non-Western intellectual traditions. Winter flips this narrative by focusing on local, historically rooted efforts to uphold literacy.

By setting her stories against historical backdrops, Winter makes it clear that literacy isn't just an abstract concept; it's a tangible reality shaped by conflict. The Iraq War and Taliban rule serve as intense narrative crucibles,

challenging and strengthening the characters' determination. By weaving her tales into real events, Winter enhances the role of children's literature to:

- humanize historical trauma, making complex geopolitical issues relatable for young readers.
- validate local agency, pushing back against stereotypes of passive victims in conflict zones.
- highlight education and cultural preservation as universal acts of resistance.

The historical contexts in *The Librarian of Basra* and *Nasreen's Secret School* shift the theme of literacy from something aspirational to something urgent. Literacy emerges as a powerful tool against erasure. Winter's work thus shows how children's literature can engage with history to nurture empathy and critical awareness, echoing Nel and Paul's (2013) assertion that such stories "expand the moral imagination" of young readers and broaden the "keywords" of children's literature to encompass activism and hope. Ultimately, these works demonstrate how children's literature can meet the four criteria of meaningful historical narrative identified by Levstik and Barton (2011): significance, perspective, evidence, and moral response.

Thematic Analysis: Literacy as a tool for Empowerment and Resistance in *The Librarian of Basra* and *Nasreen's Secret School*

The theme of literacy as empowerment in children's literature serves as both a mirror and a beacon—reflecting the struggles faced by many while offering hope and inspiration. Children's literature often highlights this theme by showing how reading, writing, and education can transform lives, challenge oppression, and open doors to new opportunities. Through stories, young readers are encouraged to see literacy not just as a skill but as a means of self-expression, critical thinking, and social change. It becomes a political act.

A. Literacy as Empowerment in *The Librarian of Basra*

Winter's *The Librarian of Basra* presents a compelling case study of literacy as both cultural preservation and political resistance through its biographical account of Alia Muhammad Baker's efforts during the 2003 Iraq invasion. Her actions demonstrate the power of literacy to empower future generations.

Alia's actions show her strong commitment to preserving her country's culture and history by protecting books and knowledge. This reflects the idea of "radical change" in keeping collective memory alive, especially in times of conflict, as described by UNESCO (2003). In a war-torn Iraq, Alia treats books not just as objects, but as the soul of her people, saying, "Without the books, we would lose our history, our stories, our souls." This stands as a powerful response to colonial and Western narratives such as those critiqued by Said (1978). Through Winter's storytelling, Alia becomes a quiet yet powerful hero whose actions are both practical and symbolic, protecting knowledge physically, keeping it accessible, and preserving cultural identity. Libraries, as Winter and others note, are more than buildings; they are living spaces of resistance, memory, and hope, challenging power structures and offering a place for healing and transformation.

Winter's metaphor of the "A library is a river of knowledge" (2005) deepens this discussion, portraying the library as what Foucault (1986) would call a "heterotopia"—a real space that both reflects and challenges broader social structures. Libraries emerge as "dangerous" spaces (Mattern, 2014) that confront power dynamics and serve as sites of ideological resistance.

Alia's decision to take action and say, "I will save the books myself," is a powerful example of what Bayat (2013) calls "quiet encroachment", that is, small but meaningful acts of resistance by ordinary people. Her choice shows how literacy can inspire awareness and change, especially in times of conflict. It also

challenges stereotypes that portray Muslim women as passive, revealing instead how they can be strong, active leaders. Alia's leadership reflects the often-overlooked role women play in protecting culture during war.

The neighbourhood's collective effort "with the help of friends, Alia carried the books home," and this shows how reading and writing are part of everyday social life, reflecting Barton and Hamilton's (1998) idea of "literacy practices." This concerted effort helps rebuild the communal spirit lost during war, as seen in the revival of the library in Winter's story (Baker & Shear, 2007, pp. 11-28). It also creates spaces for shared learning and shows how ordinary people can take part in rebuilding society. Rather than seeing librarianship as a quiet or passive job, this story presents it as a powerful act of cultural resistance. For those studying children's literature, it offers a new way to think about how literacy can stand up to political violence.

