

Rewriting Afghanistan: Postcolonial Representations, Media Power, and the Marginalization of Afghan Voices

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ABSTRACT

Afghanistan is frequently portrayed in global discourse through highly selective narratives that emphasize war, extremism, and gender oppression. These portrayals are shaped by Orientalist frameworks, geopolitical interests, and media routines that prioritize crisis-driven storytelling. As a result, Afghanistan's cultural diversity, historical complexity, and social resilience often remain absent from international representations. This article examines how such reductive narratives are constructed, reinforced, and circulated across media, academic, and political contexts. Drawing on postcolonial theory, discourse analysis, and autoethnographic reflection, the study analyzes the ways in which global media shape hetero-stereotypes of Afghanistan while overlooking everyday life, cultural continuity, and local agency. The analysis also considers how media exaggeration and simplification contribute to a narrow global imagination of Afghanistan. By bringing Afghan perspectives into the discussion, the article challenges dominant discourses and calls for more balanced, ethical, and contextually informed representations. The findings highlight the importance of recognizing Afghanistan as a complex and dynamic society rather than a static symbol of crisis.

Keywords: Afghanistan, media representation, Hetero-stereotypes, Orientalism, postcolonial studies, Framing, Marginalization, Afghan voices, intercultural communication, discourse analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan occupies a highly contested position in global discourse. Despite its deep cultural history, strategic geopolitical location, and diverse social fabric, the country is predominantly represented through a narrow set of themes such as war, extremism, gender oppression, and humanitarian crisis. These depictions constitute heterostereotypes, which are identity constructs imposed by external observers rather than narratives generated by Afghans themselves (Hall, 1997). Such images obscure the country's internal diversity and reduce a complex society to simplified symbols that circulate widely in international media, political rhetoric, and humanitarian narratives.

These reductive portrayals do not emerge accidentally. They are reinforced through media systems shaped by selective reporting practices, geopolitical agendas, and historically embedded Orientalist frameworks (Said, 1979). Over several decades, these factors have created a discursive environment in which Afghanistan is repeatedly framed as a site of crisis. During an intercultural academic exchange, for example, the author observed that students from another country constructed Afghanistan almost entirely through media-derived narratives. Although they acknowledged positive traits such as hospitality and generosity, their presentations overwhelmingly emphasized extremism, patriarchal control, and violence. These perceptions reflect dominant discursive patterns rather than nuanced cultural or historical understanding.

Existing scholarship demonstrates that Afghanistan's representation cannot be separated from its geopolitical entanglements. The Soviet invasion, the United States led intervention beginning in 2001, and decades of proxy warfare have shaped the narratives through which Afghanistan is understood (Rubin, 2002; Ibrahim, 2017). Western media described Afghan resistance fighters as "freedom fighters" during the Cold War, yet used the term "terrorists" for similar actors two decades later. This shift reveals the political nature of representation and shows how global narratives adapt to foreign policy priorities rather than cultural or historical analysis (Said, 1997).

This article examines how such narratives are produced, circulated, and sustained within global media and academic contexts. Through discourse analysis, autoethnographic reflection, and comparative historical inquiry, it explores the political motivations, structural pressures, and epistemic hierarchies that shape Afghanistan's global image. At the same time, the analysis highlights Afghan cultural resilience as an essential counternarrative, one that challenges reductive portrayals by foregrounding the agency, creativity, and diversity of Afghan communities. By centering Afghan perspectives and situating representation within broader postcolonial and geopolitical dynamics, the study contributes to more balanced, ethical, and informed understandings of Afghanistan in global discourse.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The representation of Afghanistan in global discourse has been shaped by a long history of geopolitical conflict, foreign intervention, and media framing. Scholars across postcolonial studies, communication theory, and political anthropology have shown that Afghanistan's image in international contexts is not produced through neutral observation. Instead, it emerges from historically embedded frameworks that simplify complex societies into recognizable narratives (Said, 1979; Hall, 1997).

