

# MASTER THESIS | MASTER'S THESIS

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“Woman or Other? The U.S. Media Treatment of Afghan Women  
as a Contemporary Case of Othering”

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## Abstract (English)

This thesis examines how U.S. media discourses construct representations of Afghan women. The temporal focus is placed on two decisive years for U.S.-Afghanistan relations: 2001, the year of 9/11 which subsequently led to the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, and 2021, where the Taliban re-established their regime and the U.S. withdrew its forces from the country after a twenty-year presence.

Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory, the thesis investigates how mechanisms of Othering and Orientalist stereotyping shape the portrayals of Afghan women and how they reflect and perpetuate hierarchies of power, gender, and race. In order to achieve this, a highly selective qualitative analysis of newspaper articles from *The New York Times* will be conducted through the use of Critical Discourse Analysis, a method highly suited to uncover the ideological workings of language and the subtle ways in which discourse reinforces dominant power structures and normative worldviews. The research is guided by the central question: How do Othering and Orientalist stereotyping intersect with U.S. media framing of Afghan women?

Findings reveal that U.S. media representations continue to rely heavily on binary constructions: Afghan women are framed either as voiceless victims in need of saving or as symbols of failed Western intervention. These portrayals are not neutral, but embedded in broader geopolitical agendas and epistemic power relations. While some texts show more nuanced representation and amplify Afghan women's voices, the majority perpetuate stereotypical and reductive narratives. This research contributes to postcolonial feminist media critique by highlighting the ongoing entanglement of gender, power, and representation. It calls for greater reflexivity in media practices and a commitment to amplifying marginalised voices rather than speaking for them.

### **Key terms:**

**gender, Othering, Orientalist Stereotyping, representation, media discourses, Afghanistan**

## Abstract (Deutsch)

Diese Arbeit untersucht, wie Diskurse in US-amerikanischen Medien Darstellungen afghanischer Frauen konstruieren. Der zeitliche Fokus liegt auf zwei entscheidenden Jahren in den US-afghanischen Beziehungen: 2001, dem Jahr der Anschläge vom 11. September, das in der Folge zur Invasion Afghanistans durch die USA führte, sowie 2021, dem Jahr, in dem die Taliban ihr Regime wieder etablierten und sich die USA nach zwanzigjähriger Präsenz aus dem Land zurückzogen.

Gestützt auf postkoloniale feministische Theorie analysiert die Arbeit, wie Mechanismen des Othering (des „Andersmachens“) und des orientalistischen Stereotypisierens die Darstellung afghanischer Frauen prägen und wie diese Darstellungen bestehende Macht-, Geschlechter- und Rassenhierarchien widerspiegeln und festigen. Zu diesem Zweck wird eine bewusst selektive qualitative Analyse von Zeitungsartikeln der New York Times durchgeführt, mithilfe der Kritischen Diskursanalyse – einer Methode, die besonders geeignet ist, ideologische Wirkungsweisen von Sprache sowie subtile Formen der Reproduktion dominanter Machtverhältnisse und normativer Weltbilder offenzulegen. Die zentrale Forschungsfrage lautet: Wie überschneiden sich Othering und orientalistische Stereotypisierung mit der medialen Darstellung afghanischer Frauen in US-amerikanischen Medien?

Die Analyse zeigt, dass mediale Repräsentationen afghanischer Frauen in US-Medien weiterhin stark auf binäre Konstruktionen zurückgreifen: Afghanische Frauen erscheinen entweder als stumme Opfer, die gerettet werden müssen, oder als Symbole gescheiterter westlicher Interventionen. Diese Darstellungen sind nicht neutral, sondern eingebettet in geopolitische Agenden und epistemische Machtverhältnisse. Zwar gibt es vereinzelt differenziertere Darstellungen, die afghanischen Frauen eine Stimme geben, jedoch dominieren stereotype und reduktionistische Narrative.

Diese Forschung leistet einen Beitrag zur postkolonial-feministischen Medienkritik, indem sie die anhaltende Verflechtung von Geschlecht, Macht und Repräsentation sichtbar macht. Sie fordert mehr Reflexivität im medialen Umgang mit marginalisierten Gruppen und eine bewusste Entscheidung, marginalisierte Stimmen zu verstärken, anstatt für sie zu sprechen.

### **Schlüsselbegriffe:**

**Geschlecht, Othering, orientalistische Stereotypisierung, Repräsentation, Mediendiskurse, Afghanistan**

## Table of Contents

|                                                                                      |    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Abstract (English) .....                                                             | 2  |
| Abstract (Deutsch).....                                                              | 3  |
| Abbreviations .....                                                                  | 6  |
| Acknowledgements .....                                                               | 6  |
| Pledge of Honesty .....                                                              | 6  |
| 1. Introduction .....                                                                | 7  |
| 1.1. Research Question.....                                                          | 8  |
| 1.2. Hypothesis and Justification.....                                               | 10 |
| 1.3. Relevance of the Research .....                                                 | 11 |
| 2. Literature Review .....                                                           | 12 |
| 2.1. Afghan Women as Victims and Resistant Figures.....                              | 12 |
| 2.2. The Racialisation of Muslim Women .....                                         | 15 |
| 2.3. Women in the Media: Representation, Power, and Social Instrumentalisation ..... | 17 |
| 3. Historical Background.....                                                        | 20 |
| 4. Theoretical Framework .....                                                       | 23 |
| 4.1. Postcolonial and Feminist Theory .....                                          | 23 |
| 4.2. Key Concepts .....                                                              | 27 |
| 4.2.1. Othering.....                                                                 | 27 |
| 4.2.2. Orientalist Stereotyping.....                                                 | 29 |
| 4.2.3. The Relationship between Othering and Orientalism .....                       | 30 |
| 5. Research Methodology.....                                                         | 31 |
| 5.1. Methodological Framework: Critical Discourse Analysis .....                     | 31 |
| 5.2. Case Selection .....                                                            | 34 |
| 5.3. Ethical Considerations.....                                                     | 36 |
| 6. Analysis.....                                                                     | 37 |
| 6.1 Saving Narratives .....                                                          | 37 |

|                                                             |    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| 6.1.1 Saving Narratives in 2001 Media Discourse .....       | 37 |
| 6.1.2 Saving Narratives in 2021 Media Discourse .....       | 41 |
| 6.2 Alienation and Silencing .....                          | 44 |
| 6.2.1 Alienation and Silencing in 2001 Media Discourse..... | 45 |
| 6.2.2 Alienation and Silencing in 2021 Media Discourse..... | 49 |
| 6.3 Resistance Narratives .....                             | 52 |
| 6.3.1 Resistance Narratives in 2001 Media Discourse .....   | 52 |
| 6.3.2 Resistance Narratives in 2021 Media Discourse.....    | 55 |
| 6.4 Reflection and Outcomes .....                           | 58 |
| 7. Conclusion.....                                          | 61 |
| 8. Bibliography.....                                        | 64 |
| 8.1 Primary Literature .....                                | 64 |
| 8.2 Secondary Literature: .....                             | 66 |

## Abbreviations

CDA – Critical Discourse Analysis

Feminist IR – Feminist International Relations

MWAF – Muslim Women Against Femen

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

NGO – Non-governmental organisation

*NYT* – *The New York Times*

RAWA – Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan

U.N. – United Nations

U.S. – United States

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I am deeply grateful to my family and friends for their unwavering support, encouragement, and belief in me throughout this journey. Without their support from near and far, this thesis would not have been possible.

It's still a surprise to me that, after years of analysing sonnets and plays during my Bachelor's, I found myself delving into the representation of Afghan women in U.S. media for my Master's. This path has been unexpected, challenging, and eye-opening – and I couldn't have walked it alone.

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

## Pledge of Honesty

On my honour as a student of the Diplomatische Akademie Wien,  
I submit this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither  
given nor received unauthorized assistance on it.

*Marlene Palan*

## 1. Introduction

“He did not want girls to become free of their father’s control once they turned 18 years old. He did not want them to go, as they do in America, to nightclubs. ‘If that happened,’ Mr. Muhammad said, pulling an imaginary trigger with his right index finger, ‘I would shoot her.’”<sup>1</sup> Statements such as this one, combined with similar broadcasts by international media outlets, have evoked emotional responses worldwide about treatment of Afghan women under the Taliban rule and the stark contrasts to Western liberties. Frequently described as “banned from education,” “trapped in their homes,” or “stripped of their futures,” such portrayals have dominated news cycles, political speeches, and NGO campaigns alike.

What is not often examined or explicitly addressed, however, is that through the very process of writing about Afghan women, they become alienated. Outside perspectives shaped by a country’s political stance on Afghanistan, cultural differences, and long-standing stereotypes feed into seemingly unbiased descriptions of Afghan women. On one hand, such depictions may perpetuate harmful or overly simplistic assumptions about the lives of Afghan women. On the other, they reinforce a perception of Afghan women as perpetual victims or passive beings in need of Western salvation, thereby denying them a voice of their own and power over their own narratives. Although 21<sup>st</sup> century zeitgeist believes itself to be removed from colonial discourses of the past, studies show that this does not reflect reality.<sup>2</sup> Racial bias and gender inequality remain deeply embedded in contemporary systems of knowledge and representation. While such biases may take more covert forms today, they persist – often disguised by the language of humanitarianism or progress.

These portrayals are not created in a vacuum; they are shaped by long-standing patterns of Othering and Orientalist stereotyping, which have historically constructed women from Muslim-majority countries as oppressed, voiceless, and culturally backward. The international media’s focus on Afghan women thus becomes more than mere reporting, it is also an act of representation shaped by broader discourses of power, difference, and geopolitical interest.

This thesis seeks to critically examine these dynamics by investigating how U.S. media narratives frame Afghan women, with a particular focus on the interplay of Othering and

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<sup>1</sup> Norimitsu Onishi, “A NATION CHALLENGED: TRADITION; in New Leader’s Village, Taliban Rules Are Just Tradition,” *The New York Times*, December 22, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/22/world/nation-challenged-tradition-new-leader-s-village-taliban-rules-are-just.html?searchResultPosition=317>. Henceforth referred to as **2001-07**.

<sup>2</sup> For example: Laura Silver, “More People Globally See Racial, Ethnic Discrimination as a Serious Problem in the U.S. Than in Their Own Society,” Pew Research Center, November 2, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/11/02/more-people-globally-see-racial-ethnic-discrimination-as-a-serious-problem-in-the-u-s-than-in-their-own-society/>.

Orientalist stereotyping. It explores how language and representation function to uphold or challenge dominant power structures, and how these depictions have evolved across different political moments, specifically in 2001 and 2021, following the respective U.S. military interventions and withdrawals.

This thesis is structured to build a layered understanding of how Afghan women are represented in U.S. media discourse. [Chapter 1](#) introduces the research question and outlines the working hypothesis. [Chapter 2](#) offers a literature review, examining existing scholarship on Afghan women as both victims and resisters, the racialisation of Muslim women, and the broader dynamics of media representation and power. [Chapter 3](#) provides the historical context, situating current representations within the legacy of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan and shifting gender discourses over time. [Chapter 4](#) presents the theoretical framework, drawing on postcolonial and feminist theory and defining key concepts such as Othering and Orientalist stereotyping, as well as their interrelationship. [Chapter 5](#) outlines the research methodology, introducing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the guiding method, discussing the rationale for case selection, and addressing ethical considerations. [Chapter 6](#) comprises the core of the analysis, organised into three thematic sections: saving narratives, alienation and silencing, and resistance narratives, each analysed comparatively across two pivotal moments: 2001 and 2021. Finally, [Chapter 7](#) draws together the key findings, reflects on the broader implications of the research, and suggests directions for future inquiry.

## 1.1. Research Question

Given Afghanistan's current isolation and the precarious situation of Afghan women, this thesis examines how U.S. media represents Afghan women. As a key Western actor with a twenty-year presence in Afghanistan following the 2001 invasion, the U.S. plays a central role in shaping global narratives. This analysis focuses on two pivotal moments: the start of the U.S.-led invasion in 2001 and the U.S. withdrawal and Taliban return in 2021, periods that offer contrasting yet connected perspectives on media framing in the context of ideology, war, and occupation.

This leads to the main research question guiding this thesis:

**How do Othering and Orientalist stereotyping  
intersect with U.S. media framing of Afghan women?**

This question is situated within a broader inquiry into the role of Western media in producing and maintaining power dynamics through discourse. The objective is to identify the patterns and recurring themes through which Afghan women are portrayed, and to assess how these may contribute to, or challenge, dominant narratives rooted in colonial and gendered assumptions. Both



Othering and Orientalist Stereotyping form the key theoretical concepts of this thesis, providing a critical lens through which media portrayals can be examined, allowing a nuanced analysis of how discursive practices shape perceptions of Afghan women and, in a similar vein, perceptions of the East in relation to the West.

There are several reasons why this research question is relevant. First, understanding the biases underlying the portrayal of Afghan women is crucial because such portrayals are not merely symbolic, they carry real-life implications. Media representations can influence policy decisions, shape public opinion, and contribute to the justification of foreign interventions or humanitarian agendas. The way Afghan women are framed affects how their struggles and agencies are perceived globally, which in turn can reinforce hierarchies between the Global North and South.

Second, a critical analysis of these portrayals offers insights into how entrenched stereotypes, both colonial and gendered, continue to exist and operate in contemporary media. This is why this thesis will employ Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to conduct the analysis. By exposing these underlying biases, this thesis aims to contribute to a broader conversation about Western journalistic practices, including the need to recognise and avoid reductive or patronising representations in media coverage.

The purpose of this thesis is therefore not only to identify patterns of Othering and Orientalist stereotyping but also to interrogate their broader implications. It aims to shed light on the implicit yet persistent practices that construct a dichotomous worldview embedded in media narratives, that of a hierarchy between the East and West. By critically analysing how Afghan women are positioned as the Other, this thesis seeks to question the ideological work such representations perform and the power structures they sustain.

In addition to the main research question, the thesis also explores a set of related sub-questions:

- What power relations are embedded in the media's portrayal of Afghan women?
- How do "saving narratives" operate within the discursive framing, and to what extent are they manifestations of Othering and Orientalist stereotyping?
- What recurrent themes and tropes can be identified, and how do they align with or differ from classical Orientalist imagery?

Together, these questions will guide a critical exploration of the representational strategies used by U.S. media, with the aim of offering both theoretical insights into the workings of Othering and Orientalism and practical reflections on the ethical stakes of representing Afghan women in global news narratives.

## 1.2. Hypothesis and Justification

This thesis is based on the hypothesis that U.S. media narratives on Afghan women perpetuate Orientalist tropes that position them as helpless, voiceless victims and Others who must be “saved.” These representations erase their agency and reinforce a dichotomy between the enlightened West and the oppressed East, contributing to moral justification for past and future interventions under the guise of humanitarian concerns. By reproducing familiar stereotypes, these media narratives help legitimise U.S. involvement in Afghanistan and sustain broader cultural hierarchies rooted in colonial histories.

This hypothesis draws on extensive scholarship that critiques Western media portrayals of Muslim women in conflict zones. Edward Said’s foundational work on Orientalism shows how the East has long been depicted through a Western lens as exotic, inferior, and in need of domination.<sup>3</sup> Muslim women, in particular, are often reduced to symbols of cultural backwardness, with their bodies and attire, especially the veil, used as shorthand for oppression.<sup>4</sup>

These representations are not only reductive but politically useful. As Lila Abu-Lughod notes, invoking Muslim women’s suffering often serves as moral justification for Western intervention, bypassing the structural and political realities shaping their lives.<sup>5</sup> This framing simplifies complex contexts into a binary: the liberated West versus the oppressed East.

Such discursive patterns extend beyond Afghanistan. Western media often deploy similar tropes in coverage of Iraq, Syria, and Iran, especially during times of conflict.<sup>6</sup> The recurring imagery of the barbaric male Other, the oppressed female subject, and the West as saviour reflects a broader media tendency to reinforce cultural hierarchies through gendered narratives.

Afghanistan, however, holds a particular place in this discourse. After the 2001 U.S. invasion, women’s rights were prominently cited as a justification for military action.<sup>7</sup> Media framed the war as a humanitarian mission to “liberate” women from Taliban rule, using imagery and language aligned with a civilising agenda.<sup>8</sup> Two decades later, during the 2021 U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban’s return to power, media concern for Afghan women resurfaced, echoing earlier narratives of victimhood and rescue. These two key moments, 2001 and 2021, offer a valuable lens through which to examine both the persistence and evolution of Orientalist tropes.

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Feminist Review* 30, no. 1 (November 1988): 61–88, <https://doi.org/10.1057/f.1988.42>.

<sup>5</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2004; repr., Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Laura Bush, “Radio Address by Mrs. Bush,” [georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov](https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011117.html), November 17, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011117.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Krista Hunt and Kim Rygiel, eds., *(En)Gendering the War on Terror: War Stories and Camouflaged Politics* (2008; repr., Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2016).

This hypothesis does not only seek to identify stereotypes or media bias. Rather, it aims to explore how discourse constructs geopolitical realities, reinforcing a world order that privileges the West while marginalising those it claims to protect. By analysing U.S. media narratives through the lenses of Othering and Orientalism, this research reveals how deeply embedded these patterns are – and how they may shape public perception and foreign policy alike.

### 1.3. Relevance of the Research

A notable amount of academic literature has explored the Othering of Afghanistan and its people, predominantly within literary and film studies. This includes analyses of Khaled Hosseini's novels *And the Mountains Echoed*,<sup>9</sup> *A Thousand Splendid Suns*,<sup>10</sup> and *The Kite Runner*,<sup>11</sup> as well as examinations of Afghan representations in Bollywood cinema.<sup>11</sup>

While some studies<sup>12</sup> have addressed media portrayals of Afghan women, and others<sup>13</sup> have explored visual Orientalism in the War on Terror, few have systematically analysed how U.S. mainstream news media have discursively represented Afghan women over time, particularly through a comparative lens spanning both the 2001 U.S. invasion and the 2021 withdrawal.