Alia's Journey: Critical Moments of Empowerment:

This analysis examines Alia's journey through Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, revealing how literacy operates as a tool of empowerment amid oppression and conflict. Alia's transformation begins when she problematizes the war's threat to cultural heritage. As the bombs get close, she sees that the library is not just a building but the "soul of Basra," where "ideas matter more than bullets." This shows Freire's first stage of semi-intransitive consciousness, in which people see a threat but not the systemic causes. Her rise to critical transitivity comes when she sees the governor's failure to move the books as complicity in killing culture. When she goes against his orders "He refuses. So Alia takes matters into her own hands" she does authentic praxis: both reflection (she sees the failure of the institution) and action (she moves the books). "Her books are more precious than mountains of gold" This Freirean "naming" redefines value amid war, rejecting material plunder for cultural preservation.

Alia's initial solitary action evolves into collective scaffolding. She mobilizes neighbours, restaurant owners, and library staff, creating a group which shares a zone of thinking where the new learner learns from the learner. The phrase "I have an idea. Let me tell you about it" initiates Vygotskian socially shared cognition. Tasks are mediated by skills: some pass books over walls, others hide them, creating a "chain of preservation" where collective intelligence exceeds individual capability. Books become psychological tools that organize action. Rescuing a 700-year-old manuscript symbolizes reclaiming historical agency amid present destruction.

Alia's declaration "In the Koran, the first thing God said to Muhammad was 'Read!'" demonstrates symbolic distancing. By using sacred text, she goes beyond the immediate threat to make a point about the importance of literacy throughout history. This reflects Vygotsky's view that symbolic systems made it possible to plan and think about things that might happen. Winter's drawings show Alia's dream of a rebuilt library as a bright building, which is an example of future-oriented agency. This mental projection, a higher function according to Vygotsky, helps people stay strong when "the library is burned to the ground." The things Alia does have a big impact on other people:

Individual Empowerment: Illiterate women in Basra later joined literacy programs, declaring education as "the right track" for their children echoing Freire's "education as freedom".

Cultural Resilience: Saving 30,000 books preserved Iraq's intellectual heritage, enabling post-war reconstruction of collective identity.

Global Symbol: Alia's story became a global symbol for literacy and inspired international literacy campaigns (e.g., UNESCO's heritage protection), demonstrating Freire's "untested feasibility"—the belief that alternative futures are possible.

The quote "Alia waited until dark. Then she began moving the books" evokes multiple

implications. "Dark" is not just a night, it provides both a practical way to hide and a symbol of resistance. Practically, darkness shields Alia's illegal book escape from war time spying, transforming night into a tactical tool of subversion. Symbolically, it inverts oppression's logic: where darkness typically signifies fear, it does not make her afraid, but instead it makes a space where she can act. While bombs "light up" Basra with destruction, Alia's work in darkness preserves light—books as embers of knowledge. This mirrors Freire's view that literacy illuminates consciousness amid oppressive "darkness." Every time she takes a book, she fights back against the darkness of war. Darkness becomes a metaphor for all acts of quiet rebellion—where the "unseen" is the most potent. By framing darkness as both shield and symbol, Winter lifts up Alia's act beyond survival into a poetics of resistance: where night is not blankness but the start of hope. Moving the books is not just physical work but also an important act of sharing knowledge. This risky task shows what Schulz and Nakamoto (2013) call "dangerous literacy," where learning is connected to danger.

The simile in the quote "Books are like birds. They fly through time and space, carrying ideas and dreams" reflects Freire's (1970) idea of "reading the world," where literacy opens the mind and brings freedom. The bird imagery creates a powerful picture of books as active, moving forces full of potential and not stuck in place. In Jeanette Winter's story, literacy becomes more than learning: it helps reclaim space as books are moved and protected, connects generations by preserving knowledge, and becomes a quiet form of protest as reading defies oppression. This shows that in times of conflict, books and reading can act as powerful tools of resistance, helping people hold on to their culture and identity, even in the face of destruction.