Research in postcolonial theory demonstrates that representations of the Global South are often structured through binaries such as modern versus traditional or civilized versus primitive. These binaries reinforce hierarchical worldviews and position Western societies as authoritative interpreters of non-Western cultures. Afghanistan has repeatedly been situated within this framework, particularly during the Cold War, the post-2001 intervention, and the subsequent humanitarian crisis reporting. Scholars argue that this legacy shapes how media outlets select, frame, and circulate stories about the country (Rubin, 2002; Ibrahimi, 2017).

Media studies further highlight that global news systems rely on routines that privilege events of conflict, crisis, and political instability. As a result, countries experiencing geopolitical tension are often reduced to singular themes that overshadow cultural diversity and local agency. Coverage of Afghanistan frequently fits this pattern, emphasizing violence, extremism, and gender repression while overlooking variations in everyday life, regional differences, and community resilience (Nacos, 2016; Sontag, 2003).

Studies on representation and discourse also show that global narratives become repeatedly recycled until they form a dominant interpretive frame. This process contributes to the creation of hetero-stereotypes that shape how international audiences imagine Afghanistan. Even when conditions change, these stereotypes remain influential because they are embedded in political rhetoric, historical memory, and media storytelling conventions (Fairclough, 1995; Mirzoeff, 2011).

Although existing research offers valuable insights into how Afghanistan is portrayed, significant gaps remain. Few studies incorporate Afghan voices directly, and many analyses are produced from external perspectives. Moreover, limited attention has been given to how contemporary media exaggeration, simplification, or selective focus contribute to the reproduction of outdated or incomplete images. Little research also examines the cultural resilience and everyday realities of Afghan society that complicate dominant crisis-oriented portrayals.

This literature review highlights the need for a more balanced approach that recognizes both structural forces shaping representation and the lived experiences of Afghans. Addressing this gap is essential for developing more ethical and accurate understandings of Afghanistan within global discourse.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design that integrates discourse analysis, autoethnographic reflection, and historical contextualization. These approaches are well suited for examining how Afghanistan is represented within global media and academic discourse, since they allow for a close examination of language, power, experience, and historical framing.

Discourse analysis is used to explore how linguistic and symbolic structures shape dominant narratives about Afghanistan. This approach makes it possible to analyze how media outlets and academic sources construct

hetero-stereotypes, frame geopolitical events, and reinforce simplified images of Afghan society. The method is particularly appropriate for investigating the relationship between representation, power, and ideology.

Autoethnographic reflection adds an experiential dimension to the analysis. As an Afghan student participating in an international academic exchange, the author observed how peers interpreted Afghanistan through media influenced narratives. These reflections are included not as subjective anecdotes but as analytical data that reveal how global discourses shape intercultural perception. Autoethnography provides insight into how externally produced representations affect real intercultural encounters.

Historical contextualization is necessary for understanding how long-standing geopolitical dynamics influence contemporary narratives. Afghanistan's representation cannot be separated from events such as the Soviet invasion, the Cold War, the post-2001 intervention, and the global war on terror. Placing discourse within its historical context highlights how political priorities shape the evolution of media and scholarly portrayals.

Together, these methods provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing how Afghanistan's image is constructed, circulated, and maintained in global discourse. The combination of textual analysis, lived experience, and historical inquiry allows for a balanced and multidimensional understanding of representation that foregrounds Afghan perspectives while critically examining external narratives.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in postcolonial theory, representation studies, and media framing, which together provide a lens for understanding how Afghanistan's global image is constructed and reproduced. Postcolonial theory, particularly the work of Edward Said, explains how knowledge about non-Western societies is shaped through asymmetrical power relations. Said's concept of Orientalism describes the process through which cultures are positioned as "other," "dangerous," or "backward," enabling simplified interpretations that align with political and ideological interests. This framework is central to analyzing how Afghanistan has been represented across different historical periods.