This thesis addresses that gap by critically analysing recurring narratives and imagery in U.S. media coverage of Afghan women, highlighting how these align with Orientalist tropes and contribute to broader processes of Othering. The focus is on the construction and persistence of these narratives, not on audience reception or direct policy influence.

Drawing on cultural studies, postcolonial theory, and feminist IR, the thesis examines how gendered and racialised discourses operate in global media. Through a postcolonial feminist lens, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the power dynamics embedded in representations of Afghan women.

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<sup>9</sup> Izrana Fareed, Waheed Ahmad Khan, and Aftab Ahmed, "View of Othering of Afghans: A Critical Study of and the Mountains Echoed," *The Dialogue* 17, no. 2 (June 22, 2022): 107–18, <https://journals.qurtuba.edu.pk/ojs/index.php/thedialogue/article/view/511/212>.

<sup>10</sup> Samina Yasmin, Nusrat Sultana, and Sanniya Sara Batool, "The Concept of Othering in 'a Thousand Splendid Suns and the Kite Runner': A Postcolonial Study," *Global Language Review* VI, no. II (2021): 172–80, [https://doi.org/10.31703/glr.2021\(vi-ii\).19](https://doi.org/10.31703/glr.2021(vi-ii).19).

<sup>11</sup> Marjuque Haque, "Savage Desires: Afghanistan as a Site for Othering in Dharmatma and Khuda Gawah," *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 16, no. 1 (March 6, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v16n1.05g>.

<sup>12</sup> For example: Azeta Hatef and Rose Luqiu, "Media and Intervention: Examining Representations of Afghan Women in the New York Times," *Journalism Practice* 15, no. 5 (April 5, 2020): 688–703, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2020.1749110>.

<sup>13</sup> For example: Maryam Khalid, "Gender, Orientalism and Representations of the 'Other' in the War on Terror," *Global Change, Peace & Security* 23, no. 1 (2011): 15–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2011.540092>.

## 2. Literature Review

Looking at the literature related to the research aim of this thesis, three main categories have emerged which are considered relevant to give an overview of, before commencing with the next sections of this thesis. This chapter thus provides a critical overview of existing scholarship on how Afghan women have been represented in discourse, how gendered and racialised narratives operate in the framing of Muslim women, and how the media acts as a political and ideological force influencing such representations. The insights from these sections will feed into the theoretical and methodological framework of this thesis, to follow in [Chapters 4](#) and [5](#).

### 2.1. Afghan Women as Victims and Resistant Figures

Since the early 2000s, scholarship on Afghan women has largely represented them in two ways: as victims and as resistant figures. The “victim” narrative, often rooted in Orientalist and postcolonial perspectives, constructs Afghan women as oppressed subjects in need of Western intervention, reinforcing patriarchal and hierarchical power relations. Conversely, scholarship on Afghan women’s resistance foregrounds their agency, activism, and complex socio-political roles. This subchapter critically engages both perspectives to explore the tension between stereotypical victimisation and narratives of empowerment, outlining key scholarly debates and their implications for gendered media representations.

The victim narrative gained prominence in the wake of 9/11, when Afghan women’s suffering was strategically invoked to justify military and humanitarian interventions. Mertus, Jiwani, and Sahill<sup>14</sup> critique how these representations served state agendas more than the women themselves. Mertus argues that while Taliban policies were deeply harmful, humanitarian responses often reinforced global inequalities and silenced Afghan women by speaking on their behalf. As she notes, “there are evident tensions between protecting human rights and providing for human needs,”<sup>15</sup> underscoring the paradox where empowerment discourse excludes Afghan women’s voices.

The political situation of the twentieth-century, marked by shifts between reformist and conservative regimes, positioned women’s rights as a key battleground for competing ideologies. The Taliban’s rise to power in the 1990s entrenched the figure of the Afghan woman as a symbol

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<sup>14</sup> Julie A. Mertus, *War’s Offensive on Women* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2000); Pamir H. Sahill, “Dwelling in an All-Male World: A Critical Analysis of the Taliban Discourse on Afghan Women,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 98 (May 1, 2023): 102748, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2023.102748>; Yasmin Jiwani, “Helpless Maidens and Chivalrous Knights: Afghan Women in the Canadian Press,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (April 2009): 728–44, <https://doi.org/10.3138/utq.78.2.728>.

<sup>15</sup> Mertus, *War’s Offensive*, 60.

of victimhood. Sahill argues that Taliban policies seek to erase women from public life, compelling them “to look at the world from behind the veil.”<sup>16</sup> These practices, framed as protection, are in fact mechanisms of patriarchal control. As Sahill explains, “In the Taliban discourse, the woman body is the prime cause of social strife... protecting which is the responsibility of a man.”<sup>17</sup> This positions men as public actors and women as confined domestic subjects.

Jiwani<sup>18</sup> explores similar dynamics in the Canadian media, where portrayals of Afghan women as oppressed opposite the male figure of the chivalrous protector were used to legitimise military participation, casting intervention as a moral imperative. She highlights how media narratives selectively focused on Taliban-era abuses while ignoring the longer history of gender inequality.<sup>19</sup> Khalid<sup>20</sup> expands on this, noting how U.S. media depicted Afghan women as voiceless and helpless, reproducing colonial tropes under a humanitarian guise. Similarly, Ayotte and Husain<sup>21</sup> argue that the veil is deployed rhetorically “in place of” Afghan women, erasing their agency.

Arat-Koc<sup>22</sup> critiques the complicity of Western feminist discourse in legitimising military action. She observes that media coverage often sidelined the violence of war, instead promoting a narrative of benevolent liberation. This framing, she argues, reinforced a colonial portrayal of Afghan women as passive, requiring Western salvation.

Across these works, there is broad consensus that Afghan women are not inherently powerless, but their portrayal in dominant discourses often renders them that way. These representations flatten complex realities and obscure women’s diverse forms of agency, which the next section explores.

In response to the victim trope, a growing body of literature foregrounds Afghan women’s resistance and activism. Scholars like Brodsky,<sup>23</sup> Armstrong,<sup>24</sup> Bazafkan,<sup>25</sup> and Kolhatkar<sup>26</sup> reclaim the complexity of Afghan women’s lives by attending to both suffering and resilience.

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<sup>16</sup> Sahill, “Dwelling in an All-Male World”, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Sahill, “Dwelling in an All-Male World” 7.

<sup>18</sup> Jiwani, “Helpless Maidens”.

<sup>19</sup> Jiwani, “Helpless Maidens”, 733.

<sup>20</sup> Khalid, “Gender, Orientalism and Representations of the ‘Other’”.

<sup>21</sup> Kevin J. Ayotte and Mary E. Husain, “Securing Afghan Women: Neocolonialism, Epistemic Violence, and the Rhetoric of the Veil,” *NWSA Journal* 17, no. 3 (October 2005): 112–33, <https://doi.org/10.2979/nws.2005.17.3.112>.

<sup>22</sup> Sedef Arat-Koc, “Hot Potato: Imperial Wars or Benevolent Interventions? Reflections on ‘Global Feminism’ Post September 11th,” *Atlantis* 26, no. 2 (2002): 53–65.

<sup>23</sup> Anne E. Brodsky, *With All Our Strength: The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan* (Routledge, 2004).

<sup>24</sup> Sally Armstrong, *Veiled Threat: The Hidden Power of the Women of Afghanistan* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> Homa Bazafkan, “We Can Speak for Us: The Role of Women in Intra-Afghan Peace Talks,” in *Afghan Women and Education* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2024), 147–75.

<sup>26</sup> Sonali Kolhatkar, “‘Saving’ Afghan Women,” *Turning the Tide* 15 (2002): 2, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/saving-afghan-women/docview/230656524/se-2>.

Brodsky, for instance, highlights how Afghan women have used “their voices and their pens; their self-sacrifice and sense of community; and their commitment to social change”<sup>27</sup> as tools of resistance.

Whereas the victim narrative dominated early 2000s scholarship and media discourse, what becomes clear is that these more recent works attempt to reclaim the complexity of Afghan women’s lives by attending to both their suffering and their resilience. Brodsky’s work on the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) shows how local activism challenges both domestic patriarchy and international narratives that erase Afghan women’s voices.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Bazafkan draws on third-world feminism to critique international interventions that impose Western models of empowerment. She argues that such efforts often reinforce colonial dynamics rather than amplify Afghan women’s agency.<sup>29</sup> Kolhatkar echoes this,<sup>30</sup> urging scholars and activists to centre Afghan perspectives rather than project their own.

While studies of resistance remain fewer in number compared to those emphasising victimhood, some have documented both public and private acts of defiance. Jiwani observes that media portrayals of resistance often frame Afghan women as heroines, especially when their narratives align with Western liberal ideals “and thus worthy of our support.”<sup>31</sup> Yet, even these depictions can reinscribe familiar assumptions, valuing Afghan women’s stories primarily when they mirror Western notions of feminism.

Armstrong’s *Veiled Threat*<sup>32</sup> celebrates Afghan women’s courage, critiquing the global silence around their struggles. Like Brodsky, she highlights women’s everyday acts of defiance as meaningful forms of agency. Ahmed-Gosh’s<sup>33</sup> interviews with Afghan women further illustrate their resilience and determination to improve their lives. She argues that democracy and empowerment are essential to ensure meaningful participation: “Given the kin-based patrilineal family structure in Afghanistan, women are unable to negotiate their rights... because of extreme economic dependency.”<sup>34</sup>

Taken together, these works signal an important shift in the literature: from depicting Afghan women solely as victims to acknowledging their resistance and survival strategies. Yet, even in scholarship emphasising resistance, Afghan voices are often mediated through Western

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<sup>27</sup> Brodsky, *With All Our Strength*, 2.

<sup>28</sup> Brodsky, *With All Our Strength*, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Bazafkan, „We Can Speak for Us”.

<sup>30</sup> Kolhatkar, “‘Saving’ Afghan Women”.

<sup>31</sup> Jiwani, “Helpless Maidens”, 740.

<sup>32</sup> Armstrong, *Veiled Threat*.

<sup>33</sup> Huma Ahmed-Ghosh, “Voices of Afghan Women: Human Rights and Economic Development,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 8, no. 1 (March 2006): 110–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616740500415508>.

<sup>34</sup> Ahmed-Gosh, “Voices of Afghan Women”, 124.

frameworks. The tension between amplifying agency and reinscribing familiar tropes highlights a continuing gap.

By analysing both dominant strands, victimhood and resistance, this thesis will employ a more nuanced approach that moves beyond binary framings. Such critical perspectives are essential to understanding how representations of Afghan women are shaped by local, national, and global power structures, insights central to this thesis's examination of gendered media portrayals in U.S. news coverage.

## 2.2. The Racialisation of Muslim Women

Given this thesis engages with Orientalism and Othering, it is essential to explore the racialisation of Muslim women and its role in shaping gendered media representations. In Western discourse, the veiled Muslim woman has long symbolised cultural inferiority and gendered oppression. This subchapter therefore examines how racialisation intersects with gender, raising questions about who is granted visibility, which forms of resistance are deemed legitimate, and how racialised representations contribute to broader structures of global inequality. Central to this discussion is the veil, which is deeply entwined with alienation and racialisation.

There is broad consensus in the literature that Muslim women face a form of multilateral discrimination: they are marginalised not only as women but also as Muslims and racialised, non-Western subjects. Their gendered identities are inseparable from racial and religious markers, a key concern in both postcolonial and feminist critiques. As several scholars have noted, the veil operates as a visible signifier of Otherness, presenting Muslim women as fundamentally different and implicitly deficient. The Taliban's rise in 1996 intensified global attention on the veil as a symbol of female disempowerment.

Ayotte and Husain<sup>35</sup> note that the burqa has come to represent Afghan women's oppression. Similarly, Abu-Lughod<sup>36</sup> critiques the collapse of Muslim women's diverse experiences into a single narrative through the image of the burqa, describing this reduction as a colonising act. It denies Muslim women the right to define their subjectivities. Beyer critiques this ethnocentric framing, arguing that claims such as "nowhere in the Muslim world are women treated as equals"<sup>37</sup> erase diversity and uphold the notion of an inherently patriarchal East.

In a similar vein, Hirschkind and Mahmood<sup>38</sup> observe that debates about the veil reflect broader anxieties about Islam, secularism, and gender. In Western contexts, the veil is not viewed

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<sup>35</sup> Ayotte & Husain, "Securing Afghan Women".

<sup>36</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*.

<sup>37</sup> Lisa Beyer, "The Women of Islam," *Time*, December 3, 2001, 50.

<sup>38</sup> Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood, "Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency," *Anthropological Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2002): 339–54, <https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2002.0031>.



as faith but as a threat to liberal values. They write: “A Muslim woman can only be one of two things, either uncovered, and therefore liberated, or veiled, and thus still, to some degree, subordinate.”<sup>39</sup> This binary leaves little space for recognising the multiplicity of motivations behind veiling. As they ask rhetorically, “Can our bras, ties, pants, miniskirts, underwear, and bathing suits all be so easily arrayed on one or the other side of this divide?”<sup>40</sup>

Western feminist interventions have, at times, reinforced the colonial logics they aim to resist. Satiti<sup>41</sup> critiques the protest by Femen, “International Topless Jihad Day,” as a “manifestation of coloniality”<sup>42</sup> that appropriated Muslim women’s struggles. In response, Muslim Women Against Femen (MWAFF) asserted their agency by reframing the veil as resistance. Amin-Khan similarly describes the veil as “a convenient scapegoat for the Orientalist construction of Islam and gender in most Western states.”<sup>43</sup>

Media representations have played a key role in circulating these racialised narratives. Macdonald<sup>44</sup> traces how the veil, once exoticised, has become a symbol of fundamentalism and Islamophobic anxiety. She notes the ongoing surprise at veiled women’s participation in roles that contradict passive stereotypes, such “as Olympic athletes, ‘suicide bombers,’ feminists, politicians, musicians, or even comedians.”<sup>45</sup> This reveals the persistent belief that veiling and agency are incompatible.

Bibi,<sup>46</sup> drawing on Du Bois’ double consciousness, explores how Muslim women navigate both literal and metaphorical veiling. She argues they are shaped by social and cultural exclusion, which marks them as outsiders. According to Bibi, “Muslim women have developed a consciousness which recognises their gendered and racialised status as ‘other’... subject to differing scales of power, which is both spatially, socially and historically contextualised.”<sup>47</sup>

Additionally to the focus has been on symbolic representations, others have focused on legal and policy dimensions. Zempi<sup>48</sup> examines the impact of face-veil bans across Europe, noting how the women affected were absent from debates. While bans are justified on grounds of values,

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<sup>39</sup> Hirschkind & Mahmood, “Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency”, 352.

<sup>40</sup> Hirschkind & Mahmood, “Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency,” 353.

<sup>41</sup> Nur Latifah Umi Satiti, “When ‘Silence Is Complicity’: Voicing Muslim Women’s Resistance through Reiteration of the Veil,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 30, no. 2 (2021): 227–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2020.1863200>.

<sup>42</sup> Satiti, “When ‘Silence is Complicity’”, 228.

<sup>43</sup> Tariq Amin-Khan, “New Orientalism, Securitisation and the Western Media’s Incendiary Racism,” *Third World Quarterly* 33, no. 9 (October 2012): 1595–1610, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2012.720831>, 1600.

<sup>44</sup> Myra Macdonald, “Muslim Women and the Veil,” *Feminist Media Studies* 6, no. 1 (2006): 7–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680770500471004>.

<sup>45</sup> Macdonald, “Muslim Women and the Veil”, 19.

<sup>46</sup> Rashida Bibi, “Examining BSA Muslim Women’s Everyday Experiences of Veiling through Concepts of ‘the Veil’ and ‘Double Consciousness,’” *Identities* 29, no. 5 (2022): 633–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289x.2020.1845492>.

<sup>47</sup> Bibi, “Examining BSA Muslim Women” 647.

<sup>48</sup> Irene Zempi, “Veiled Muslim Women’s Views on Law Banning the Wearing of the Niqab (Face Veil) in Public,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42, no. 15 (2019): 2585–2602, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2019.1588985>.



communication, or security, Zempi finds they produce new exclusions, reducing mobility and visibility. Such policies mirror the erasure found in media discourse.<sup>49</sup>

Sotsky's<sup>50</sup> analysis of the documentary *They Call Me Muslim* (2006) offers a counterpoint, juxtaposing a woman in France who chooses to veil despite bans and another in Tehran resisting mandatory veiling. The film disrupts binary assumptions by highlighting diverse experiences and the centrality of choice in both contexts.

Across this literature, what becomes clear is a shared recognition that the veil serves as a racialised symbol that renders Muslim women hypervisible yet voiceless. They are seen not as individuals but as projections of broader anxieties about Islam and gender. As Mohanty<sup>51</sup> famously argued, Western feminist discourse often constructs 'Third World women' as a homogenous, oppressed group, reinforcing imperial hierarchies even under the guise of solidarity.

Together, these works reveal enduring gaps in how Muslim women are represented and heard. While some scholarship amplifies Muslim women's perspectives, dominant narratives still frame them either as oppressed or defiant, both frames that risk reinscribing Orientalist logics. This thesis, by examining how such patterns of racialised representation unfold in U.S. news articles, contributes to laying bare the structures of Othering that shape media portrayals of Afghan women. In doing so, it calls for a more critical and reflexive engagement with the discursive mechanisms through which gender, race, and religion intersect in global media narratives.

### **2.3. Women in the Media: Representation, Power, and Social Instrumentalisation**

While the media serves numerous roles, this section focuses on how women are represented, how gendered portrayals reinforce power imbalances, and how such portrayals are often politically instrumentalised, especially during conflict. Although the media operates as a political and ideological force more broadly, this chapter emphasises the depiction, exclusion, and instrumentalisation of women in ways that shape public perception, policy, and lived realities. This discussion is central to the thesis's focus on the racialised and gendered framing of Afghan women in U.S. media, as it provides the critical groundwork for understanding how media narratives both reflect and reproduce systems of power and Othering. Building on earlier observations about the reductionist portrayals of Afghan and Muslim women, this section further explores how such

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<sup>49</sup> Zempi "Veiled Muslim Women", 2595.