Alia Muhammad Baker's story epitomizes literacy's dual power: as cognitive mediation (Vygotsky) and liberatory praxis (Freire). Her courage was not innate but forged through social struggle, where books became tools to rehumanize a war-torn world. As Freire asserts,

literacy enables the oppressed to "read their reality and write their history," while Vygotsky reveals how symbolic action cultivates the agency to do so. As Illich (1992, p. 16) notes, this true story can also be seen as a symbol, with books being carried home not just to be saved, but to be cherished, protected, and grown like something alive. It's a reminder that knowledge requires a safe place to keep growing, and in caring for it, we care for ourselves.

B. Literacy as Empowerment in *Nasreen's Secret School*

Nasreen's Secret School unfolds the poignant tale of a young girl living under Taliban rule in Afghanistan, where her grandmother takes a brave stand to send her to a hidden school. This book has garnered acclaim for its inspiring message about how literacy can transform lives, particularly for girls in repressive environments. It beautifully illustrates literacy as a vital lifeline, empowering Nasreen to rise above her trauma, discover her voice, and reclaim her sense of self. The secret school's curriculum, filled with "stories and lessons and hope," begins to fill the void within Nasreen, showcasing how literacy can be a source of empowerment. The story, rooted in real experiences but featuring a fictional protagonist, highlights a shift in children's literature from focusing solely on problems to offering more comprehensive portrayals of hardship. Winter's choice to focus on Nasreen's emotional journey, rather than reducing her to just her trauma, reflects a growing trend in literature that values agency and resilience. The imagery of girls gathered around books resonates with Bishop's concept of "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors" (1990), providing Afghan girls with reflections of their strength. The teacher's powerful statement "We will teach our girls to read and write and know the world" positions literacy as a bold act of defiance against erasure.

Nasreen's story shows how powerful education can be, especially for girls living under strict rules. Her grandmother bravely defies the Taliban's ban on girls' schooling by sending Nasreen to a secret school and promising, "I will teach you about the world beyond these walls."

This simple act becomes a powerful form of resistance, turning their home into a space of learning and defiance. It reflects the idea that education can break down barriers and fight oppression, as described by thinkers like Freire (1970) and scholars of Islamic feminist traditions like Badran (2009) and Al-Hazza (2010). Saba Gul Khattak (2002) explains that educating Afghan women has long been a way to resist control, just like what Nasreen does. Her story also highlights how important girls' literacy is in places where their rights are often denied (Herz & Sperling, 2004). Harris (2012) even calls the hidden school a "counter-geography," a secret space that pushes back against patriarchy. As UNESCO (2011) notes, education in times of crisis helps people recover and grow stronger, just like in Nasreen's case, moving from fear to hope through learning.

The book focuses on the Taliban's restrictions on girls' education and reflects feminist critiques of patriarchal control, showing how education can be a powerful force for change. Human Rights Watch (2022) highlights how gender-based barriers to education continue in Afghanistan, helping readers understand the story's setting. After losing her parents, Nasreen falls silent, but gradually, through schooling, she begins to speak again: "Slowly, Nasreen began to speak again." Her journey from silence to finding her voice shows how literacy can help children heal from trauma and how school can offer structure and safety in times of conflict (Paulson, 2011, pp. 299-304). Kolk (2014) explains that learning language helps people reconnect with themselves, which we see in Nasreen's progress. Joosen (2018) notes that trauma-aware stories can empower young readers, and Zipes (2013) argues that children's literature often challenges unjust systems—just like Nasreen defies the Taliban. Her ability to speak again shows what experts call "post-traumatic growth" (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), turning the story into more than just a tale of loss—it becomes a story of healing through education. Winter's book then reminds us that learning can help rebuild lives, even in the darkest times.

In the secret school, the teacher speaks in whispers so that no one outside can hear. The book notes, "The soldiers patrolled the streets, searching for schools like ours." These quiet lessons show the bravery it takes to seek education under oppressive rule. Though it's dangerous, the characters continue learning because they know education is a powerful form of resistance and strength. Their quiet voices grow into acts of defiance (Skalli, 2006), and the hidden classroom becomes a space where normal rules, especially about gender, can be briefly set aside (Turner, 1969). Education becomes what Scott (1985) calls a "weapon of the weak," helping students cope with fear by giving them something meaningful to focus on. Burde (2014) supports this in her study of secret schools in Afghanistan, showing how communities worked together to keep learning alive despite the risks. These efforts not only gave children a sense of routine and safety, but also helped them and their families stay emotionally strong during conflict. Like Winter's story, Burde's research shows how education brings hope, unity, and resilience in even the hardest times.