Representation theory further clarifies how meaning is produced and circulated through language, images, and discourse. According to Hall (1997), representation is not a mirror of reality but a system of meaning shaped by cultural assumptions, social power, and institutional practices. When applied to Afghanistan, this perspective highlights how narratives of war, extremism, and crisis become dominant interpretive frames that overshadow cultural diversity, everyday life, and local agency.

Media framing theory adds another layer to this analysis by explaining how news organizations select, highlight, and structure information in ways that shape public perception. Major international outlets often prioritize stories that align with established frames of conflict or instability. This tendency does not necessarily indicate intentional distortion but reflects broader journalistic routines and pressures that privilege dramatic, urgent, or easily recognizable narratives. Applying framing theory allows the study to examine how certain portrayals of Afghanistan become normalized while others remain marginalized or invisible.

Bringing these perspectives together creates an analytical framework that connects global power structures, media practices, and cultural interpretation. Postcolonial theory explains why certain images of Afghanistan emerge, representation theory clarifies how these images acquire meaning, and framing theory shows how they are circulated and sustained in public discourse. This combined framework supports a critical examination of the dominant narratives that shape global understanding of Afghanistan and offers a foundation for foregrounding Afghan perspectives and lived realities.

Analysis

The findings indicate that global representations of Afghanistan continue to be shaped by long-standing discursive patterns that frame the country through crisis-oriented narratives. These narratives appear not only in media reporting but also in academic settings, where students and scholars often draw upon familiar images of war, extremism, and gender oppression. During the intercultural exchange that informed part of this study, participants relied heavily on these narratives when discussing Afghanistan, which demonstrates how deeply embedded these portrayals are in collective imagination. Their interpretations reflected media influence more than first-hand cultural understanding, reinforcing the idea that representations of Afghanistan are constructed externally rather than derived from local perspectives.

Analysis of contemporary media sources shows that international outlets frequently prioritize events that align with existing frames of instability. Coverage often focuses on political repression, women's restrictions, or acts of violence, while offering limited attention to regional diversity, community resilience, or everyday social life. Although such reports capture important aspects of the current situation, they tend to present conditions as uniformly extreme, without acknowledging variation between different provinces or communities. This pattern contributes to the perception of Afghanistan as a society defined solely by crisis.

The analysis also reveals how historical geopolitics continue to shape current representations. Narratives that developed during the Cold War and the post-2001 intervention still influence how media and academic discourse frame Afghanistan. These narratives often position the country within binary categories such as modern versus traditional or civilized versus chaotic. By repeating these contrasts, global discourse reinforces a simplified picture that overlooks Afghanistan's complex internal dynamics, including cultural traditions, education efforts, local governance, and forms of social cooperation that persist despite political challenges.

Furthermore, the analysis highlights the absence of Afghan voices in dominant global narratives. International reporting seldom includes perspectives from ordinary Afghans or acknowledges the agency exercised in everyday life. Women, in particular, are frequently depicted as passive victims of oppression, even though their lived experiences vary widely across regions, communities, and social contexts. This omission contributes to a one-dimensional portrayal that ignores the nuanced ways Afghan individuals navigate constraints, create opportunities, and preserve cultural values.

Taken together, the findings indicate that Afghanistan's global image is shaped by selective attention, structural media routines, and historical political interests. These discursive forces reinforce reductive portrayals that fail to capture the full spectrum of Afghan social reality. The analysis underscores the need for a more balanced and contextually informed approach that considers both the challenges facing Afghan society and the everyday resilience, cultural continuity, and local agency that remain largely absent from global representations.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that Afghanistan's global representation continues to be shaped by selective narratives that emphasize crisis while marginalizing cultural diversity and local agency. These representations mirror long-standing Orientalist patterns in which non-Western societies are interpreted through established lenses rather than contextually grounded understanding. The intercultural exchange described earlier illustrates how deeply these narratives inform the perceptions of individuals who have never directly engaged with Afghan society. Their interpretations relied on images of extremism, gender oppression, and instability, which shows how powerful media-produced discourses are in shaping global imagination.