<sup>50</sup> Jennifer Sotsky, "They Call Me Muslim: Muslim Women in the Media through and beyond the Veil," *Feminist Media Studies* 13, no. 5 (2013): 791–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2013.838359>.

<sup>51</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders : Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003).

representations are not only shaped by but also serve to reinforce broader structural inequalities, offering key insights into the intersection of media, gender, and political discourse.

There is consensus in the literature that media affords women and men different treatment, a disparity that has been the subject of extensive scholarly scrutiny since the rise of the second wave feminist movement in the 1960s. Scholars such as Carter and Steiner<sup>52</sup> trace the historical gendering of media, showing how women have been confined to domestic and emotional spheres and excluded from public and political ones. These portrayals are not accidental. Gramsci's theory of hegemony suggests media plays a vital role in sustaining dominant cultural norms.<sup>53</sup> As Carter and Steiner put it, "media texts never simply mirror or reflect 'reality', but instead construct hegemonic definitions of what should be accepted as 'reality.'"<sup>54</sup>

Gaye Tuchman's influential concept of "symbolic annihilation"<sup>55</sup> describes how women are rendered invisible or one-dimensional, often portrayed as emotional, decorative, or irrational. This symbolic marginalisation contributes to normalising broader gender inequalities, reinforcing the perception that limited representation is both natural and justified. Ross<sup>56</sup> notes that this persists in updated forms, with women still depicted primarily as victims, relatives, or sensationalised subjects rather than as political actors.

Although rooted in film, the "male gaze" is pertinent to news media. Kitzinger<sup>57</sup> argues that sexism and racism remain covert, shaped by a persistent "white male gaze." Gallagher<sup>58</sup> similarly notes that "the tension between the lived experience of inequality and its representation in the media is as obvious today as it was 50 years ago,"<sup>59</sup> emphasising that media serve ideological agendas, particularly in contexts of conflict or humanitarian crisis.

The media's influence is tied to political and economic power. Atkinson et al<sup>60</sup> highlight that media coverage signals political priorities, shaping not just public values, but public focus.

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<sup>52</sup> Cynthia Carter and Lydia Steiner, eds., *Critical Readings: Media and Gender*, *Critical Readings: Media and Gender* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2004).

<sup>53</sup> Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (1971; repr., New York: International Publishers, 1992).

<sup>54</sup> Carter & Steiner, *Critical Readings*: 2.

<sup>55</sup> Gaye Tuchman, "Introduction: The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media," in *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media*, ed. Gaye Tuchman, Arlene Kaplan Daniels, and James Benét (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>56</sup> Karen Ross, *Gendered Media: Women, Men, and Identity Politics* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010).

<sup>57</sup> Jenny Kitzinger, "Media Coverage of Sexual Violence against Women and Children," in *Women and Media: International Perspectives*, ed. Karen Ross and Carolyn M. Byerly (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 33.

<sup>58</sup> Margaret Gallagher, "Media and the Representation of Gender," in *The Routledge Companion to Media and Gender*, ed. Cynthia Carter, Linda Steiner, and Lisa McLaughlin (London and New York: Taylor & Francis, 2014), 23–31.

<sup>59</sup> Gallagher, "Media & Representation of Gender", 27.

<sup>60</sup> Mary Layton Atkinson, John Lovett, and Frank R. Baumgartner, "Measuring the Media Agenda," *Political Communication* 31, no. 2 (April 3, 2014): 355–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2013.828139>.

Ross elaborates on this “agenda-setting power of the mass media,”<sup>61</sup> showing that media determines which issues are deemed important. Stereotypical portrayals of women can thus have real effects on policy and public discourse.

This becomes especially important for refugee and Muslim women. Rothenberger and Schmitt<sup>62</sup> find that refugee women are often cast as helpless or exotic, traits that feed Western saviour narratives. The veiled Muslim woman has been instrumentalised to evoke both pity and suspicion, justifying interventions framed as liberatory. Khalid argues such gendered Orientalist discourses “make appeals to women’s rights discourses... to camouflage the patriarchal and militarised masculinity that drives the projects justified by these discourses.”<sup>63</sup>

Thornham<sup>64</sup> critiques media efforts to speak “for” women, warning that this often replicates the inequalities it aims to challenge. The category “woman” is fractured by race, class, and nationality, and attempts to speak on behalf of all women can become acts of cultural imperialism. She emphasises the imaginative power of media – how stereotypes persist because they are ideologically convenient, especially during geopolitical tensions when complex realities are flattened into moral binaries.

What becomes clear is that the media is far from a neutral mirror of society. It is a discursive tool, deeply enmeshed in structures of power and ideology. Women, in particular racialised women, are portrayed in ways that reinforce their subordination. Afghan women face compounded symbolic marginalisation through gendered and racialised framings. As the upcoming chapters will show, U.S. media depictions of Afghan women reflect these broader patterns: political instrumentalisation, symbolic annihilation, and the enduring power of the white male gaze.

This body of scholarship provides essential context for the analysis that follows. Understanding how media shapes and politicises women’s representation is critical not only for interpreting post-9/11 portrayals of Afghan women but for interrogating the wider power structures that govern visibility, voice, and meaning in global media narratives.

Taken together, the three sections of this literature review reveal a significant body of scholarship concerned with the ways in which Orientalism, Othering, and racialised gender stereotyping

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<sup>61</sup> Karen Ross, “The Gendered Turn in Mediated Politics,” in *Women and Media: International Perspectives*, ed. Karen Ross and Carolyn M. Byerly (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 60–80.

<sup>62</sup> Liane Rothenberger and Melanie Schmitt, “Refugee Women in the Media – Prevalence, Representation and Framing in International Media Coverage,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 50, no. 16 (2024): 3913–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.2024.2344520>.

<sup>63</sup> Khalid, “Gender, Orientalism and Representations of the ‘Other’”, 28.

<sup>64</sup> Sue Thornham, *Women, Feminism and Media* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

operate within media narratives, particularly in contexts shaped by war, Islam, and gender politics. The portrayal of Afghan women as either passive victims or symbolic figures of resistance, the racialisation of Muslim women through the veil, and the broader media mechanisms that render women simultaneously hypervisible and voiceless, all point to a recurring discursive pattern: the use of gendered and racialised imagery to sustain ideological hierarchies and justify political agendas. These texts demonstrate that media does not merely report on gendered subjects, but actively participates in constructing meanings around them: meanings that are steeped in colonial histories, geopolitical interests, and structural inequalities. This literature provides critical groundwork for the thesis' central inquiry into how U.S. media representations of Afghan women post-9/11 reproduce Orientalist and gendered gazes. By drawing on these insights, the thesis aims to interrogate the ways in which Afghan women are framed within U.S. news discourse, and how such framing reflects and reinforces broader systems of Othering and political instrumentalisation.

### 3. Historical Background

To contextualise the analysis of U.S. media coverage on Afghan women, this chapter provides an overview of the long-standing history between Afghanistan and the U.S. The aim is to help readers familiarise themselves with the complicated and long-standing history between Afghanistan and the U.S. through latter's intervention in Afghanistan, the history of female exclusion by the Taliban regime, and a short overview of the country's development throughout the twenty years of the U.S.-backed democratic government. This background is essential to understanding how geopolitical entanglements shaped media narratives, especially those marked by Orientalist and Othering tropes.

Afghanistan's modern history has been shaped by repeated foreign intervention. Once a pawn in the imperial fight between the British and Russian Empires, Afghanistan underwent a relatively stable period in the early twentieth century. However, the 1978 coup by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan led to political upheaval. Afghanistan turned into a Cold War battleground with the Soviet invasion in 1979 to support the communist regime, with the U.S. covertly supporting mujahideen fighters. After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, power struggles among mujahideen factions sparked a civil war. This fragmentation of state institutions and societal divisions between conservative rural regions and more progressive urban created fertile ground for the rise of the Taliban in the early 1990s.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Mertus, *War's Offensive*.

Compounding this instability was the lack of long-term interests by foreign powers. Both the Soviet exit and the U.S. withdrawal in the early 2000s left behind fractured institutions and ungoverned spaces.<sup>66</sup> The Taliban capitalised on this vacuum, promising to restore order through their version of Islamic law. In 1996, they seized Kabul and established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Their regime was marked by an extreme interpretation of the Sharia law, strict moral codes, and human rights abuses.<sup>67</sup> Women were excluded from public life, barred from education, employment, and movement without a male guardian. As Rashid notes, these restrictions were not solely religious but functioned as tools for political control through gendered repression.<sup>68</sup>

U.S. involvement in Afghanistan came with the launching of its “War on Terror” following the 9/11 attacks. Operation Enduring Freedom quickly toppled the Taliban regime, with counterterrorism and state-building as its stated goals. Yet, the rhetoric quickly expanded to include the “liberation” of Afghan women, casting the intervention as a moral and humanitarian mission.<sup>69</sup> As Abu-Lughod and others have shown, this “saving” narrative conflated women’s rights with Western modernity and democracy.<sup>70</sup> First Lady Laura Bush famously stated in a 2001 radio address: “The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.”<sup>71</sup>

Media campaigns reinforced the portrayal of Afghan women as silent victims of Taliban brutality, justifying military action as a form of benevolent rescue. Scholars such as Samar, Barfield, and Ayotte & Husain<sup>72</sup> argue that Afghan women were instrumentalised to legitimise foreign policy aims, rather than treated as agents of change in their own right. Crucially, this framing ignored the fact that U.S. support for Islamist groups during the Cold War had helped empower many of the same actors who later oppressed women.<sup>73</sup>

This simplistic binary of good versus evil ran through much of U.S. political discourse. As President Bush claimed in 2002, “We fight ... for a just peace – a peace that favours human liberty.”<sup>74</sup> Over the next two decades, the U.S. and NATO supported a democratic Afghan

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<sup>66</sup> Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan a Cultural and Political History*, 2nd ed. (2010; repr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022); Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, “The Collapse of Afghanistan,” *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 1 (2022): 40–54, <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/843611/pdf>.

<sup>67</sup> Amnesty International, “Women in Afghanistan: The Back Story,” Amnesty UK (Amnesty International, July 27, 2022), <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/womens-rights-afghanistan-history>.

<sup>68</sup> Rashid, *Taliban : Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism*.

<sup>69</sup> Ho, “Responding to Orientalist Feminism”, 433.

<sup>70</sup> Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*

<sup>71</sup> Bush, “Radio Address by Mrs. Bush”.

<sup>72</sup> Sima Samar, “Feminism, Peace, and Afghanistan,” *Journal of International Affairs* 72, no. 2 (2019): 145–58, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26760839>; Barfield, *Afghanistan*; Ayotte & Husain “, “Securing Afghan Women”, 121.

<sup>73</sup> Hirschkind & Mahmood, “Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency,” 341.

<sup>74</sup> George W Bush White House Archives, “President Bush Delivers Graduation Speech at West Point (United States Military Academy, West Point, New York, June 1, 2002).,” Archives.gov, February 27, 2007, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/06/>.

government. Conditions for women improved: they gained access to education, employment, and even political office. However, the effectiveness of the reforms remained contested. Hatef and Luqiu<sup>75</sup> argue that reforms were largely top-down and failed to transform underlying societal structures, making progress fragile and heavily dependent on international support. Meanwhile, the Taliban quietly rebuilt their networks and gradually reclaimed territory throughout the 2010s.

Responding to shifting geopolitical interests, U.S. President Trump negotiated a deal with the Taliban in 2020, intent on withdrawing the U.S. forces. Implementing the withdrawal in 2021, President Biden maintained that the withdrawal was necessary, as nation-building was not the goal of the U.S. intervention 20 years ago and that the original aims, “get those who attacked us on September 11th, 2001,” had been fulfilled.<sup>76</sup> This rhetoric stood in stark contrast to the interventionist rhetoric of 2001, which positioned the U.S. as a liberator from evil and bringer of good.

The U.S. exit in August 2021 was swift and chaotic. The Afghan government collapsed, and the Taliban retook Kabul with little resistance. Images of civilians desperately clinging to departing aircraft came to symbolise the abrupt end to two decades of intervention.

The Taliban’s return brought with it a reinstatement of many of the oppressive policies from their earlier rule.<sup>77</sup> Women were again banned from secondary education, barred from working in many sectors, and increasingly restricted from public spaces. *Human Rights Watch* noted that such conditions already existed in Taliban-controlled areas even before 2021, with ongoing violations of humanitarian law.<sup>78</sup> Akbari and True describe the new regime as an intensification of “gender apartheid,”<sup>79</sup> and international humanitarian aid has become limited—both by Taliban restrictions and global fatigue.

Throughout Afghanistan’s recent history, women’s rights have been entangled in ideological battles, used to justify interventions but rarely treated as genuine policy priorities. Reforms were often externally imposed, serving moral narratives for foreign audiences rather than building sustainable internal change. This pattern of instrumentalising Afghan women has entrenched the Orientalist “saving” narrative, positioning them as passive symbols of cultural backwardness rather than as complex political subjects. This historical trajectory – punctuated by

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<sup>75</sup> Hatef & Luqiu, “Media and Intervention W.”

<sup>76</sup> US Mission to NATO, “Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan,” U.S. Mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, August 16, 2021, <https://nato.usmission.gov/remarks-by-president-biden-on-afghanistan/>.

<sup>77</sup> Samar, “Feminism, Peace, and Afghanistan.”

<sup>78</sup> Human Rights Watch, “You Have No Right to complain,” (30 June 2020). <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/06/30/you-have-no-right-complain/education-social-restrictions-and-justice-taliban-held>

<sup>79</sup> Farkhondeh Akbari and Jacqui True, “One Year on from the Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan: Re-Instituting Gender Apartheid,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 76, no. 6 (July 30, 2022): 624–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2022.2107172>.



cycles of foreign intervention, promises of liberation, and renewed oppression – forms the essential backdrop against which U.S. media portrayals must be understood. Recognising this context is crucial for critically analysing the Orientalist and Othering tendencies that this thesis seeks to expose, and it is these circumstances that have directly informed the hypothesis guiding this research.

## 4. Theoretical Framework

This chapter outlines the theoretical foundations of the thesis, focusing on postcolonial and feminist theory as the primary lenses for analysing U.S. media representations of Afghan women. These frameworks are chosen for their critical engagement with power, representation, and the legacy of imperialism, particularly in gendered contexts. While both offer valuable insights into how discourse sustains hierarchies, their limitations will also be acknowledged. The chapter begins by tracing the development, key tenets, and critiques of postcolonial and feminist theory. It then turns to the central analytical concepts of Othering and Orientalist stereotyping, which are vital to the research question and the media analysis in [Chapter 6](#). Although rooted in postcolonial thought, these concepts hold significant relevance in feminist critique as well. The chapter concludes by exploring how these ideas intersect, reinforcing exclusion and domination in media portrayals. Together, these theoretical and conceptual tools provide a critical foundation for investigating how Afghan women are represented in U.S. media.

### 4.1. Postcolonial and Feminist Theory

The lives of Afghan women have been heavily affected by biased media discourses, shaped by their gender, ethnicity, and the passive “victim” label imposed upon them by the international community. This constructed image has not only influenced global rhetoric but has also been instrumental in justifying military and humanitarian interventions under the guise of “saving” Afghan women, most notably in political speeches and media coverage during the U.S. invasion of 2001. To critically examine these dynamics, this thesis adopts postcolonial and feminist theory as its primary analytical frameworks. As Parashar<sup>80</sup> observes, these two approaches have increasingly grown to inform and enrich one another, offering substantial tools for analysing

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<sup>80</sup> Swati Parashar, “Feminism and Postcolonialism: (En)Gendering Encounters,” *Postcolonial Studies* 19, no. 4 (October 2016): 371–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2016.1317388>.

intersecting forms of oppression, gendered experiences, and creating more self-reflexive accounts.<sup>81</sup>

Postcolonial theory emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, as the independence of former colonial states rang in a new era of critically studying the aftereffects of colonialism. Rooted in literary studies and foundational works such as Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978),<sup>82</sup> Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961),<sup>83</sup> postcolonial theory provides a critical lens for challenging Western-centric narratives, inequalities, and interrogating how narratives of domination, identity, and resistance are constructed. Among the central concerns of postcolonial thought is the concept of otherness, the construction of non-Western people as different, exotic, or even inferior, which was tightly linked to colonial rhetoric justifying colonial intervention and domination.

Over the years, several scholars have contributed more important concepts, such as hybridity and the subaltern. With hybridity, Homi Bhabha<sup>84</sup> argues that colonial encounters produced new, mixed cultural forms that simultaneously resist and reproduce colonial authority, thus destabilising the binary divisions between coloniser and colonised. Meanwhile, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak<sup>85</sup> introduced the influential notion of the subaltern, referring to those who exist outside dominant power structures and whose voices are systematically excluded from hegemonic discourse. In her 1988 seminal essay, Spivak critiques Western intellectuals for speaking on behalf of the oppressed, thereby perpetuating the silencing of subaltern subjects even within efforts to 'liberate' them. This is visible in the case of Afghan women as well, with empowered, non-Afghan women speaking for and instead of them.<sup>86</sup> Her most famous quote, "white men saving brown women from brown men" rings true with this description as well and will also be relevant in the analysis section of this thesis.

Postcolonial theory challenges the epistemic violence, a Foucauldian term taken up by Spivak to describe how colonialism operated not only through military conquest but also through the Eurocentric control and erasure of knowledge, which marginalized non-Western voices.<sup>87</sup> Employed in a contemporary context, it helps to highlight and unpack manifestations of ongoing colonial dominance and Western superiority. The ongoing state of colonisation is also picked up

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<sup>81</sup> Parashar, "Feminism and Postcolonialism", 371.

<sup>82</sup> Said, *Orientalism*.

<sup>83</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Penguin Books, 1952); Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1961).

<sup>84</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>85</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988).

<sup>86</sup> Ayotte & Husain, "Securing Afghan Women".