Key Moments of Literacy as Empowerment:

Nasreen's journey mirrors Freire's "ontological vocation"—becoming more fully human—via Vygotsky's culturally mediated development:

Nasreen's first state is an example of Freire's idea of magical consciousness. After her parents went missing, she was traumatized and silent, accepting the Taliban's oppression as an unchangeable fact. Vygotsky's idea that social interaction is necessary for higher mental functions is shown by the fact that her isolation limits her cognitive and emotional growth. The grandmother's powerful statement, "Education is freedom," carries deep meaning. It reflects the idea, rooted in Freire's work (1970), that education can inspire critical thinking and change. By saying this, she directly challenges the Taliban's belief system that limits what women are allowed to know. Her words also echo Hooks' (1994) idea of education as a path to freedom and personal growth. This simple

phrase does more than express a belief—it helps build a mindset of resistance, showing how language can both reflect and shape the struggle for justice. Her determination to "remove the shadows" starts a conversation about resistance, putting education not just a way to learn new skills but also a way to take back humanity from forces that make people less human. The secret classroom is both a Freirean space for dialogic practice and a Vygotskian social structure for cognitive and emotional growth. The school is physically hidden by windows that are covered, which is a metaphor for Taliban oppression. However, it "opens windows" in a psychological way through symbolic mediation. The teacher and classmates work together to scaffold Nasreen's emerging abilities, progressively advancing her skills through guided collaboration. For example, shared storytelling encourages critical dialogue (Freire's *conscientização*) about gendered oppression, while peer modelling (like writing letters to lost family) expands her capacity for agency and expression. This synergy transforms the hidden room into a small world of resistance, where knowledge is co-constructed through deliberate social mediation, defying institutionalized silencing.

Nasreen depicts her mother's face through her drawing which demonstrates Freirean principles combined with Vygotskian concepts. The drawing functions as a Freirean method of "naming her world" because it restores identity which public erasure attempted to erase and transforms emotional pain into a physical object of opposition. Vygotskian assessment demonstrates how symbolic mediation connects feelings to mental processing because the artwork functions as a psychological instrument to help emotional control and conceptual thinking and planning for the future. Through letter-writing to her vanished parents Nasreen practices a method that integrates mourning with action and develops her narrative skills as an advanced cognitive ability.

The moment when Nasreen quietly says "I miss my parents" represents the peak point of her empowerment. The breaking of silence through this expression demonstrates Freirean critical

transitivity because it connects individual suffering to broader systemic violence while defying self-imposed oppression. Vygotskian theory explains this event as the return of self-mediated speech which restructures her mental processes for trauma processing. The grandmother expressed the transformation by saying "Now she sees the world with new eyes" which demonstrates literacy enables re-humanization (Freire) through voice recovery and agentic futurity (Vygotsky) through hope symbolism.

The line "Nasreen learned to read and write, and her world grew larger" shows how literacy can open up new windows on seeing and experiencing the world. It reflects how reading and writing expand one's "social space," as described by Lefebvre (1991), allowing individuals to engage more fully with their surroundings as Nasreen begins to imagine new possibilities beyond her immediate reality. Additionally, it illustrates Vygotsky's (1978) concept of semiotic mediation—how tools like language and symbols help shape thought and understanding. Through literacy, Nasreen gains the ability to mentally and socially navigate a broader world. Her journey from silence to finding her voice highlights how education can heal emotional wounds, challenge unfairness, and give strength to those who are often ignored. Her story reflects the strength of the human spirit and shows why literacy is so important. Nasreen's healing through education matches research that finds schooling can help children recover from the effects of war. For example, Betancourt et al. (2013) emphasize how education brings a sense of normal life back to children affected by conflict. Tatar (2009) explains how stories of resilience support children in understanding trauma, which fits well with Nasreen's experience. The secret school thus transcends its physical constraints, becoming a site where literacy transforms consciousness (Freire) through culturally mediated development (Vygotsky). Winter's closing line "Nasreen has no need of secrets now" summarizes liberation: Literacy restores voice, community, and futurity—transcending the Taliban's "culture of silence" through praxis-oriented pedagogy.