Media Simplification and Exaggeration

Although international news organizations play an important role in documenting human rights concerns, their coverage is shaped by selective focus and journalistic pressures that prioritize dramatic stories. Major outlets such as the BBC, CNN, and Reuters frequently foreground narratives of oppression, political violence, and humanitarian crisis. These issues are important, yet the emphasis often overshadows regional diversity, local adaptation, and everyday social life. Reports on women's restrictions or media censorship are sometimes presented as uniformly extreme across all regions, even though lived experiences vary significantly. This tendency reflects structural routines within global journalism, including the need for rapid updates and compelling headlines, which can unintentionally reinforce reductive portrayals. As a result, Afghanistan often appears in global discourse through a narrow lens of crisis while its social complexity remains underrepresented.

Cultural Resilience and Everyday Realities

Balanced representation requires acknowledging not only Afghanistan's difficulties but also the cultural resilience that characterizes everyday life. Despite political uncertainty, Afghans continue to maintain social continuity through traditions, education efforts, community support networks, and cultural practices that persist across generations. Families celebrate cultural events, pursue learning opportunities, and engage in community problem-solving even in the face of restrictions. Afghan women and men frequently find ways to negotiate their circumstances, exercise agency, and sustain cultural values in private, communal, and professional

settings. These everyday realities are essential for understanding Afghanistan beyond the crisis-focused narratives that dominate global media. Recognizing resilience does not minimize existing challenges but offers a more accurate and multidimensional understanding of Afghan society.

Historical Continuity and Discursive Persistence

The persistence of crisis-oriented narratives is partly explained by historical continuity. Representations established during the Cold War and the post-2001 intervention continue to inform contemporary discourse. These narratives positioned Afghanistan within binary oppositions such as modern versus traditional or stable versus chaotic. Their recurrence in media, policy debates, and academic settings demonstrates how global narratives often adapt to political priorities rather than changes within Afghan society. The continued reliance on these frameworks reinforces stereotypes, reduces interpretive complexity, and makes it difficult for alternative narratives to gain visibility.

Absence of Afghan Voices

Another significant factor shaping Afghanistan's global representation is the limited inclusion of Afghan voices in international discourse. Media coverage often quotes officials, analysts, or international institutions rather than ordinary Afghans. Women are frequently portrayed as passive victims without acknowledging the diversity of their experiences and strategies of resilience. As a result, the global narrative remains externally constructed, with minimal attention to local perspectives, internal debates, or cultural nuance. This exclusion contributes to hetero-stereotypes that fail to capture the realities of Afghan life and ignore the interpretive authority of Afghans themselves.

Implications for Intercultural Understanding

The dominance of selective and crisis-oriented narratives has direct implications for intercultural communication. When individuals rely solely on media-produced images, they develop incomplete or inaccurate assumptions that influence interactions with Afghans in educational, professional, and international contexts. The findings of this study underscore the need for more ethically grounded representations that highlight Afghan perspectives, acknowledge cultural complexity, and avoid reducing a diverse society to a static symbol of crisis. A more balanced approach can contribute to meaningful intercultural understanding and challenge the epistemic hierarchies that determine who has the authority to speak about Afghanistan.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Implications

The findings of this study have several important implications for media studies, intercultural communication, and postcolonial scholarship. First, they demonstrate that global representations of Afghanistan continue to be shaped by crisis-focused narratives that obscure cultural complexity and everyday life. This reinforces the need for scholars and practitioners in intercultural communication to examine how such representations influence perceptions, interactions, and expectations in international academic and professional contexts. When individuals rely on simplified media images, their intercultural understanding becomes limited, which can affect communication quality and cross-cultural engagement.

Second, the study highlights the role of structural media routines in sustaining reductive portrayals. This suggests that media literacy should become an essential component of intercultural education, particularly for those working with international communities or studying global cultures. Understanding how news framing operates helps individuals critically evaluate dominant narratives and recognize the difference between representation and lived reality.