<sup>87</sup> Claudia Brunner, "Conceptualizing Epistemic Violence: An Interdisciplinary Assemblage for IR," *International Politics Reviews* 9, no. 1 (March 13, 2021): 193–212, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41312-021-00086-1>.



by Sara Ahmed, who questions the ‘post’ in postcolonial theory. She argues that with modern phenomena such as globalisation and multiculturalism, exclusionary ideas are still being perpetuated.<sup>88</sup> Most notably, she talks about ‘stranger fetishism,’ which obscures the inherent power structures that produce the stranger and instead turns them into an object of fascination, fear, or difference.<sup>89</sup> This will be picked up further in [Chapter 4.2.1](#) on Othering.

Applied in a contemporary context, postcolonial theory thus highlights how narratives of Western superiority continue to manifest, even after the formal end of colonial rule. More recently, scholars like Derek Gregory<sup>90</sup> have elaborated on how colonial legacies persist in contemporary geopolitics. With specific reference to Afghanistan, he argues that the post-9/11 intervention reinforced colonial practices in modern times. He argues that “Postcolonial critique must not only counter amnesiac histories of colonialism but also stage ‘a return of the repressed’ to resist the seductions of nostalgic histories of colonialism.”<sup>91</sup> This insight is particularly relevant for this thesis and its hypothesis, as it seeks to expose how contemporary media portrayals of Afghan women are not merely modern narratives, but are deeply rooted in enduring colonial patterns of representation, power, and exclusion.

In addition to postcolonial theory, feminist theory constitutes the second critical lens with which this thesis conducts the analysis of media representations of Afghan women. This choice seems logical given that the primary aim of this paper is the analysis of female portrayal in the media, but is also necessary and will contribute greatly to the conduction of the analysis as feminist theory adds depth and a gender-aspect to an otherwise race-focused analysis.

Feminist theory has emerged as a response to the traditional, male-dominated disciplines as awareness of their limitations progressively increased in the twentieth century. It critically examines how hierarchies of power and oppression are gendered. Similar to how postcolonial theory criticised the exclusion of colonised voices from historical narratives, feminist scholars were intent on laying open how feminist discourse excludes the voices of marginalised women outside the mainstream, those not part of the white, Western, middle-class experience. Central to feminist critiques is the concept of intersectionality, coined by Kimberly Crenshaw,<sup>92</sup> focusing on how factors such as gender, race, and class interlock and create multi-faceted systems of oppression that reinforce systemic inequalities, making it a key tool in analysing the complexity

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<sup>88</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000). Ahmed, Sara 2000, 13.

<sup>89</sup> Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 5.

<sup>90</sup> Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004).

<sup>91</sup> Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, 9.

<sup>92</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139–67, <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=uclf>.

underlying discourses about women. It is also pertinent to the analysis in this thesis, showing how Afghan women are not only affected by their gender, but also race, socio-economic class, education levels, and more.

Cynthia Enloe's scholarship, particularly *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* (1989),<sup>93</sup> also provides an important foundation for this study. Enloe explored how women's lives are deeply entangled in global political struggles, showing that international relations are not gender-neutral, but are instead deeply shaped by assumptions about femininity, masculinity, and power. Her insistence on "making feminist sense of international politics"<sup>94</sup> invites a re-examination of the ways Afghan women have been positioned symbolically in both media narratives and policy discourses.

Other feminist scholars such as bell hooks, Ann Tickner, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty<sup>95</sup> further strengthen this theoretical base. hooks' concept of "transnational white supremacist capitalist patriarchy"<sup>96</sup> offers a broader frame for understanding intersecting systems of domination, while Tickner critiques the masculine biases within traditional IR theory and argues for the inclusion of women's experiences and voices in global politics.<sup>97</sup>

A key scholar on the influence of colonialism and globalisation on women's lives is Mohanty,<sup>98</sup> who explored how women from the Global South have frequently been homogenised in Western feminist narratives, portrayed as helpless, passive victims rather than as agents of their own destinies. Her influential critique in *Under Western Eyes* reveals how global feminism can perpetuate imperialist attitudes under the guise of solidarity. This resonates directly with the subject of this thesis: the portrayal of Afghan women in Western media is often flattened into a singular narrative of victimhood, obscuring their diverse realities and voices.

Feminist theory provides a critical lens to examine how gender and ethnicity function within media discourses to uphold unequal power relations. In particular, postcolonial feminism highlights how Western narratives often instrumentalise women's rights to justify political or military intervention. This combined framework is well-suited to address the central research question, namely how Othering and Orientalist stereotyping intersect with U.S. media framing of

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<sup>93</sup> Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (1989; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

<sup>94</sup> Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, title page.

<sup>95</sup> bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York ; London: Routledge, 2000); J. Ann Tickner, *Gender in International Relations : Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*.

<sup>96</sup> hooks, *Where We Stand*, 159.

<sup>97</sup> Tickner, *Gender in IR*.

<sup>98</sup> Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*; Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes*.

Afghan women, and to test the hypothesis that such narratives construct Afghan women as either victims in need of saving or exceptional figures validating Western ideals.

Media discourses are not neutral; they actively shape public understanding by framing stories through culturally loaded binaries and omissions. A postcolonial feminist lens helps expose how these narratives obscure Afghan women's complexity while reinforcing Western dominance. With this theoretical grounding, the chapter now turns to the key concepts guiding the analysis.

## 4.2. Key Concepts

### 4.2.1. Othering

The concept of Othering can be found in philosophical texts going back to Hegel and eighteenth-century philosophical thought.<sup>99</sup> For the purpose of its use in this thesis, however, and its drawing on postcolonial and feminist theory, its definitions tracing back to Simone de Beauvoir will be particularly relevant. In *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir argues that women are constituted as the Other opposite men, defining womanhood not as an autonomous identity but as a deviation from the male norm. This positioning, she contended, is central to women's subjugation in patriarchal societies.<sup>100</sup> This early feminist framing shows how Othering operates not only across racial and cultural lines but also along gendered lines, making it a foundational concept in both feminist and postcolonial theory.

Later, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) expanded Othering into a more specific geopolitical and cultural form, based on the East being constructed by the West as its Other: "The Orient is [...] also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other."<sup>101</sup> In postcolonial theory, this dynamic is central to understanding how colonial powers constructed their identities and authority through opposition to colonised peoples.

By the 1990s, this form of Othering found its way into broader research with Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"<sup>102</sup>, already mentioned above, analysing how marginalised groups are constituted as the Other by dominant groups in an effort to stay in control. As expounded by Khalid,<sup>103</sup> orientalism can also be gendered, thereby creating an even greater plethora of binaries, where "us" is superior to "them" and Western men or women are superior to eastern women.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Lajos Brons, "Othering, an Analysis," *Transcience* 6, no. 1 (2015): 69–90, [https://www2.hu-berlin.de/transcience/Vol6\\_No1\\_2015\\_69\\_90.pdf](https://www2.hu-berlin.de/transcience/Vol6_No1_2015_69_90.pdf). Page

<sup>100</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949).

<sup>101</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 1.

<sup>102</sup> Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*

<sup>103</sup> Khalid, "Gender, Orientalism and Representations of the 'Other'".

<sup>104</sup> Khalid, "Gender, Orientalism and Representations of the 'Other'", 27.

This insight is particularly relevant for this thesis, as it shows how Afghan women are Othered through both cultural and gendered lenses – positioned doubly as outsiders within dominant Western narratives. This dual lens of feminist and postcolonial theory allows a more complex analysis of intersecting oppressions in media portrayals.

Othering is thus a process by which a person or group of people is consciously labelled and regarded as different. By using techniques of marginalisation and alienation, often through dehumanisation, Othering reinforces power dynamics and productions of hierarchy by creating distinctions between a normative “us” and an inferior “them.” This makes the concept central to any discussions of power, identity, and social exclusion. As established in earlier chapters, media discourses are inherently connected to the dichotomies employed in Othering. Similar to Ahmed’s concept of “stranger fetishism” and the fascination with the alien,<sup>105</sup> Arat-Koc<sup>106</sup> sees an “obsessive gaze on the ‘other’”, which further affirms the in-group’s domination over the Other. This perspective, therefore, not only reinforces a sense of superiority over the ‘other,’ but as argued by Arat-Koc also serves to deflect attention from our own issues, circumstances, and social position.<sup>107</sup>

However, the creation of an “Other” also always includes the construction of a “Self”, as it is a relational process through which the Other is created. In the case of this thesis, the US media treatment of Afghan women as “Other” leads to the US occupying the position of the Self. Only in relation to the Other can the West/the U.S. establish itself, “as morally and physically superior, and ultimately legitimate in pursuing military intervention.”<sup>108</sup> This means that the portrayal of Afghan women as oppressed and in need of saving, as presumed in the hypothesis this thesis investigates, simultaneously reinforces an image of the U.S. as powerful and morally superior. By positioning Afghan women as the Other, the media constructs the U.S. as a Self which is free and in a powerful position which allows it to intervene. This relational dynamic not only justifies foreign involvement but also strengthens national identity by contrasting American values with those attributed to the Other.

By situating Othering within both feminist and postcolonial theory, this thesis employs it as a critical tool for analysing how gendered and racialised discourses intersect to justify interventionist policies and sustain global hierarchies. Consequently, media narratives of Othering shape not only perceptions of Afghan women but also the U.S.’s understanding of itself and its role in the world.

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<sup>105</sup> Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*.

<sup>106</sup> Arat-Koc, “Hot Potato”, 61.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Khalid, “Gender, Orientalism and Representations of the ‘Other’”, 28.

#### 4.2.2. Orientalist Stereotyping

The term ‘Orientalism’ emerged in the 1970s with the emergence of the field of postcolonial research. Analysed extensively by Edward Said in *Orientalism*, it is defined by him as “a style of thought based upon an epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and ‘the Occident.’”<sup>109</sup> Neither the Orient/Occident nor East/West are historically given facts, however, and instead constructed through biased ways of thinking. The construction of a dichotomy between the East and the West allowed for the West to take on the dominant position and establish ‘the Orient’ as an opposite, with “Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”<sup>110</sup> Historically, this can be observed going hundreds of years back, for example, through the vilification of the Ottomans vis-à-vis European powers. Through distortion of images, exoticism, victimisation, and the use of religious and cultural stereotypes, the Orient was constructed as simultaneously alluring and inferior, particularly in the portrayal of women as passive, oppressed, mysterious, and hypersexualised figures. These depictions reinforced Western perceptions of moral and intellectual superiority and legitimised various forms of control and intervention.

The concept of Orientalism remains highly relevant in the twenty-first century. Eurocentric interpretations of non-Western contexts continue to dominate media narratives, often exacerbating racialised understandings of Islam and Muslim communities. Amin-Khan’s notion of *Neo-Orientalism* identifies a shift in post-9/11 discourse, where “the racialisation of Muslims in the process of securitisation permits Western politicians and many in the mainstream media to target Muslim women, associate Muslim males with terrorism, and criminalise migrants and refugees.”<sup>111</sup> This form of Orientalism is characterised by anti-Muslim and pro-Western imagery, and has intensified Islamophobia within contemporary discourse. Unlike classical Orientalism, which often exoticised and romanticised Muslim women, Neo-Orientalism reframes them as voiceless victims of a violent and patriarchal culture, often to legitimise Western ‘saving’ interventions. In this framework, Muslim women become a symbol of what must be rescued from Islam, rather than subjects with political agency.

A noteworthy difference between Said’s Orientalism and Amin-Khan’s Neo-Orientalism are the differences in connotations that each attaches to the East. While classical Orientalism frequently regarded the Oriental woman as exotic, mysterious and erotic, Neo-Orientalism reframes the East as a violent and regressive place, where religious fanaticism and political

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<sup>109</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 2.

<sup>110</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 3.

<sup>111</sup> Amin-Khan, “New Orientalism”, 1596.

instability are commonplace and where women are not so much eroticised as they are instrumentalised in narratives of victimhood and rescue. This change is reflective of broader changes in global power dynamics and the securitisation of Muslim identities following the events of 9/11. Both frameworks reduce complex societies and reinforce Western superiority. This modern form is heavily racialised and Islamophobic, often portraying Muslims as either threats or helpless victims. In both cases, the narratives justify Western dominance, whether through fascination or fear, and obscure the voices and agency of those being represented.

Given the significant influence of Edward Said's foundational work on Orientalism, this thesis adopts the term "Orientalist stereotyping" throughout the analysis, in preference to more modern alternatives such as "racialised" or "Islamophobic" stereotyping. This choice is intended to remind readers that the phenomena under discussion are not recent developments, but rather part of a long-standing historical process deeply rooted in the postcolonial tradition. The following section will examine how Orientalist stereotyping and Othering operate together, with particular attention to how gender is mobilised to sustain systems of exclusion and Western superiority in the U.S. media discourse.

#### **4.2.3. The Relationship between Othering and Orientalism**

Othering and Orientalist stereotyping are not entirely separate concepts, rather they are interrelated and mutually reinforcing processes that construct and sustain hierarchies of power. While Othering refers to the broader discursive mechanism of defining a group as fundamentally different, inferior, or alien in order to maintain dominance, Orientalism is a historically specific form of Othering that applies to the constructed East, particularly as imagined by the West. Both rely on the creation of binary oppositions, such as us vs. them, civilised vs. barbaric, and rational vs. emotional, that reduce complexity and consolidate Western authority. Orientalism adds another layer by casting the 'Orient' as exotic, backward, and in need of Western guidance, providing ideological justification for colonialism and intervention. In this way, Orientalism operates as a subset of Othering structured by centuries of political, military, and epistemological domination.

This relationship is central to the analysis in this thesis. U.S. media portrayals of Afghan women, especially post 9/11, are shaped by both Othering and Orientalist stereotyping, presenting them either as oppressed victims requiring Western salvation or as resistant figures whose struggles are framed through a Western-centric lens. Both portrayals deny Afghan women their agency and reduce their complexity, which leads to their life stories and struggles being used by Western sources to draft narratives of humanitarian intervention and national security. These two concepts are bound to each other, as Orientalist narratives rely on Othering to establish a binary.

The theoretical interconnection between these concepts can also be understood through the lens of power and discourse in the Foucauldian sense. As Khalid notes, Said's notion of Orientalism is deeply indebted to Foucault's theory of discourse and power/knowledge.<sup>112</sup> Orientalism is not just a collection of representations, but a discourse that enables and constrains what can be said about the East, and by whom. In this sense, Orientalist stereotyping is not merely reflective; it is productive. It actively shapes what can be known, said, and imagined about Afghan women, often silencing them in the process.

The concepts of Orientalist stereotyping and Othering will therefore be applied throughout the analysis to identify how media discourses construct Afghan women in ways that both reflect and reproduce broader systems of racialised and gendered power. By examining how these intertwined processes function in U.S. media coverage through the use of Critical Discourse Analysis which allows for an exploration of how power is reinforced through language and representation, this thesis seeks to reveal the enduring influence of colonial thought in contemporary narratives, investigate how they change over different points in time, and highlight the ways in which discursive constructions contribute to the maintenance of global hierarchies, marginalising women.

## 5. Research Methodology

### 5.1. Methodological Framework: Critical Discourse Analysis

To investigate how U.S. media discourses construct representations of Afghan women and the extent to which these representations reflect mechanisms of Othering and Orientalist stereotyping, this thesis will employ Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in its analysis of the chosen U.S. media samples. The underlying hypothesis is that media portrayals, even when framed as sympathetic or feminist, frequently reproduce racialised and gendered hierarchies that marginalise Afghan women's voices and perspectives. By examining news articles through this lens, the methodology aims to uncover how such representations are shaped, legitimised, and circulated, and how they contribute to broader narratives of Western moral and political superiority. The following section outlines the methodological tools employed, with particular focus on CDA and its integration with key theoretical concepts presented in [Chapter 4.2](#).

Language plays a significant role in the construction of power, conveying ideologies, and legitimising them. Deeply intertwined with notions of culture and identity, language has played a role in political discourses over centuries and is naturally also important in media analysis where

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<sup>112</sup> Khalid, "Gender, Orientalism and Representations of the 'Other'", 18.



it can be used to shape public perception and set agendas. The role and influence of the media has already been explored in [Chapter 2.3](#), but as Entman observes, the media does not necessarily always frame news in alignment with a country's governmental narratives.<sup>113</sup> The events surrounding 9/11 and the ensuing war on terror, however, represent a notable exception: never before had the U.S. media been so cooperative with the White House as immediately after the terrorist attacks. While this is just one example, it underlines that the media does play a significant factor in the shaping of public perceptions of geopolitical events and legitimising foreign policy actions.

Developed by linguistics scholars and emerging as a distinct discipline in the 1990s, CDA is concerned with all these aspects. It is a primary tool for uncovering power relations, biases, and the hidden meanings of texts, which is what makes it a suitable methodological frame for this thesis. Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak<sup>114</sup> are the most notable early contributors to CDA, exploring its application across various domains such as media, politics, and education. Their work laid the foundation for understanding how discourse shapes and is shaped by societal power structures. In particular Fairclough's focus on how discourse operates at the intersection of language, ideology, and social practice is particularly relevant here. His three-dimensional framework, analysing text, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice, offers a systematic way to connect micro-level linguistic choices to macro-level power dynamics.<sup>115</sup> This thesis will draw on Fairclough's approach not only by analysing linguistic features in the news articles, but also by considering their production and circulation within the broader socio-political contexts of the chosen time frames of analysis.

Van Dijk's examination of the discursive reproduction of racism in elite discourse also provides valuable insights for this thesis. His analysis of news narratives reveals how subtle linguistic choices contribute to the construction of in-groups and out-groups, reinforcing exclusionary ideologies under the guise of objective reporting.<sup>116</sup> By applying van Dijk's emphasis on cognitive frames and ideological structures in media discourse, this thesis will explore how Afghan women are discursively positioned in relation to Western audiences, using strategies of Othering and Orientalist stereotyping.