Comparative Summary

Both Jeanette Winter's narratives frame literacy as dual emancipation: political liberation (Freire) and cognitive-agential development (Vygotsky). Through her rescue operation Alia Muhammad Baker protected 30,000 books which functioned as cultural resistance against wartime erasure. Through her actions she demonstrates Freirean conscientização by questioning cultural destruction before restoring shared historical heritage and the community's book rescue activities demonstrate Vygotsky's social mediation which transforms texts into tools for post-war identity reconstruction. The story of Nasreen's Secret School focuses on restoring individual voices that became silent during Taliban oppression. Through her traumatic silence Nasreen begins her journey toward freedom by uttering "I miss my parents" thus fulfilling Freire's concept of "culture of silence," linking personal pain to systemic injustice. Vygotskian processes emerge as drawing/writing mediate her emotional-cognitive awakening, with peers and grandmother scaffolding her agency. These stories converge on literacy's role as radical hope. For Freire, it enables oppressed communities to "rewrite their world"; for Vygotsky, it builds cognitive bridges from silence to agency. Whether preserving cultural memory in Basra or restoring voice in Taliban-era Afghanistan, literacy transforms oppression by marrying critical consciousness with developmental power—proving that to read and write is to reclaim one's humanity.

Visual Semiotics Analysis: Examining Winter's Use of Illustration to Reinforce the Power of Literacy

The fact that *The Librarian of Basra* and *Nasreen's Secret School* are children's picture books greatly shapes how the theme of literacy is presented. The picture book format allows Winter to communicate the power of education in a way that is both accessible and emotionally impactful for young readers. Her illustrations play a crucial role in both stories. Through her use of colour, layout, and visual symbolism, she

adds emotional depth and helps readers better understand the characters' struggles. As Short (2018, pp.5-6) puts it, illustrations are essential to storytelling in picture books, working hand-in-hand with the text to shape meaning. She also emphasizes the importance of design elements such as book size, cover, page layout, and typeface, all of which contribute to the reader's experience. With today's advanced visual culture and innovative design tools, illustrators have more creative freedom than ever, which children—naturally attuned to visual storytelling—deeply enjoy (Lambert, 2015). Huck (1964, p.469) also notes that pictures are just as important as text in conveying a story's message, especially for young children who often "read" the images as opposed to adults who read the words aloud. But even older readers benefit from thoughtful illustration. In Winter's books, the rich depictions of the library and the hidden classroom bring these learning spaces to life, showing their cultural and emotional significance. These visuals, combined with lyrical and hopeful text, highlight the transformative power of education and give weight to the characters' resilience (Zarnowski, 2014).

Delving deeper into Winter's picture books, this analysis can show how Winter conveys the idea of literacy and its transformative power through four key methods:

1. Strategic Simplification Through Visual Metaphor

Winter's illustrations play a crucial role in communicating complex ideas in such a way that is easily accessible and emotionally engaging for young readers.

A- Simplifying complex geopolitical realities through visual metaphors:

Her artwork uses visual metaphors to render serious topics like war and oppression understandable for children without overwhelming their cognitive capacity. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) note, visuals can translate complex messages, and Winter does so

by softening the harshness of war while staying true to historical context (Mattson, 2004).

- *The Librarian of Basra*: The image of a burning orange sky in combination with the words “War is coming” acts as an indexical sign (Peirce, 1932), subtly connecting to real-life images of bombings while maintaining a level of abstraction appropriate for young readers.

- *Nasreen's Secret School*: Winter uses metonymy to represent oppression through barred windows and burqa-clad figures—symbols that suggest broader control and restriction without graphic detail.

B- Creating emotional resonance through colour:

Winter also uses colour to communicate mood and certain shades of meaning. Kennedy (2021) highlights how her colour choices are deliberate and symbolic:

- Warm yellows and golds foreshadow approaching danger;

- Lavender tones subtly suggest mourning and trauma;

- Blues convey peace and hope, creating what Kress and van Leeuwen (2002) describe as “visual modality”, reinforcing emotional truth and mental clarity through colour.