Third, the findings have significant implications for postcolonial scholarship. They show that Orientalist patterns remain present in contemporary coverage, demonstrating the ongoing relevance of postcolonial theory for analyzing twenty-first-century media. The absence of Afghan voices in global narratives also underscores the need for research that foregrounds perspectives from within marginalized contexts rather than relying solely on external interpretations. Recognizing Afghan agency and resilience challenges the assumption that

non Western societies are passive recipients of global forces and highlights the value of insider contributions to knowledge production.

Finally, the study suggests that more balanced representations can influence intercultural understanding by fostering empathy, reducing stereotyping, and encouraging nuanced engagement. A more accurate portrayal of Afghanistan has the potential to support constructive cultural dialogue, policy formation, and international cooperation.

Recommendations

Based on the implications above, several recommendations can be made for researchers, media professionals, educators, and institutions involved in global communication.

First, researchers should prioritize studies that center Afghan voices and experiences, including work produced by Afghan scholars, journalists, and community members. Future research should explore regional differences, everyday resilience, and cultural practices that challenge dominant narratives. Comparative studies examining how different media systems represent Afghanistan could also provide deeper insight into discursive variation.

Second, media organizations should adopt more context-sensitive reporting practices. This includes incorporating local perspectives, acknowledging regional diversity, and avoiding generalizations that present Afghanistan as a uniform site of crisis. Providing more balanced coverage that includes cultural, social, and educational developments would contribute to more accurate global understanding.

Third, educators in intercultural communication should integrate media literacy components into their teaching. Encouraging students to question dominant narratives, evaluate sources critically, and recognize framing techniques can reduce stereotyping and support more informed global engagement. Educational programs should also include direct cultural materials from Afghanistan, such as literature, documentaries, and testimonies from Afghan communities.

Fourth, international institutions and policymakers should consider the role of representation when designing programs related to Afghanistan. Policies informed by incomplete or crisis-focused narratives may fail to address local needs or engage with Afghan communities effectively. A greater emphasis on consultation, local knowledge, and cultural nuance can lead to more effective and respectful interventions.

Finally, scholars and practitioners should work toward creating platforms where Afghan narratives can be expressed directly. Supporting academic exchanges, cultural initiatives, and collaborative research with Afghan experts can shift global discourse toward more ethical and accurate representations.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Afghanistan is represented within global discourse and how these representations shape intercultural understanding. The analysis showed that dominant narratives continue to rely on selective, crisis-oriented frames rooted in historical geopolitical dynamics and long-standing Orientalist assumptions. These narratives prioritize images of war, extremism, and gender oppression, which overshadow the diversity, cultural depth, and everyday resilience that characterize Afghan society. Media routines, geopolitical interests, and interpretive traditions contribute to the persistence of these reductive portrayals, while Afghan voices remain significantly underrepresented in global conversations.

At the same time, the study revealed the importance of recognizing the complexity and dynamism of Afghan social life. Daily practices, cultural traditions, community cooperation, and individual strategies of resilience form essential parts of Afghanistan's reality, even when these aspects receive limited international attention. Acknowledging these dimensions does not dismiss existing challenges but offers a more accurate understanding of a society that continues to adapt and endure despite political instability.

The findings underscore the need for more balanced and ethically responsible representations of Afghanistan in media, academic work, and intercultural exchange. Incorporating Afghan perspectives, highlighting regional variation, and avoiding simplified crisis narratives can contribute to more informed and respectful global

engagement. This study provides a foundation for rethinking dominant narratives and encourages future research that centers Afghan voices, explores under-represented cultural and social dimensions, and examines how more nuanced portrayals can strengthen intercultural communication. Recognizing Afghanistan as a complex and evolving society is essential for moving beyond stereotypes and supporting fairer, more contextually grounded global narratives.

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