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<sup>113</sup> Robert M. Entman, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>114</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1995); Teun A. Van Dijk, "The Mass Media Today: Discourses of Domination or Diversity?," *Javnost - the Public* 2, no. 2 (January 1995): 27–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.1995.11008592>; Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: Sage, 2001).

<sup>115</sup> Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*.

<sup>116</sup> Van Dijk, "The Mass Media Today".

Ruth Wodak's discourse-historical approach further informs this analysis by situating texts within their historical and political contexts.<sup>117</sup> Her framework highlights how discourses draw upon intertextual references and historical narratives to reinforce certain ideologies. This perspective is crucial for unpacking how postcolonial legacies and gendered Orientalist tropes continue to inform contemporary media portrayals of Afghan women.

In addition to CDA, Stuart Hall's theory of representation will be employed to complement the discourse analysis. Hall argues that representation is not merely about reflecting reality but about actively producing meaning through language, images, and signs.<sup>118</sup> His emphasis on how meaning is constructed, contested, and negotiated within discourse aligns closely with the goals of CDA. Hall's concept of encoding/decoding is especially useful for understanding how dominant readings of Afghan women, as oppressed, voiceless, or in need of rescue, are encoded into media texts and how these meanings circulate as 'common sense' or 'given facts' within public discourse. Furthermore, Hall's attention to hegemonic struggles sheds light on how marginalised groups, such as Afghan women, are not merely passive objects of representation but also sites of contestation, where dominant narratives can be reinforced or resisted.

In line with the central research question, namely how U.S. media discourses construct representations of Afghan women, and the extent to which these representations reproduce Orientalist and gendered forms of Othering, this thesis will examine how Afghan women are portrayed across selected media outlets, with a focus on the period following the 9/11 attacks and the Taliban's 2021 return to power. Through the lens of CDA, the analysis will identify how these women are constructed as passive victims, voiceless subjects, or symbols of difference, and how their lived realities are flattened into ideologically charged narratives that support Western intervention narratives. The concepts of Othering and Orientalist stereotyping will be used by observing the language used in connection with Afghan women, tracking patterns such as the absence of their voices, the framing of their agency through Western liberal values, and the recurrence of familiar tropes, such as the oppressed Muslim woman or the rescued subject. This discursive framing will be examined across the production, textual, and socio-political dimensions of media texts. In doing so, the analysis seeks to demonstrate how gendered and racialised logics persist within contemporary U.S. media and to what extent they obscure, marginalise, or instrumentalise Afghan women's subjectivities. This methodological framework therefore serves as a roadmap for the analytical chapters that follow.

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<sup>117</sup> Wodak & Meyer, *Methods of CDA*.

<sup>118</sup> Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997).

## 5.2. Case Selection

As outlined above, this thesis will conduct its analysis of the Othering and Orientalist stereotyping of Afghan women through a qualitative analysis of selected news media articles. Since the topic requires an in-depth reading of how Othering and Orientalist stereotyping are constructed in discourse, a qualitative approach has been chosen over a quantitative one. This method enables a close analysis of the language, framing, and underlying narratives in the media coverage, allowing for attention to nuances such as word choice, metaphors, silences, and recurring discursive patterns that cannot be captured through quantitative data alone.

For this purpose, a comparative critical evaluation of the media coverage of Afghan women will be conducted, focusing on its evolution over critical points of Afghanistan's 21<sup>st</sup> century political history. These selected time frames are:

- **October – December 2001:** 2001 marks the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan during the War on Terror. Following the events of 9/11, the world media was highly sensitised and closely followed the first months of the war in Afghanistan.
- **August – October 2021:** This time frame includes the Fall of Kabul, withdrawal of U.S. groups and establishment of the Taliban 2.0 regime, as well as its immediate aftermaths.

The intent behind this choice is to analyse whether any correlations between the media portrayals of Afghan women at different points in time exist or if noticeable differences can be detected that would indicate an ideological shift of the media corresponding to different levels of U.S. presence in Afghanistan. With the twenty years of U.S. occupation during which notable accomplishments for women's rights were made and subsequent return to an Islamic fundamentalist state that wants to eliminate women from the public sphere, Afghan women's lives have undergone several differences over the past decades. The analysis of the media treatment of Afghan women might thus reflect strong or less noticeable instances of Othering and Orientalist stereotyping at different points in the analysis.

The samples for analysis will be drawn from the website of a prominent U.S. newspaper, *The New York Times*. This outlet was selected not only because it had one of the widest print circulations, particularly significant for the 2001-2002 timeframe covered in this thesis, but also due to its ongoing influence and reputation as a respected source of news. *NYT* is considered one of the most reliable sources of information, known for proper sourcing and reputable journalism; any past failed fact checks have largely concerned opinion pieces, not straight news reporting.<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, it plays a key role in shaping the broader media agenda. As Atkinson et al. note,

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<sup>119</sup> Media Bias Fact Check, "New York Times - Media Bias/Fact Check," Media Bias/Fact Check, June 29, 2023, <https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/new-york-times/>.

major outlets like *NYT* often act as arbiters of what counts as news, with other media outlets frequently following their lead through a process known as “inter-media agenda setting.”<sup>120</sup> For these reasons, it serves as a valuable source that reflects dominant narratives and mainstream sentiments within U.S. media discourse. All *NYT* articles are also accessible on the website which features an advanced search filter, thereby facilitating research as even access to articles from 2001 and 2021 can be easily found and filtered.

The search criteria were as follows: articles were retrieved using the keyword “Afghan women,” with results filtered to include only those in the “International” or “U.S.” sections, consciously excluding all opinion pieces, letters to the editor, and articles that only mention Afghan women in passing. The date range spanned from August to December 2001 and from spring to October 2021. Live tickers and video coverage were excluded. The initial 2001 search yielded over 300 results, but only 30 explicitly referenced women or girls in the headline or by-line. The first article explicitly discussing Afghan women appeared in October, with a clear spike around November, coinciding with Laura Bush’s speech on women’s rights in Afghanistan. In total, 22 articles from September to December 2001 focused meaningfully on Afghan women, with 9 selected for detailed analysis.

For 2021, the search process was more selective, as media attention to Afghanistan had already been heightened due to political developments in 2020 and 2021. In particular, Trump’s February 2020 deal with the Taliban (which excluded the Afghan government) and Biden’s subsequent shifting of the withdrawal deadline (originally envisioned for 11 September and eventually finalised for August 31) influenced coverage. Article frequency rose sharply in spring 2021, declined in early summer, and surged again in August-October as the U.S. withdrawal approached and unfolded. More than 30 articles focusing on women were found in this time period, but many were excluded due to redundancy or lack of depth (e.g., short-form updates or live tickers). Around 20 articles were deemed suitable, and ultimately, 7 were selected for analysis. This careful curation ensured that articles represented a diverse but focused sample of dominant themes.

A pronounced focus of the articles on Afghan women is seen as essential and has been evaluated qualitatively, since this leads to the further exclusion of press releases detailing solely political developments within Afghanistan, such as lists of the limitation of women’s rights, which are often identical to articles from other countries since the information is published by

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<sup>120</sup> Mary Layton Atkinson, John Lovett, and Frank R. Baumgartner, “Measuring the Media Agenda,” *Political Communication* 31, no. 2 (April 3, 2014): 355–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2013.828139>. 358.

international press agencies. To not go beyond the scope of this thesis, the selection had to be meticulous and well-reasoned, leading to the analysis including a total of 16 articles.

Given the nature of CDA, which demands a close reading of textual detail and socio-political context, this constitutes a highly selective discourse analysis. Articles were also chosen with thematic balance in mind, ensuring that not all stemmed from identical narrative angles, thus supporting a richer and more critical engagement with the material.

In the following, each article will be analysed critically, looking at language, framing, and power relations, focusing on instances of Othering and Orientalist stereotyping, how it affects Afghan women, and how this perpetuates or combats dichotomous views of us vs. them. To make the analytical process transparent and accessible, the categorisation of themes has been carried out systematically. After collecting and closely reading the selected articles, recurring tropes and discursive patterns were identified and tagged using a set of guiding keywords. These included, among others: “focus on race”, “focus on gender”, “speaking for”, “they / alienation”, “voice given because exiled”, “voice given within country”, “Western viewpoint”, “emphasis on silence”, “intervention positive”, “intervention negative”, “saviour narrative”, “rebellion”, and “quiet resistance”. These initial keywords helped cluster the data into broader thematic categories, which were then refined into the three subchapters of the analysis: saviour narratives, discursive alienation and silencing, and resistance narratives. This structure ensures that the analysis is not only attentive to the nuances of language and framing but also directly engages with the research questions. By following this thematic progression, the thesis aims to unpack how Orientalist and Othering discourses manifest and shift across time and context.

### 5.3. Ethical Considerations

The topic and analytical approach of this thesis raise important ethical considerations. Conducted from an external perspective without personal ties to Afghanistan or the United States, the analysis is shaped by a Western academic lens, which may carry implicit cultural biases influencing interpretation. Additionally, the study focuses on a very selective sample of U.S. news articles, meaning its findings cannot claim comprehensiveness or statistical representation but instead offer a qualitative, interpretive reading of discursive patterns.

A further ethical concern lies in the risk of reproducing the very narratives under critique by re-centring Afghan women within Western media frames. While the thesis critiques these portrayals, it does not incorporate Afghan women’s voices directly, and thus remains aware of the limitations of analysing representations about them rather than from them. Transparency about these interpretive and methodological constraints is necessary to ensure critical and ethical

reflection throughout the research. By openly acknowledging these limitations and biases, the research aims to maintain transparency and responsibility in the analysis and presentation of results.

## 6. Analysis

This chapter presents the core analysis of this thesis. Building on the historical and political context outlined in earlier chapters, the existing scientific literature presented in the Literature Review, and guided by a postcolonial feminist framework, it applies CDA to selected U.S. newspaper articles from 2001 and 2021. The aim is to explore how present processes of Othering and Orientalist stereotyping are in media representations of Afghan women. In doing so, the chapter addresses the central research question: How do Othering and Orientalist stereotyping intersect with U.S. media framing of Afghan women? The analysis seeks to examine the extent to which these narratives perpetuate recurring tropes – depicting Afghan women as voiceless, passive victims and cultural Others in need of Western salvation – and thus to evaluate the validity of the hypothesis introduced at the beginning of this thesis.

### 6.1 Saving Narratives

One of the most prominent themes to emerge from the analysis of U.S. media coverage of Afghan women is the recurrence of saving narratives. These narratives frame Afghan women primarily as victims of a repressive culture or regime, positioning them in need of external rescue. These portrayals are rooted in long-standing Orientalist discourses that construct the non-West as backward and patriarchal, while casting the West as progressive, rational, and morally responsible. In the context of the War on Terror, these narratives served to legitimise U.S. military intervention by presenting it as a humanitarian mission, with the liberation of Afghan women used as moral justification. Drawing on a close reading of selected articles from *NYT* during the early phase of the U.S. invasion in 2001 and its withdrawal in 2021, this chapter explores how the figure of the Afghan woman is instrumentalised to reproduce hierarchies of power and identity. Through these discourses, Othering and Orientalist stereotyping are not only sustained, but also deeply embedded within gendered representations of war and nationhood.

#### 6.1.1 Saving Narratives in 2001 Media Discourse

The immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks created an environment of ideological tensions and heightened nationalism within the United States. In this context, media outlets played a crucial

role in generating support for the War on Terror and, as explored in earlier chapters, Afghanistan quickly became a central focus due to its association with the Taliban and the harbouring of al-Qaeda operatives. However, the rationale for intervention in Afghanistan was not solely framed through the lens of counter-terrorism. Rather, U.S. media coverage heavily foregrounded the oppression of Afghan women, constructing a moral narrative that sought to legitimise military action through humanitarian concern. Articles from 2001 reveal a distinct pattern of “saving narratives,” where Afghan women are represented as helpless victims of a barbaric regime, and U.S. intervention is positioned as their necessary salvation. These representations echo deeply embedded Orientalist tropes, which reinforces binaries of Western superiority and Eastern backwardness, and thereby sustains the discursive Othering.

This discursive shift aligned with a broader ideological campaign, as seen in Laura Bush’s radio address in November 2001, which declared the “fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.”<sup>121</sup> Her speech was widely referenced and amplified in the media, serving to tie the war effort to a moral issue. This strategic framing illustrates what Khalid identifies as the gendering of Orientalist discourse to gain public support: “Gendered Orientalism became the lens through which a civilising mission could be seen as legitimate, even necessary.”<sup>122</sup> Within this framework, Afghan women were not simply victims of Taliban brutality but symbolic figures whose liberation would justify U.S. military actions.

The articles analysed from *NYT* in 2001 reflect this narrative structure with striking consistency. Afghan women are persistently portrayed as being heavily oppressed, their experiences often described in emotionally charged and dehumanising terms. This positions them as the Other to most U.S. women, who have not faced such a repressive regime before. One article reports that “the status of women plunged”<sup>123</sup> under the Taliban, while “many were beaten for exposing their faces and some were publicly executed after accusations of sexual misconduct.”<sup>124</sup> Such depictions, while grounded in fact, are framed in ways that elicit emotional responses from Western audiences, inviting identification with the victims and moral outrage against their oppressors. Waldman recounts a widow’s testimony: “I thought of killing myself many times [...] Buying groceries could bring a beating from the religious police.”<sup>125</sup> Through these vivid portrayals of suffering, the women’s agency is eclipsed by their victimhood.

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<sup>121</sup> Bush, “Radio Address by Mrs. Bush“.

<sup>122</sup> Khalid, “Gender, Orientalism and Representations of the ‘Other’”, 28.

<sup>123</sup> Steven Erlanger, “A NATION CHALLENGED: RIGHTS; in Bonn, Three Champions for Afghan Women,” *The New York Times*, November 30, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/30/world/a-nation-challenged-rights-in-bonn-three-champions-for-afghan-women.html?searchResultPosition=250>. Henceforth referred to as **2001-05**.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Amy Waldman, “A NATION CHALLENGED: RESISTANCE; behind the Burqa: Women Subtly Fought the Taliban,” *The New York Times*, November 19, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/19/world/a-nation->



By use of this rhetorical strategy, Afghan women are not only positioned as the Other but also reduced to one-dimensional figures, stripped of political voice or personal complexity. This aligns closely with common Orientalist tropes and Gayatri Spivak's critique of the colonial trope of "white men saving brown women from brown men",<sup>126</sup> whereby gender oppression is used to as a moral validation for imperial ambitions. The media's representations in 2001 echo this logic, presenting U.S. involvement as a humanitarian mission to rescue voiceless women from violent, regressive men. Women describe their experience under the Taliban as being "put in a can and the lid closed",<sup>127</sup> while another depicts life under the Taliban like imprisonment: "'It was like being in jail,' said another woman, Delband. Today, the prisoners were free."<sup>128</sup> Such metaphors reinforce the image of total entrapment, resolved only through external intervention.

The sense of hope that follows the U.S. invasion is similarly constructed through a Western lens, reinforcing the role of the U.S. as a benevolent saviour. Afghan women are quoted expressing joy at the fall of the Taliban, with one student declaring, "We are so happy the Taliban have gone... We are so excited about the future",<sup>129</sup> and another stating, "I am very happy if the Americans come to Afghanistan [...] especially if they eliminate the Taliban."<sup>130</sup> In these portrayals, the U.S. is positioned as the agent of change, while Afghan women remain the passive recipients of that change. As Waldman writes, "Now jobs, not to mention dreams and plans, do not have to be scrimped and hoarded."<sup>131</sup> Gall quotes a woman expressing the dream to "go to university and travel to America,"<sup>132</sup> further romanticising the West as a place of freedom and fulfilment. This East/West dichotomy directly parallels Edward Said's framework of Orientalism, where the Orient is depicted as static, repressive, and incapable of reform without Western guidance.<sup>133</sup>

Indeed, this dichotomy is often bolstered by language that casts Afghanistan as pre-modern or uncivilised. In one article, the Taliban's rule is described as "medieval treatment of women"<sup>134</sup>

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[challenged-resistance-behind-the-burka-women-subtly-fought-taliban.html?searchResultPosition=214](https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/23/world/nation-challenged-resistance-behind-the-burka-women-subtly-fought-taliban.html?searchResultPosition=214). Henceforth referred to as **2001-02**.

<sup>126</sup> Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*

<sup>127</sup> Carlotta Gall, "A NATION CHALLENGED: WOMEN'S TRADITIONS; back to the Old Bathhouse: Free to Laugh Once Again," *The New York Times*, December 23, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/23/world/nation-challenged-women-s-traditions-back-old-bathhouse-free-laugh-once-again.html?searchResultPosition=318>.

Henceforth referred to as **2001-08**.

<sup>128</sup> 2001-02.

<sup>129</sup> 2001-08.

<sup>130</sup> David Rohde, "A NATION CHALLENGED: REBEL REGION; Education Offers Women in Northern Afghanistan a Ray of Hope," *The New York Times*, October 3, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/03/world/nation-challenged-rebel-region-education-offers-women-northern-afghanistan-ray.html?searchResultPosition=66>.

Henceforth referred to as **2001-01**.

<sup>131</sup> 2001-02.

<sup>132</sup> 2001-08.

<sup>133</sup> Said, *Orientalism*.

<sup>134</sup> 2001-05.

that shocked “a horrified West”,<sup>135</sup> and another notes how “an animal was freer than us because a woman could not even go out of the house herself.”<sup>136</sup> These depictions underscore the binary of Western vs. Islamic civilisations at the heart of Orientalist discourse, which Amin-Khan identifies as central to what he calls the “new Orientalism” of the post-9/11 era.<sup>137</sup> Here, cultural and gender difference are used to support narratives of Western intervention, with Afghan society positioned as inherently inferior and in need of transformation through external forces.