Kennedy summarizes that Winter's folk art style, with its emotionally reflective colours, enhances the narrative's emotional impact.

C- Balancing minimal text with rich imagery:

Sipe (2008) describes picture books as “multimodal texts”, where images, words, and design features like covers and endpapers work together to tell a deeper story. He explains that these elements interact in ways that create meaning beyond what either could do alone. Earlier, Sipe (1998, p. 100) called this interaction a synergy, where the combination of text and visuals produces a more powerful emotional experience. This use of colour and design also illustrates what Gualberto (2019) calls “affective chronotopes”—emotional, time-

linked spaces shaped by colour that guide readers' feelings. Similarly, Nikolajeva and Scott (2013) refer to this process as “interanimation”, where words and images enhance and expand each other's meanings, resulting in a rich, layered narrative experience.

2. Cultural Semiotics

Saccardi's (2010) observation about Winter's “spare but matter-of-fact” text paired with culturally rich illustrations demonstrates how the folk-art aesthetic serves multiple functions, as it:

A- reinforces the thematic progression:

- *The Librarian of Basra*: Geometric patterns reference Islamic art heritage (Grabar, 2006), glowing images of books symbolize hope, and framed illustrations echo medieval manuscripts, offering a sense of emotional safety, as Bettelheim (1976) suggests in his work on fairy tales.

- *Nasreen's Secret School*: dark clouds visually represent Nasreen's sadness, while the gradual shift to brighter colours mirrors her emotional recovery, with ochres giving way to hopeful blues. Framed scenes also reflect the tension between restriction and hope under Taliban rule (Lempke, 2009).

B- authenticates cultural specificity through:

- *The Librarian of Basra*: Arabic geometric patterns

- *Nasreen's Secret School*: Afghan textile motifs

C- constructs literacy as tangible activism resistance:

- *The Librarian of Basra*: Books as physical vessels of national memory.

- *Nasreen's Secret School*: Slates/chalk as tools of quiet defiance. Whispered lessons under burqas

E- constructs what Anstey and Bull (2000) call “visual literacy scaffolds,” supporting young readers' historical understanding, emotional

empathy, and critical thinking—what Arizpe (2013) describes as essential visual scaffolding for deeper learning.

3. Trauma Representation Through Visual Synecdoche

Winter's approach to depicting loss and violence exemplifies what Joosen (2018) terms "difficult knowledge" adaptation:

- *The Librarian of Basra*: - "Basra": Distant smoke plumes employ what Mitchell (1994) calls "the pictorial turn" – communicating destruction through its traces rather than spectacle, demonstrating how images can "speak back" to dominant narratives.

- *Nasreen's Secret School*: The empty chair operates as visual synecdoche – a single domestic object representing profound absence (Hirsch, 1997).

Winter's illustrations help mediate trauma by using stylistic distancing (Styles & Arizpe, 2009), creating a visual space that softens the emotional impact while still conveying the seriousness of events. This approach aligns with research showing that traumatized children often cope through creative means like drawing or storytelling, which help them process pain by putting some emotional distance between themselves and the traumatic experience (Chien & Lau, 2023). Argent (2015) highlights Winter's skill in the scene depicting the library bombing, noting her effective use of temporal compression—capturing the weight of a moment in a single image—along with emotional restraint through careful composition and symbolic contrast, such as the image of fragile books standing against the force of bombs. These artistic choices allow young readers to engage with difficult themes in a thoughtful and manageable way.