While some articles acknowledge the complexity of Afghan society and note the persistence of traditional restrictions even after the Taliban’s fall, these moments are largely overshadowed by a dominant narrative of suffering and Western-led liberation. The Taliban era is framed as a shocking era of regression, one that isolated Afghan women from modernity, freedom, and basic human rights. The U.S. intervention, in turn, is presented as a corrective measure, one that restored hope and improved daily life. It is acknowledged to not bring an immediate improvement, but still one of progress: “It’s going to be a very difficult time. It will be two steps forward, three steps back.”<sup>138</sup> However, the underlying message across these texts is consistent: intervention was not only justified but necessary, and the improvement of women’s lives is presented as proof of its success.

This narrative logic exemplifies the strategic use of gendered Othering to achieve geopolitical – or in the case of the U.S. in 2001 security-oriented – goals. Such discourse often frames gendered oppression in ways that legitimises foreign intervention while neglecting mentions of the historical and political complexities that underlie these situations, as argued by Abu-Lughod in her examination of the use of Muslim women as justifications for interventions.<sup>139</sup> While most articles in the analysis attempted to explain the present circumstances of Afghan women’s suffering through explaining the country’s political history, they still frame U.S. military action as the catalyst for change. What remains notably absent is any meaningful mention of Afghan women’s own strategies of dissent prior to the Taliban rule.

In nearly all the 2001 articles analysed, saving narratives are either explicitly articulated or implicitly embedded in the contrast of past suffering and present liberation. The logic of salvation is rarely questioned and problematised. The plight of Afghan women becomes a complementary focus to the War on Terror, invoked to maintain public support and solidify the image of the U.S.

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<sup>135</sup> 2001-05.

<sup>136</sup> 2001-02.

<sup>137</sup> Amin-Khan, “New Orientalism.”

<sup>138</sup> Barbara Crossette, “The World: Afghanistan’s Women; Hope for the Future, Blunted by a Hard Past,” *The New York Times*, December 2, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/02/weekinreview/the-world-afghanistan-s-women-hope-for-the-future-blunted-by-a-hard-past.html?searchResultPosition=10>. Henceforth referred to as **2001-06**.

<sup>139</sup> Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*

as a force for good. The intervention is portrayed as a humanitarian mission enacted through U.S. military, where gendered suffering is not only described but strategically instrumentalised.

Ultimately, the 2001 coverage of Afghan women in U.S. media illustrates one of the most pervasive and enduring forms of Orientalist stereotyping. Afghan women are doubly Othered, first as Muslim women presumed to be inherently oppressed, and second as non-Western subjects presumed to lack agency. The power relations embedded in these portrayals reflect a broader discursive order in which the West retains moral and political authority, while the East is rendered passive, regressive, and in need of saving. These narratives not only justify foreign intervention but shape global perceptions of Afghan identity and gender roles.

### 6.1.2 Saving Narratives in 2021 Media Discourse

No longer framed by the events following 9/11 or the US-led War on Terror, the media samples from 2021 follow the United States preparations to withdraw from Afghanistan after 20 years of occupation. The withdrawal was not celebrated as the successful conclusion of a humanitarian mission, but instead raised concerns about its consequences, particularly for Afghan women. While in 2001 the question “what now?” had suggested new beginnings and Western-backed emancipation, in 2021 it stood for the fear of regression, with headlines dominated by the Taliban’s rapid advance and the fragility of institutions left behind. These were often depicted as inherently dependent on continued US support, emphasising the notion that the gains of the last two decades, particularly for women’s rights, were both precarious and externally upheld.

Although the US was now withdrawing rather than invading Afghanistan, the underlying logic remained familiar. Afghan women are still framed as in need of protection, but now in the context of abandonment rather than intervention. This shift alludes to a transformation, not a disappearance of the “saving” narrative. The image of the endangered Afghan woman remains, still largely constructed through a Western gaze and defined by what might be lost rather than what had been achieved. Much of the 2021 coverage focuses on the fear of a return to repression. As Fassihi & Bilefsky put it, “millions are afraid of a return to a repressive past,”<sup>140</sup> a sentiment echoed repeatedly as journalists emphasise the Taliban’s return as an existential threat to women’s rights. The idea that “everything we have achieved for 20 years will be gone”<sup>141</sup> is found frequently, expressing concerns about a future of erasure and silence, as well as a widespread sense of intimidation: “‘I want to go out, I want to drive — I like driving,’ Fahima Saman said ..., speaking

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<sup>140</sup> Farnaz Fassihi and Dan Bilefsky, “For Afghan Women, Taliban Stir Fears of Return to a Repressive Past,” *The New York Times*, August 17, 2021, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/17/world/asia/afghanistan-women-taliban.html>. Henceforth referred to as **2021-01**.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

only on the condition that she not be identified by her full name for fear of a Taliban reprisal. ‘But because of this situation, I cannot — I am afraid.’”<sup>142</sup>

Language like that reframes women’s rights as a brief exception to an otherwise ongoing period of oppression that has been observed throughout Afghanistan’s history, reinforcing the Orientalist binary of modern (Western) versus backward (Taliban). Even the achievements of the past two decades are narrated in terms of dependence: “Since the US ousted the Taliban, women and girls have rejoined society in ways that would have been unimaginable under their rule. Now those gains are threatened.”<sup>143</sup> The implication drawn from that is that progress was contingent on Western presence, not Afghan agency. This is also implied by Eddy & Blue when they state that “The demonstration of women wearing head-to-toe garments and face coverings on the 9/11 anniversary was a sharp rebuke to the United States and its allies, which long cited women’s rights as a reason for continuing the war in Afghanistan [...]”<sup>144</sup>

This framing draws heavily on processes of Othering. Despite two decades of engagement, Afghan women are still positioned as passive beneficiaries of Western modernity. Though some have become more visibly active, working in government, studying, and advocating, their representation still hinges on their alignment with the West. Even as they are described as “from the generation that had a lot of opportunities after the fall of the Taliban,”<sup>145</sup> their political subjectivity is subordinated to the larger story of U.S. intervention and failure. What persists is not just the portrayal of Afghan women as oppressed, but as a symbol of the stakes of Western involvement.

It is important to observe that the tone of the media shifts as well, with the triumphalism of 2001 giving way to a more mournful and humanitarian tone. The narrative moved from justifying occupation to criticising its end, with women’s rights held up as the singular moral success of the intervention. Fassihi & Bilefsky remark that “the one widely recognised bright spot [of the prolonged U.S. presence]: the treatment of women.”<sup>146</sup> Such framing credited the US with moral progress, reinforcing its self-portrayal as a civilising force, even as it is retreating. The investment was quantified (“The United States has invested more than \$780 million to encourage

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<sup>142</sup> Lara Jakes, “Women in Afghanistan Wait for US Protection, as Promised,” *The New York Times*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/18/us/politics/afghanistan-women-protection.html?searchResultPosition=173>. Henceforth referred to as **2021-02**.

<sup>143</sup> 2021-01.

<sup>144</sup> Melissa Eddy and Victor J Blue, “At Pro-Taliban Protest, a Symbol of America’s Lost Influence: Faces Obscured by Veils,” *The New York Times*, September 11, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/11/world/europe/afghanistan-women-burgas.html?searchResultPosition=331>. Henceforth referred to as **2021-05**.

<sup>145</sup> 2021-01.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

women's rights"<sup>147</sup>) emphasising the belief that emancipation was something delivered, not demanded.

This is not a departure from the Western saviour complex but a reformulation of it. The urgency of the 2021 evacuation gave rise to a new kind of "rescue" narrative, one centred on extraction and asylum rather than transformation. Stories focus less on helping Afghan women flourish and more on helping them escape. The logic of saving shifted to getting the "right" people out in time. The goodness of these actions is tinged with regret, but women remain cast as passive figures needing help and less as agents capable to have a say in their own future. Thus, while the saviour narrative has become less overt, its core remains intact, only now it operates through humanitarian discourse rather than militarised liberation.

With the U.S. stepping back, the responsibility for Afghan women is increasingly framed as international, with NGOs and the U.N. present in Afghanistan and preoccupied about its future trajectory. This diversification dilutes solely U.S. responsibility but continues to position Afghan women as subjects of Western pity and protection. As U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres notes, "I am particularly concerned by accounts of mounting human rights violations against the women and girls of Afghanistan,"<sup>148</sup> reinforcing their visibility through suffering. The issue is no longer framed as an ideological battle, but as a humanitarian emergency. The Orientalist gaze endures. Women are still depicted in static terms, their oppression seemingly inherent to their culture rather than the result of specific cultural circumstances.

Neo-Orientalist tropes re-emerge powerfully through portrayals of the Taliban. Despite the shift in geopolitical strategy, the West retains moral authority by casting itself as the protector of rights now under threat. The Taliban are consistently depicted as unchanged, barbaric, anti-modern, irredeemably patriarchal: "The Taliban's spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, surprised some when he acknowledged ... that many within the Taliban ranks could not be trusted to treat women civilly, and would need to be educated."<sup>149</sup> The West, in contrast, symbolises enlightenment and freedom. This dynamic reasserted the same binaries as in 2001, implying that Afghan women cannot uphold rights without external support. Such framing not only ignores local feminist agency but reproduces a narrative where progress is imported and maintained by Western stewardship.

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<sup>147</sup> 2021-01.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Alissa J Rubin, "Threats and Fear Cause Afghan Women's Protections to Vanish Overnight," *The New York Times*, September 4, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/04/world/middleeast/afghanistan-women-shelter-taliban.html?searchResultPosition=303>. Henceforth referred to as **2021-03**.

This recurring pattern is further reinforced by the episodic nature of media attention. As Ross <sup>150</sup> observes, women's suffering often serves as a trigger for coverage, but their everyday activism is overlooked. In 2021, there is a notable surge in articles between August and October, during the height of the Taliban takeover, followed by a steep decline. This reinforces the idea that Afghan women are rendered visible only during moments of crisis. Their stories are told not on their own terms, but in line with Western interest. Their pain is newsworthy.

Ultimately, the 2021 coverage reveals a continuity in Western media narratives: Afghan women remain symbolic figures through which broader geopolitical meaning is negotiated. While the historical circumstances have changed, the structure of representation remains unchanged. Afghan women are portrayed primarily in relation to what the West can or cannot do for them. The narrative continues to privilege Western action and Western failure, and less Afghan resilience or autonomy. What appears as a centring of Afghan women instead reinforces asymmetrical power relations. Their depiction as victims still functions to maintain a discourse in which their voices are peripheral.

The next chapter builds on this by examining how such representations rooted in postcolonial and feminist critiques of Othering contribute to a broader pattern of symbolic appropriation, silencing, and erasure within U.S. media discourse.

## 6.2 Alienation and Silencing

Alongside overt "saving narratives", U.S. media representations of Afghan women are also shaped by more subtle mechanisms of alienation. This chapter explores how forms of representational absence function in the news discourse. Silencing manifests not only in what is omitted, such as Afghan women's own voices, agency, and political perspectives, but also in how their presence is framed. Especially in 2001, women still in Afghanistan are frequently portrayed as voiceless or passive, while exiled women, particularly those living in Western countries, are depicted as more emancipated and credible, their perspectives rendered more relatable through a lens of Westernisation. The burqa, often prominently featured in imagery and language, operates as a key symbol in this dynamic. It is not only depicted as a marker of oppression but also as an object that erases individuality and mutes identity, reinforcing the figure of the Afghan woman as culturally Othered and inaccessible. This chapter will highlight how Othering and Orientalist stereotyping operate through both presence and absence, contributing to a broader marginalisation of Afghan women. By focusing on the articles from both 2001 and 2021, this chapter interrogates

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<sup>150</sup> Ross, "The Gendered Turn".

how the absence of complexity and nuance contributes to the Othering process, reinforcing Orientalist binaries of “us” versus “them” and legitimising paternalistic gazes from the West.

### 6.2.1 Alienation and Silencing in 2001 Media Discourse

In 2001, U.S. media representations of Afghan women were not only marked by explicit saving narratives but also by other patterns of silencing and exoticising them. While representations often appear sympathetic, they simultaneously reinforce Orientalist logics by stripping Afghan women of voice, nuance, and diversity of experience. Throughout the articles analysed, a recurring dichotomy emerges: Afghan women within Afghanistan are frequently framed as voiceless, invisible, and unknowable, while those in exile, particularly in the West, are portrayed as outspoken and emancipated. This distinction not only reproduces hierarchical binaries of modernity and tradition but also serves to legitimise Western intervention and moral superiority, echoing Edward Said’s foundational critique of Orientalist stereotyping and its framing of the East as “irrational, weak, feminized, and passive” in contrast to the “rational, strong, active” West.

This dynamic begins with the linguistic and stylistic choices used to refer to women inside Afghanistan. Across several articles, Afghan women are described predominantly through the third-person plural “they,” marking them as distant from the U.S. reader and removing any sense of connection. For example, one article notes, “Here, at least, **they** can ride in the back of trucks if a man deigns to let them. **They** can shop in the market, although **they** are allowed to speak to male shopkeepers only if it is absolutely necessary”<sup>151</sup> [emphasis added]. The repetition of “they” constructs an Othered identity, emphasising the separateness to the predominantly Western audience of *NYT*. Such portrayals strip Afghan women of individual agency and identity, turning them into a mass that exemplifies repression, rather than individuals living in a complex social, political, and historical environment.

Further compounding this Othering is the visual and symbolic representation of Afghan women as silent. Fassihi & Bilefsky write: “Still, to a Western visitor, a striking feature of alliance territory is that women are seen only occasionally on the street, **silently** carrying a child or leaving a bazaar with food”<sup>152</sup> [emphasis added]. Here, silence is framed as eerie and unnatural, invoking a sense of discomfort and alienation. The article positions the “Western visitor” as the normative observer, contrasting their expectations of normal public life with the perceived absence of Afghan women in the public sphere. Such a contrast reinforces the idea that voicelessness is inherent to

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<sup>151</sup> 2001-01.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.



Afghan womanhood. This assumption is then used to justify both their marginalisation in discourse and the U.S.'s self-ascribed role as saviour.

This symbolic silencing is also articulated through what Gaye Tuchman describes as “symbolic annihilation,” where the complexity of women’s lives is erased through underrepresentation, trivialisation, or stereotyping.<sup>153</sup> In the case of Afghan women, the annihilation is both literal, through the limited quotations or absence of direct voices, and metaphorical, in how their lived experiences are reduced into basic tropes. While moments of resistance are acknowledged (and will be explored in [Chapter 6.3](#)), these instances are often overshadowed by the narrative perception of widespread silence.

By contrast, Afghan women in exile are often framed as possessing agency and articulate political voices, particularly when their values align with Western liberal feminism. In an article by Bumiller, Hadisa Safi, a former Kabul education official now living abroad, asserts: “Before this, we were crying all the time... but we got answers very few. The world forgot us. Now, this is the time that they are listening to us.”<sup>154</sup> This kind of statement positions exiled women as “breaking the silence,” a role made possible not only by leaving Afghanistan but also by proximity to Western media platforms, values, and audiences. Similarly, Sima Wali is quoted in several articles as an advocate working tirelessly to ensure Afghan women’s inclusion in post-Taliban political processes. Crosette highlights how “over the last week, a small group of Afghan women, all of them exiles, have been in Bonn [...] to lobby for inclusion in whatever the new Afghan order may be.”<sup>155</sup> These women are granted voice, legitimacy, and a central role in the narrative, implicitly reinforcing the notion that visibility and intelligibility are tied to Westernisation.

This distinction between the voiceless Afghan woman within the homeland and the vocal, empowered exile also relies on visual markers of identity, most prominently the burqa. Burqa imagery functions as a powerful symbol in many of the articles, representing not only Taliban oppression (“To the outside world, the burka was the most obvious and chilling symbol of the Taliban rule.”<sup>156</sup>) but also the perceived incomprehensibility and anonymity of Afghan women. Waldman describes the burqa as a garment that “renders a woman more column than human,”<sup>157</sup> while in another article Waldman recounts the difficulty of interviewing a woman in a burqa: “You do not know what she looks like, how old she is, whether she is smiling, or thinks you have just

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<sup>153</sup> Tuchmann, “Symbolic Annihilation of Women”.

<sup>154</sup> Elisabeth Bumiller, “Afghan Women Trade Shadows for Washington’s Limelight,” *The New York Times*, November 30, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/30/us/afghan-women-trade-shadows-for-washington-s-limelight.html?searchResultPosition=252>. Henceforth referred to as **2001-04**.

<sup>155</sup> 2001-06.

<sup>156</sup> 2001-02.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

asked a stupid question. It feels like talking to a voice box.”<sup>158</sup> These representations dehumanise women who wear the burqa, reducing them to symbols of speechlessness and erasure rather than recognising the cultural or personal reasons for wearing it. The contrast between the veiled woman seen in public and the shock and intimacy of seeing women unveiled within their homes further illustrates this dynamic of the veiled woman being perceived as an Other that is present in many of the articles.

The narrative emphasis on the burqa as an oppressive object overlooks its cultural significance for many Afghan women themselves. Some articles include statements by women who assert their intention to keep wearing the burqa, such as: “‘We will never take off our burkas because this is tradition for us,’ said Bibi Asha, 44, a mother of 10 children.”<sup>159</sup> Others cite Afghan men who insist that women should continue wearing it even if they are allowed to work or attend school: “Many men who say women should be able to work or go to school still say they should wear the burka. ‘It is a tradition in Afghanistan.’”<sup>160</sup> While these inclusions complicate the narrative slightly, they are generally framed as outdated opinions, contrasted with the assumed modernity of burqa-free exiled women. The burqa thus becomes a visual and ideological dividing line, marking the boundary between the “liberated” and the “oppressed,” reinforcing the Orientalist logic that equates Western dress and public speech with freedom and self-expression.

Here again, Spivak’s formulation of the colonial trope of “white men saving brown women from brown men” becomes relevant, as the figure of the veiled woman serves as the ultimate justification for interventionist rhetoric.<sup>161</sup> In the 2001 U.S. media coverage, the burqa does not simply signify a dress code, it becomes extended to a symbol for feminine subjugation. In one article, the garment is described as “an impenetrable wall of pale blue polyester where a human being should be,”<sup>162</sup> and continues with the uncomfortable fact of life for Afghan women that “for her own protection, a woman must be stripped of her identity.”<sup>163</sup> Such descriptions do more than critique Taliban policies; they assert a moral hierarchy in which the West brings identity and liberation. The use of exoticised language, for example by referring to the burqa as a “shroud,”<sup>164</sup> or the women as “faceless ciphers”<sup>165</sup> further alienates Afghan women from Western readers,

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<sup>158</sup> Amy Waldman, “A NATION CHALLENGED: DIARIES; Reporters in Afghanistan: Fear, Numbness and Being a Spectacle,” *The New York Times*, December 29, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/29/world/nation-challenged-diaries-reporters-afghanistan-fear-numbness-being-spectacle.html?searchResultPosition=331>.

Henceforth referred to as **2001-09**.

<sup>159</sup> 2001-07.

<sup>160</sup> 2001-02.

<sup>161</sup> Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*

<sup>162</sup> 2001-09.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

reinforcing a vision of Afghan femininity as both mysterious and tragically constrained. On the other hand, a gathering of Afghan professional women in the United States is described as: “Not one of them wore a burka, and probably never had, although a few had veiled heads. Their goal, they said, was to go back home and become part of their nation's life again.”<sup>166</sup> The implicit message is clear: empowerment and visibility go hand in hand, and the West enables both.

While some articles attempt to complicate this binary by referencing the diversity of Afghan women's experiences, such as reporting on urban women who had worked as professionals before the Taliban, or acknowledging local resistance efforts, these efforts are generally marginal to the dominant narrative. The voices of women still within Afghanistan are filtered through Western journalists' interpretations, mediated by visual symbolism, or else completely absent. While one article reports that a group of women protested in Kabul for peace and education, even in this rare instance of political mobilisation, the women themselves are not quoted directly: “Several hundred Afghan women demonstrated for women's rights here today for the first time in at least five years, demanding peace for the country, education for their children and power for themselves.”<sup>167</sup> Their presence is acknowledged, but their voices remain absent. Although it is important to note that elsewhere in the 2001 coverage, there are instances where Afghan women are given space to speak and articulate their acts of resistance, this pattern of speaking about women rather than with them is nonetheless recurrent. This omission reinforces the broader silencing at work: Afghan women are spoken about, not spoken with.

The symbolic framing of Afghan women as silent, often described in the articles through imagery and metaphors, serves both a narrative and political function. It legitimises Western moral intervention while reducing the very subjects it claims to rescue. As noted earlier, Sima Wali's invocation of “silent voices” draws attention to the marginalisation of Afghan women in global forums: “We are the silent voices that need to be heard.”<sup>168</sup> Yet ironically, the media often reinforces that same silence by privileging the perspectives of those closest to Western audiences. In this way, silencing is not merely an effect of Taliban policies; it becomes a discursive practice embedded in media representation.

In sum, the 2001 coverage of Afghan women reveals a powerful convergence of Othering, exoticism, and symbolic silencing that both reflects and sustains Orientalist stereotypes. Women inside Afghanistan are depicted as passive, voiceless, and obscured, both literally through the burqa and figuratively through their absence in narrative voice. In contrast, exiled women are

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<sup>166</sup> 2001-04.

<sup>167</sup> David Rohde, “A NATION CHALLENGED: RIGHTS; the Women, Veils Shed, Demonstrate,” *The New York Times*, November 21, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/21/world/a-nation-challenged-rights-the-women-veils-shed-demonstrate.html?searchResultPosition=220>. Henceforth referred to as **2001-03**.

<sup>168</sup> 2001-05.

framed as empowered, but only insofar as they align with Western norms and values. This representational dichotomy contributes to the broader cultural narrative of the War on Terror, in which Afghan women's suffering is not only documented but also instrumentalised. As such, the question is not only whether Afghan women are seen or heard, but on what terms, and for whose purposes.

### 6.2.2 Alienation and Silencing in 2021 Media Discourse

Instead of documenting the fall of the Taliban like in 2001, journalists in 2021 report on their rapid return to power following the withdrawal of U.S. forces. While certain discursive patterns persist, such as the symbolic use of the burqa and the recurrent framing of Afghan women as oppressed, there is a marked shift in the representational strategy. Unlike in 2001, Afghan women are no longer wholly voiceless in these narratives. Instead, they speak, sometimes defiantly, sometimes fearfully, but they are heard. Direct quotations, personal testimonies, and interviews are far more prevalent, especially from women still living within Afghanistan. However, this new visibility is overshadowed by the sense of an impending return to silence, as the Taliban's resurgence threatens to undo two decades of progress.

This shift is evident in the increased direct representation of Afghan women within the country. In stark contrast to 2001, when Afghan women were rarely quoted directly and most often appeared through third-person descriptions or as symbolic figures, the 2021 articles consistently include their voices. For example, Zucchino recounts female judges speaking openly about their fear of men they sentenced regaining freedom: “‘I lost my job and now I can’t even go outside or do anything freely because I fear these freed prisoners,’ Nabila said by phone from a safe house.”<sup>169</sup> Another woman states, “A dark future is awaiting everyone in Afghanistan, especially female judges.”<sup>170</sup> These statements do not merely illustrate victimhood, they articulate awareness, resistance, and lived consequences. The presence and directness of these quotes marks a significant departure from the abstract portrayals that dominated in 2001.

Similarly, Fassihi & Bilefsky frame the visibility of women in public discourse as remarkable: “The remarkable scene of a Taliban official taking questions from a woman journalist was part of a broader campaign by the Taliban to present a more moderate face to the world.”<sup>171</sup> That such a moment is highlighted suggests a change in both Afghan society and its media

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<sup>169</sup> David Zucchino, “Female Afghan Judges and Lawyers Now Fear for Their Lives,” *The New York Times*, October 20, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/21/world/asia/afghan-judges-women-taliban.html?searchResultPosition=22>. Henceforth referred to as **2021-07**.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> 2021-01.

portrayal: Afghan women are now positioned as actors, even interlocutors, rather than passive subjects. This evolution reflects broader shifts in Afghanistan over the previous two decades, during which women had gained access to education, employment, and public life, even if unevenly and often precariously.

However, this expansion of voice is undercut by an equally pervasive narrative: the return of silencing. If in 2001 the silence was largely imposed and complete, in 2021 it is impending and threatening. The articles construct a portrait of Afghan women who are on the brink of being silenced again, retreating from public life not out of compliance but fear. In her piece on Afghan women's shelters, Rubin describes women fleeing domestic abuse as bearing "ghastly injuries - broken bones or internal injuries from being severely beaten,"<sup>172</sup> and "knock[ing] at the unmarked gates or ordinary homes where women's aid groups took people in."<sup>173</sup> Here, action and resistance remain muted, and the women's silence is still present, but it is cast as an effect of systemic violence rather than cultural or religious practice alone. As in the analysis of the 2001 articles, Gaye Tuchman's concept of "symbolic annihilation" remains relevant; women's suffering is seen, but not always vocalised or legitimised through their own language.

The symbolism of the burqa also returns, again functioning as a key signifier of oppression and alienation: "Women there said they were starting to wear the head-to-toe burqa in the street, partly in fear and partly in anticipation of restrictions ordered by the Taliban."<sup>174</sup> The return of the burqa in public life becomes a visual signifier for the impending loss of freedom, individuality, and identity. As in 2001, it is used to evoke Western sympathy and project Afghan women as victims of a repressive regime. However, unlike the previous era, some of the articles acknowledge women's agency in negotiating these impositions. For instance, when a student named Parisa concedes: "We will wear it, but we don't want to stop educating."<sup>175</sup> The statement reveals a strategic compromise, challenging the binary of resistance versus submission.

What is particularly notable in 2021 is that the dichotomy between women inside and outside of Afghanistan has become more complicated. In 2001, exiled women were portrayed as the only visible and articulate representatives of Afghan womanhood, regarded as women of modernity. By contrast, 2021 articles feature mentions of a pro-Taliban women's protest, where demonstrators hold signs reading: "Women who left Afghanistan cannot represent us," and "Our

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<sup>172</sup> 2021-03.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> 2021-01.

<sup>175</sup> Victor J Blue and David Zucchini, "Women in Afghanistan and Girls: Taliban Restrict Their Education," *The New York Times*, September 20, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/20/world/asia/afghan-girls-schools-taliban.html?searchResultPosition=345>. Henceforth referred to as **2021-06**.

rights are protected in Islam.”<sup>176</sup> This moment subverts the 2001 narrative by introducing a plurality of women’s voices within Afghanistan, including those who reject Western feminist discourses. While this complicates the simplistic trope of the silenced Afghan woman, it also highlights how discourses of tradition and modernity continue to structure representation, this time, not only as a West vs. East binary, but also within Afghan society itself.

Yet even as direct representation increases, the articles remain haunted by the threat of symbolic silencing. In many, the spectre of the past looms heavily, suggesting that Afghanistan is poised to revert to a former era. Eddy & Blue explicitly invoke the earlier Taliban rule: “In public, women were forced to wear the burqa, a tentlike garment that covers them from head to toe, with a crocheted mesh grill over the eyes. Its use to erase the appearance of women from public life was seen in the West as a symbol of Taliban oppression.”<sup>177</sup> This retrospective framing warns of a return to repression and uses the past as a cautionary tale. It both legitimises concern and implies the fragility of women’s gains. Thus, even when women speak, their voices are situated in a narrative of impending loss.

In line with Spivak’s critique of the trope “white men saving brown women from brown men,”<sup>178</sup> the 2021 coverage suggests a new iteration of this logic. This time, the “saving” has failed or been abandoned, but the structural Orientalism remains. Afghan women are still frequently portrayed in relation to Western expectations: whether through their perceived need for rescue, or in terms of what their visibility, or lack thereof, says about the legitimacy of the Taliban or the legacy of U.S. intervention. As such, the question is not only whether Afghan women are heard, but on what terms their voices are included, and to what end.

In conclusion, 2021 media coverage reflects a more complex and often contradictory portrayal of Afghan women. Direct representation has increased significantly, both among women inside Afghanistan and in exile. Women are quoted, interviewed, and in some cases central to the narrative, signalling a break from the near-total silencing of 2001. Yet this increased visibility is always shadowed by the threat of renewed repression. The symbolic weight of the burqa, the recurrence of “silenced women” imagery, and the retrospective evocation of Taliban rule all suggest that this voice may again be lost. The result is a discourse in which Afghan women are no longer entirely silent, but remain on the verge of being silenced and still Othered and framed through Orientalist lenses, but now directly expressing the precariousness of their circumstances.

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<sup>176</sup> 2021-05.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*

### 6.3 Resistance Narratives

In contrast to the dominant portrayals of victimhood and silence, a different but also common theme found in the media coverage is Afghan women as figures of resistance. This chapter investigates how acts of defiance, ranging from attending school in secret to protesting in the streets, are depicted in U.S. media. While on the surface these stories offer an empowering counterpoint to stereotypical representations, they are often still framed through a Western gaze that positions resistance as exceptional or validates it only when it aligns with the liberal ideals pushed by the U.S. Such framing may inadvertently reproduce Orientalist assumptions by emphasising how these women diverge from the norm of their cultural context, thereby reasserting the very dichotomies the narratives appear to challenge. By critically analysing how resistance is portrayed, this chapter examines whether these narratives challenge or sustain existing power relations and explores how the figure of the “resisting woman” is used and evaluated by U.S. media sources. Even though it might yield less than other chapters in regards to Othering and Orientalist stereotyping, this narrative is deemed important to address, to go beyond the commonplace portrayal of Afghan women only as victims.

#### 6.3.1 Resistance Narratives in 2001 Media Discourse

In many instances, the media in 2001 highlighted forms of quiet defiance that occurred during Taliban rule. These acts were necessarily conducted in secrecy, yet are highlighted as courageous rebellions. Waldman refers to Soheila Helal as having waged “a quiet rebellion against the Taliban,”<sup>179</sup> reflecting how even subtle acts such as running underground schools or teaching daughters to read in private were commendable. These women are described as resilient, showing “crafty defiance”<sup>180</sup> and praised for asserting their agency within deeply repressive conditions: “Knowing they would be lashed, they went out alone anyway. Confined to their homes, many taught their daughters to read. They started secret schools or secured small concessions – permission to open a nursing school, for example – from the Taliban bureaucracy.”<sup>181</sup> However, this praise is often linked to how closely their actions align with the Western liberal feminist ideals of education, self-expression, and bodily autonomy, thereby positioning these women as ‘exceptional’ within their cultural context.

Despite the genuine courage displayed, the framing of such narratives often exoticises resistance by casting it as surprising or anomalous. As Abu-Lughod cautions, the “saving women”

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<sup>179</sup> 2001-02.

<sup>180</sup> 2001-09.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.



rhetoric common in U.S. discourses depends on depictions of the non-Western woman as oppressed but redeemable so long as she strives toward Western ideals.<sup>182</sup> In this sense, resistance is not purely celebrated on its own terms but becomes a vehicle for affirming the West's moral superiority and civilising mission. For example, one article notes that "today women showed off bruises and scars earned for going it alone or daring to speak in a government office."<sup>183</sup> These physical markers of suffering are used as proof of their resistance, making their pain visible and admirable to a Western audience.

The line between empowerment and exploitation becomes blurred in these portrayals. The stories elevate Afghan women's resilience, but they also commodify their suffering in order to legitimise U.S. involvement. As Mohanty argues, the construction of the "Third World woman" as a universal subject of oppression allows the West to position itself as the agent of rescue.<sup>184</sup> In this logic, Afghan women who resist are seen not only as brave but also as validating the liberal democratic ideals promoted by U.S. foreign policy.

Importantly, the analysis of media discourse shows a clear distinction between acceptable and unacceptable forms of resistance. Women who express a desire for Western-style education, freedom of movement, and public visibility are celebrated. One girl interviewed said, "I want to go to university and travel to America. We want to be free."<sup>185</sup> This direct articulation of Western aspirations positions her as an ideal subject: empowered, modern, and aligned with the U.S. vision for Afghanistan. Similarly, articles describing women removing their burqas, wearing sandals, or speaking freely after the Taliban's fall are saturated with symbolism. "The women throw back their burkas from their faces and chat in the sunshine,"<sup>186</sup> while "many had come in sandals, which were forbidden under the Taliban, and during the meeting they lifted their burkas to show their faces."<sup>187</sup> These moments reinforce the narrative of "liberation" through the embrace of visible, liberal modernity.

By contrast, women who do not conform to these ideals are portrayed in more ambiguous or traditional terms, not necessarily weak, but not elevated as symbolic figures of resistance. Their lack of overt defiance renders them less visible in the media's construction of progress. This binary framing risks reinforcing Spivak's saving brown women critique.<sup>188</sup> The empowered, resisting

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<sup>182</sup> Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*

<sup>183</sup> 2001-02.

<sup>184</sup> Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes*.

<sup>185</sup> 2001-08.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> 2001-03.

<sup>188</sup> Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*

woman is constructed as “good,” not just because she is resisting, but because she is resisting in a way that fits Western expectations.

This dichotomy becomes especially apparent in portrayals of Afghan women returning to public life after the Taliban’s fall. Articles describe them taking on roles as teachers, security guards, and protesters. “They were not just back – they were better,”<sup>189</sup> one journalist proclaimed, suggesting both rebirth and improvement through contact with Western ideals. Such statements, while celebratory, implicitly contrast the repressive “before” with a liberated “after” facilitated by U.S. intervention, thus reinforcing colonial narratives of progress.

While some articles grapple with the complexity of these transitions, including the potential backlash against overtly Western gender reforms, such nuances are rare. A cautionary note appeared in one article: “If we push the gender agenda too blatantly, and we push it too forcefully, not only will Afghans define their attitudes toward gender in defiance of the Taliban but also in defiance of the West.”<sup>190</sup> This admission reflects the fragile balancing act between supporting local agency and imposing external norms, though the broader discourse rarely interrogates this tension deeply.

Resistance from the diaspora by Afghan women living in exile who spoke out for their compatriots are also frequently highlighted. These figures often acted as intermediaries between Western policymakers and Afghan women on the ground. They are portrayed as vital conduits, possessing both local knowledge and knowledge of Western ways. Yet even this positioning reveals an embedded hierarchy: diasporic women are given voice partly because they can frame resistance in familiar, liberal terms. Their proximity to Western modes of discourse affords them legitimacy that local women may lack.

Moreover, the portrayal of resistance as something needing validation from Western observers undercuts its local political meaning. Instead of being framed as rooted in Afghan histories of feminist struggle or grassroots activism, resistance is often seen as heroic precisely because it deviates from the presumed norms of Afghan culture. This perpetuates Orientalist assumptions that such resistance is anomalous, even unnatural, in Afghan society. In doing so, it reaffirms a view of Afghan culture as inherently patriarchal and static, needing rescue from within, but also from afar.

Despite these issues, it is important to acknowledge that the media coverage does, in many cases, provide visibility to voices that had long been silenced, as previously discussed in [Chapter 6.2](#). Stories of women who risked their lives to teach girls or who protested for inclusion in political

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<sup>189</sup> 2001-09.

<sup>190</sup> 2001-06.

life are powerful reminders of agency under oppression. “The women vowed to march again early next week and said they would one day become powerful voices in Afghan society.”<sup>191</sup> Yet even here, these women are valorised precisely because they align with the vision the U.S. has for Afghanistan: a democratic nation with gender equality grounded in Western liberalism.

In conclusion, the 2001 resistance narratives in U.S. media construct Afghan women as brave and capable, but only insofar as they conform to Western ideals of feminism and modernity. Resistance is celebrated, but its framing often remains Orientalist, depicting Afghan women as exceptions in a backward society, rather than as agents within complex cultural and political contexts. As such, these narratives simultaneously highlight female agency while reinscribing imperial logics of cultural superiority, aligning with Mohanty’s critique of the universal oppressed woman and Spivak’s call to question who truly speaks – and for whom.