4. Educational Significance

Building on Vygotsky's social constructivism, Sipe (2008) explains that children develop literary understanding through guided

interactions with adults and peers, especially during shared reading. Picturebooks, with their blend of text and illustration, help children make sense of complex emotions and ideas by offering visual and verbal cues to support their understanding. Pantaleo (2015) shows how picturebooks like Winter's teach visual literacy by using repeated images for cohesion, colours to express emotion, and cultural symbols—like headscarves—to convey identity. Bamford (2003) emphasizes that visual literacy is essential in modern education, helping students interpret and create images that carry deep meaning. Winter's illustrations encourage skills like recognizing patterns, interpreting symbols, and following visual storylines. She also uses the unique power of picture books to speak to both children and adults at once—Islamic references invite interfaith dialogue, historical notes give context, and her visual style draws on traditional elements like Quranic illumination. Her books, *The Librarian of Basra* and *Nasreen's Secret School*, show how children's literature can transform stories of conflict into what Giroux (2011) calls "educated hope." These narratives echo Berents' (2014) ideas about the fragile yet powerful role of education in war. Alia's effort to save books becomes an act of resistance. Likewise, Nasreen's secret classroom acts as both a safe space and a place of resistance where literacy helps children heal (Boothby, 2008) and regain agency through Silvey's (2002) trauma-healing storytelling. As Short (2018) points out, Winter's use of visual storytelling captures children's attention and emotions, showing that literacy can challenge oppression and inspire a more hopeful future.

Conclusion

As can be observed from the discussion above, Jeanette Winter's *The Librarian of Basra* and Nasreen's *Secret School* powerfully show how literacy can empower individuals and communities, especially in times of conflict. In both stories, books and schools are more than just tools for learning—they become symbols of hope and resistance. "Basra" focuses on protecting culture, while "Nasreen" highlights the fight for education under oppression.

Together, they show how literacy can make a difference during crises. The grandmother's words "the soldiers can never close the windows that have opened for my granddaughter" reflect the core message: learning brings freedom, even in the face of oppression. This encourages Western readers to view education not as a given, but as something that many must fight for. As Berents (2019) puts it, education in conflict zones becomes both a symbol of normal life and a site of political struggle. UNICEF (2020) has documented how war has damaged education systems in Iraq and Afghanistan, leaving many children without access to schools. Winter's books challenge such destruction by offering stories that celebrate the power of learning. Her stories show that literacy can preserve culture, encourage political awareness, and help people heal from trauma—ideas supported by Freire's (1970) concept of critical consciousness. Winter also follows Bishop's (1990) framework as she manages to make her stories act as mirrors of local strength, windows into distant realities, and sliding glass doors that invite young readers to think deeply and act compassionately. By applying these theoretical frameworks, this research underscores the significance of Winter's works in promoting literacy as a vehicle for empowerment and that through her books children can understand complex issues, even when adults might try to shield them. Critics praise Winter for striking a balance between seriousness and accessibility (Nikolajeva, 2014), centring marginalized voices by portraying non-Western characters as active agents of change rather than passive victims (Said, 1978), highlighting local heroes over Western saviours (Mikdadi, 2009), and integrating illustration and text to deepen readers' understanding (Sipe, 2008). Her stories foster historical awareness (Lévesque, 2008), global understanding (Mansilla, 2016), and empathy (Nussbaum, 2010). Through a mix of beauty, honesty, and hope, Winter's books support a global vision of education rooted in justice. Campano and Ghiso (2011) call this "critical cosmopolitanism," where stories promote cross-cultural respect and social responsibility. Winter also meets the challenge

Tatar (2009) describes in children's literature—balancing reality with hope—and helps build what Duncan-Andrade (2009) calls "critical hope." Her portrayal of literacy as both survival and resistance teaches young readers to "read the word and the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987). In doing so, Winter's work honours local cultures while standing up against inequality and showing how literacy can help create a more just and hopeful future.

Recommendations for further research

While this research paper provides a detailed analysis of the key theme of literacy in Jeanette Winter's *The Librarian of Basra* and *Nasreen's Secret School*, it is fair to acknowledge its limitation:

- The study focuses exclusively on two of Winter's books, which may not fully represent her broader literary contributions or the wider landscape of children's literature on literacy in conflict zones.
- It does not incorporate empirical data on child readers' responses to assess how these books influence perception of literacy. Future research could expand on this by conducting reader-response analyses.
- It depends on English translations and Western publications.
- The research relies on qualitative content analysis, which, while insightful, remains interpretive and subjective. A comparative study incorporating additional children's literature from diverse cultural contexts would provide a more comprehensive perspective.

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