### 6.3.2 Resistance Narratives in 2021 Media Discourse

While resistance narratives occupy a prominent place in the 2001 media discourse, often portrayed through a Western gaze as heroic acts of transgression against a barbaric regime, by 2021 the tone had notably shifted. As the United States prepared to withdraw from Afghanistan and the Taliban rapidly reclaimed power, U.S. media coverage reflects a growing sense of resignation and loss. Resistance, although still present, is no longer foregrounded in the same celebratory tone. Instead, it is depicted as muted, melancholic, and at times futile, which is a reflection not only of worsening political conditions but also of the perceived collapse of a two-decade-long liberal feminist project.

The contrast with 2001 is stark. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11 and the fall of the Taliban, Afghan women who resisted were lionised, symbolising both the injustice of the Taliban regime and the promise of U.S.-backed liberation. By 2021, however, despair is noticeable in resistance narratives. A former official lamented, “The day the Taliban took control, I was thinking: This is the end of life for women.”<sup>192</sup> Such statements reflect the tone of media coverage in this period. Where empowerment was once the dominant tone, now there is grief, fear, and deep uncertainty.

Some women still resisted, but their defiance is presented as subdued and cautious. Rubin highlights Mahbouba Seraj, an activist who also runs a safe house for women, who chose to stay in Kabul even as the Taliban regained power. “She has not fled, or closed its [the safe house’s]

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<sup>191</sup> 2001-03.

<sup>192</sup> 2021-06.

doors, but she is keeping a low profile and calibrating what she says to the news media,”<sup>193</sup> the article notes. “When some Taliban recently came to her office saying that the women were being kept against their will, Mahbouba said she did not let them in, but went outside to talk with them.”<sup>194</sup> This depiction emphasises strategic resistance through negotiating power without direct confrontation. Mahbouba is portrayed as brave, but the cautious tone signals the dramatic change in stakes from the early 2000s.

Indeed, where 2001 narratives celebrated symbolic gestures like removing the burqa or teaching girls in secret, 2021 narratives reflect existential threats. The story of Nadima Sahar, a high-ranking education official, illustrates this shift. Initially committed to staying in Kabul, she ultimately fled, fearing imprisonment or death. “We truly have lost everything,”<sup>195</sup> she said, but also explained her motivation behind wanting to return in Afghanistan: ‘That’s like giving up on everything you believe [...] I would like to go there to contribute in whatever capacity that I can, even if it means being there as a voice of dissent.’<sup>196</sup> Her story combines deep loss with lingering defiance, yet the focus lies more on survival than on transformation.

Women who did remain in Afghanistan were often shown battling bureaucratic exclusion and social erasure. One article notes that the director of a girls’ school in Kabul could not attend education planning meetings because “they are for men only.”<sup>197</sup> This highlights a return to gendered exclusion, echoing the policies of the first Taliban regime. Yet, unlike in 2001, these accounts no longer carry a hopeful undertone of impending change, but instead document a grim reality.

Even visible acts of public protest, such as the street demonstrations following the Taliban’s takeover, were narrated with an air of inevitability and danger. “Hours before the acting government was announced, hundreds of Afghans, women among them, took to the streets to peacefully demand that their rights be respected under their new leaders.”<sup>198</sup> While this could be read as evidence of enduring resistance, the language used (“peacefully demand”) suggests a fragility, a quiet plea rather than a revolutionary stance.

The shift in tone also affects the construction of agency in resistance narratives. In 2001, resistance was typically framed as a heroic embrace of Western ideals, such as freedom and education, and those who resisted were embraced for aligning with the U.S. mission. By 2021,

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<sup>193</sup> 2021-03.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Madeleine Ngo, “‘We Truly Have Lost Everything’: A Journey out of Kabul the Day It Fell,” *The New York Times*, September 10, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/10/us/politics/afghan-taliban-escape.html?searchResultPosition=327>. Henceforth referred to as **2021-04**.

<sup>196</sup> 2021-04.

<sup>197</sup> 2021-06.

<sup>198</sup> 2021-05.

however, the narrative has become less about aspirational futures and more about trauma and survival. “She is still in a state of shock. ‘I can’t concentrate in my studies,’ she said. ‘When we think about our future, we can’t see anything.’”<sup>199</sup> This bleak image of a once-hopeful youth captures the mood of 2021 reporting: even the resisting woman is marked by loss, fear, and exhaustion.

Nevertheless, some women continued to occupy prominent roles, even under threat. Female judges and lawyers, symbols of legal and institutional resistance, are depicted as especially vulnerable. “Among those now in hiding are former lawyers and judges who defended abused women or pursued cases against men accused of beating, kidnapping or raping women and girls.”<sup>200</sup> These women are shown as defiant in their former roles, but are now hunted. Their resistance is framed not as triumphant, but tragic – courageous but crushed.

This framing raises important questions about the role of Orientalism in shaping resistance narratives. As discussed in [Chapter 6.1](#), even perceived positive representations of Afghan women can reinscribe the logic of Othering. The 2021 coverage, though less triumphalist than in 2001, still tends to depict resistance through a Western liberal lens. Women’s value is often measured by their alignment with norms of education, professionalism, and legal rights, what Mohanty critiques as the homogenising “Western feminist” gaze.<sup>201</sup> The assumption remains that progress is linear and Western-defined, and that resistance must mirror this trajectory to be recognised as valid.

What differs, however, is that by 2021, the idea that Afghanistan could be reformed through Western intervention had largely collapsed. As such, narratives of resistance lost their earlier rhetorical function as evidence of successful “liberation.” Instead, they now serve to document failure. The women who once stood as symbols of transformation are now symbols of abandonment. This melancholy undercurrent has implications for the Orientalist gaze itself. Without the illusion of Western rescue, the image of the Afghan woman becomes even more tragic. She is resistant, but ultimately defeated by forces she cannot control.

This raises an important theoretical point: has the withdrawal of Western power altered the structure of Orientalist representation? In the absence of a civilising mission, does the media resort to nostalgia for a time when Afghan women could be imagined as progressing toward Western norms? Some articles do gesture towards this, noting that “women joined the military and the police, and held political office [...] all things that were nearly impossible at the turn of the century.

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<sup>199</sup> 2021-06.

<sup>200</sup> 2021-07.

<sup>201</sup> Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes*.

But many of those women [...] have fled the country.”<sup>202</sup> Such retrospectives construct a golden age of modernisation, now lost to regression: a narrative arc that reifies the West as a source of progress, and the Taliban as its antithesis.

In conclusion, resistance narratives in the 2021 U.S. media are less frequent, more subdued, and profoundly shaped by a context of defeat. Where 2001 narratives often aligned Afghan women with the liberal ideals of the West and framed them as victorious agents of change, 2021 stories are marked by loss, despair, and survival. The women who continue to resist do so under immense threat, and their portrayals, while sympathetic, continue to reflect an Orientalist gaze that validates resistance when it aligns with Western expectations. As U.S. involvement in Afghanistan recedes, the role of resistance in media discourse shifts, from emblem of liberation to eulogy for a failed intervention.

## 6.4 Reflection and Outcomes

The analysis has revealed that U.S. media representations of Afghan women are deeply entwined with practices of Othering and Orientalist stereotyping. However, these are not always static; they take on different expressions depending on historical and political context. Across both 2001 and 2021, Afghan women are largely framed within binaries that position the West as progressive, rational, and liberating, and the East, especially under Taliban rule, as regressive, violent, and patriarchal. However, within these dominant patterns, there are also instances of nuance and disruption. These moments are significant as they complicate the idea of a uniform media narrative and highlight the tensions between political narratives, journalistic practice, and representational choices.

As pertinent to CDA, power relations have been found to be embedded at every level of these portrayals. Media representations tend to uphold the U.S. as the normative centre of authority and modernity, casting Afghan women as the symbolic beneficiaries of Western action. In 2001, the narratives predominantly framed these women as oppressed figures needing salvation, with the implication that the U.S. invasion was necessary to restore their rights and dignity. The power dynamic here is clear: Afghan women are given visibility only insofar as they can be integrated into a moral argument for military intervention. This dynamic is reproduced even in moments of apparent empathy or human interest, which frequently serve to evoke emotional responses from Western audiences without necessarily challenging the ideological foundations of interventionist policies.

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<sup>202</sup> 2021-05.

In 2021, the media's portrayal reflects the erosion of confidence in U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, but the core power relations remain. While more Afghan women are depicted as agents that are engaged in activism or governance, their stories are often infused with tones of helplessness and resignation. The withdrawal of U.S. forces is presented as giving up on these women, reinforcing a narrative that their safety and autonomy are relying on Western protection. Even in stories of resistance, the structural positioning of the West as saviour remains intact, albeit now cast in a regretful or melancholic light. The portrayal of female judges, civil servants, and activists in hiding or fleeing due to Taliban threats illustrates not only their bravery but also the perceived futility of their struggle without Western support.<sup>203</sup> This suggests that media narratives still convey the idea that Western involvement is a precondition for women's empowerment, perpetuating the asymmetrical power dynamic.

The usage of saving narratives within U.S. media is where Othering and Orientalist stereotyping intersect heavily. In 2001, these narratives are particularly pronounced, drawing on the symbolic power of the burqa, domestic confinement, and male violence to construct a moral crisis that necessitates external intervention. Articles invoke dramatic, dehumanising quotes such as "I would shoot her,"<sup>204</sup> not only to shock readers but also to implicitly legitimise U.S. efforts to modernise Afghan society. The figure of the Afghan woman becomes emblematic of everything the Taliban stands against (e.g., education, freedom, and Western values) thereby reducing individual experiences into a collective narrative of victimhood.

By 2021, saving narratives had become more subdued, though still discernible. Afghan women are frequently shown reflecting on the fragility of the rights they gained under the U.S.-backed regime, and the fear of losing everything as the Taliban resurged. Their resistance is often celebrated, but within a framework that reinforces the idea of their dependency on international actors. The statement "That's like giving up on everything you believe"<sup>205</sup> by Nadima Sahar, a fleeing official, encapsulates this sentiment: her desire to return as a "voice of dissent" is noble, but the underlying message is one of despair in the absence of Western support. Thus, the saving narrative shifts from one of active rescue to one of passive mourning, but the hierarchical relationship it implies remains largely intact.

Across the corpus of analysis, several recurring themes and tropes can be identified that align closely with classical Orientalist imagery. Binary thinking is omnipresent: women are either victims or heroines, silent or outspoken, free or enslaved. Rarely are they depicted as complex individuals shaped by a multitude of intersecting factors. Afghan women are often portrayed as a

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<sup>203</sup> E.g. 2021-02, 2021-07.

<sup>204</sup> 2001-07.

<sup>205</sup> 2021-04.



homogeneous group, defined primarily by their gender and religious-cultural context, with little attention to internal diversity or dissent. Even when their voices are included, it is typically those of exiled, Western-educated women that are foregrounded, thus reinforcing a hierarchy of credibility based on Western proximity.

Another significant trope is the rescue trope, which often positions the United States as the benevolent force restoring rights and humanity to Afghan women. In 2001, this was articulated through triumphalist narratives of liberation; in 2021, it manifests as regretful nostalgia. These shifts suggest an evolution in tone, but not necessarily in structure. The patronising gaze remains, even if the narrative register has changed. Importantly, these representations often sideline the role of Afghan women themselves in shaping their futures, presenting their fate as largely determined by male figures, whether Taliban militants or U.S. policymakers.

A comparison of the 2001 and 2021 discourses reveals both continuity and change. In 2001, the mood was one of assertive optimism. The U.S. media portrayed the intervention as a historical turning point, with Afghan women cast as its most visible beneficiaries. Resistance narratives were present but secondary, often used to underscore the transformative potential of Western involvement. By 2021, that optimism had eroded, replaced by a sense of inevitability and resignation. Women were now seen as empowered but abandoned, their gains seemingly insignificant under the looming Taliban threat. The resistance stories are more prominent, but they are laced with melancholy and exhaustion. This shift reflects the broader disillusionment with the outcomes of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, but it does not necessarily signal a break from Orientalist thinking. Rather, it suggests a reconfiguration in which the West still narrates Afghan women's stories, but now with a sense of loss rather than triumph.

These findings emerged from a CDA of selected U.S. media articles from *NYT*, grounded in a postcolonial feminist framework. This approach enabled a focus on the ideological functions of discourse, especially how gendered and racialised power operates through media narratives. By examining both language and context, the analysis highlighted how representations reinforce broader structures of Western dominance.

The insights from this analysis reaffirm the central hypothesis of this thesis: that U.S. media representations of Afghan women are shaped by intersecting practices of Othering and Orientalism, which endure even as narrative tones change.

It is worth noting, however, that the articles analysed are not entirely homogenous in their representations. Some pieces show increased awareness of power asymmetries and even critique U.S. policy failures, particularly in the 2021 dataset. Articles that include direct, diverse quotes from Afghan women or acknowledge the limits of external intervention hint at more reflexive

journalistic practices. These exceptions are important and suggest that while Orientalist logics persist, they are not unchallenged. Future research might explore how these moments of disruption could be amplified or sustained in long-term reporting.

In conclusion, this thesis has shown that U.S. media discourse continues to frame Afghan women within reductive binaries that support a broader narrative of Western supremacy. Despite increased visibility and changing global contexts, Afghan women are still largely written into the story as symbols – of oppression, of hope, of failed promises – rather than as autonomous subjects. Media representations remain shaped by structural inequalities, often serving political and ideological purposes under the guise of humanitarian concern. Ultimately, these findings contribute to broader debates in postcolonial feminist media studies and underscore the importance of critically interrogating the power embedded in discourse, particularly when it claims to speak for those it depicts.

## 7. Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how U.S. media representations of Afghan women intersect with processes of Othering and Orientalist stereotyping, particularly at two pivotal moments: the U.S. invasion in 2001 and the withdrawal in 2021. Through CDA of selected articles from *The New York Times* and guided by a postcolonial feminist framework, the study explored how language, power, and ideology interact in the construction of Afghan womanhood in the Western media.

The research revealed that U.S. media narratives reproduce binary framings, positioning the West as liberator and the East, particularly under Taliban rule, as oppressive. Afghan women are frequently depicted either as voiceless victims requiring salvation or as brave exceptions confirming Western ideals of freedom. These representations persist across both timeframes, albeit with shifts in tone: where 2001 coverage was marked by moral urgency and triumphalism, 2021 coverage reflects nostalgia, regret, and disillusionment. Yet, the underlying power relations remain intact. The symbolic function of Afghan women, as justification for intervention or as a measure of its failure, has changed in sentiment but not in structure.

This thesis also found that practices of Othering and Orientalist stereotyping are deeply entangled. Representations of Afghan women are shaped not only by gendered tropes but also by binaries that cast the West as modern and moral, and the non-West as backward and in need of transformation. Importantly, the analysis also found moments of non-conformity, where articles challenged dominant frames by foregrounding Afghan women's agency, criticising U.S. policy, or

providing more nuanced context. These instances, while limited, demonstrate the potential for alternative representations.

The analysis was conducted through a close reading of media texts using Fairclough's model of CDA, combined with a postcolonial feminist lens. This methodological approach was key to unpacking the ideological work performed by language, particularly how media discourse contributes to sustaining or contesting asymmetrical power relations. To briefly revisit the roadmap of this thesis: [Chapters 2](#) and [3](#) provided the previous literature on the subject and the historical foundation; [Chapter 4](#) presented the theoretical framework; [Chapter 5](#) discussed the methodology; [Chapter 6](#) delivered the core analysis, split into three dominant themes and culminating in a reflection.

The implications of this thesis suggest that even sympathetic or seemingly progressive coverage can reproduce structures of structural domination. The act of representing Afghan women through a Western gaze, especially in moral or sentimental terms, often silences the women it seeks to empower. This aligns with long-standing critiques in postcolonial feminist theory, which warns against the instrumentalisation of gender narratives for imperial ends.

At the time of writing, women's rights in Afghanistan have been drastically curtailed since the Taliban's return to power in 2021. Restrictions on education, employment, mobility, and public visibility have intensified, making the stakes of representation even higher. Yet, U.S. media coverage, while more sporadic, continues to frame Afghan women primarily in terms of what they have lost under Taliban rule, often neglecting the enduring local forms of resistance or structural causes of this repression, including the aftereffects of foreign occupation.

There are limitations to this thesis. Due to constraints of time and scope, the analysis focused on a relatively small sample of articles from one major U.S. outlet. While this selection was strategic in targeting influential narratives and choosing a source that other outlets frequently choose to imitate,<sup>206</sup> it does not encompass the full range of Western media discourse. Additionally, while the CDA approach allowed for a deep ideological reading, it cannot capture audience reception or the intent of journalists. Future research could extend this work by including a wider array of media sources, including regional, non-English, or alternative outlets, and by incorporating audience analysis or interviews with journalists to understand how such narratives are constructed.

Overall, this thesis has shown that media portrayals of Afghan women remain constrained by enduring Orientalist assumptions and gendered hierarchies. These narratives, even when well-meaning, often reproduce the same power structures they mean to challenge. As long as the West

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<sup>206</sup> Atkinson et al., "Measuring the Media Agenda".

continues to cast itself as the guardian of women's rights abroad, its representations will risk instrumentalising those women for geopolitical ends.

The findings call for greater reflexivity in media production and consumption. Journalists and editors must be aware of how framing choices reinforce dominant ideologies, and more space must be created for Afghan women to speak for themselves and on their own terms. Only then can media begin to move beyond the saviour-victim binary and support more just and inclusive forms of representation.

## 8. Bibliography

### 8.1 Primary Literature

For ease of reference, this section has been arranged by the reference codes given to the articles of the analysis, rather than alphabetically.

| Code    | Bibliographical Reference of Source                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|---------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2001-01 | Rohde, David. "A NATION CHALLENGED: REBEL REGION; Education Offers Women in Northern Afghanistan a Ray of Hope." <i>The New York Times</i> , October 3, 2001.<br><a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/03/world/nation-challenged-rebel-region-education-offers-women-northern-afghanistan-ray.html?searchResultPosition=66">https://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/03/world/nation-challenged-rebel-region-education-offers-women-northern-afghanistan-ray.html?searchResultPosition=66</a> . |
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