

The Case of Afghanistan

Gender & Politics

Meena Masood
Queen Mary, University of London



Learning Objectives

- Identify how Afghan women have been represented.
- Critically investigate the racialised, gendered logics at play in representations of Afghan women.
- Identify to what extent, if any, recent representations constitute a break from historic ones.









Lecture Structure I

Part 1: Representations of Afghan Women and Girls

- Chadari
- Education
- Rescue



Lecture Structure II

Part 2: Examining Representations of Afghan Women and Girls

- Racialised Civilisational Imaginaries
- Obscure Agency
- Homogenise Afghan women
- Connections with Representations of Afghan men
- Reproduction of Representations by Afghans
- Connection of Freedom & Modernity with Clothing



Brief History

- 1800-1972: Monarchy & British Invasions
- 1973: Creation of the Presidency
- 1978: Control by Communists
- 1979-1989: Soviet-Afghan War
- 1989-1996: Civil War
- 1996: Taliban Takeover
- 2001-2021: US-led Invasion & Control of Afghanistan
- 2021: Taliban Takeover



Representations of Afghan Women & Girls

‘Women are imprisoned in their homes, and are denied access to basic health care and education’ - George W Bush, 2001

‘Life under the Taliban is so hard and repressive, even small displays of joy are outlawed. Children aren't allowed to fly kites. Their mothers face beatings for laughing out loud. Women cannot work outside the home or even leave their homes by themselves’ - Laura Bush, 2001



SEE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC EXPLORER EVERY SUNDAY ON NICKELODEON CABLE TV

Representations of Afghan Women: Chadari

‘In urban areas, the Taliban brutally enforced a dress code that required women to be covered under a burqa -- a voluminous, tent-like full-body outer garment that covers them from head to toe. One Anglo-Afghan journalist reported that the burqa's veil is so thick that the wearer finds it difficult to breathe; the small mesh panel permitted for seeing allows such limited vision that even crossing the street safely is difficult’ - U.S. Department of State, 2001



Representations of Afghan Women: Education

‘The withdrawal from Afghanistan by Western powers could be a disaster for girls’ education’ - Centre for Global Development, 2021

‘Most concerning is the intentional and vicious erasure of women and girls from public life by the Taliban, especially the ban on girls’ access to secondary education and the rapid deterioration of education quality across the country’ - Bush Centre, 2022



Rescuing Afghan Women & Girls

‘Because of our recent military gains, in much of Afghanistan women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment [...] The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women’ - Laura Bush, 2001



Racialised Civilisational Imaginaries

‘The only way to defeat terrorism as a threat to our way of life is to stop it, eliminate it, and destroy it where it grows [...] what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom’ - George W Bush, 2001

‘Twenty years building a civilised society ends in the return of these brutes’ - The Irish Times, 2021

‘We gave Afghan women a glimpse of freedom. Now we MUST save them from the Taliban's medieval maniacs’ - Mail On Sunday, 2021



Can Afghan Women be Heard?

‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ - Spivak, 1988

‘Thanks to the courage and bravery of America's military and our allies, hope is being restored to many women and families in much of Afghanistan’ - Hilary Clinton, 2001



Saving Afghan Women From Afghan Men: Representations of Afghan Men

‘In many parts of Afghanistan, displays of aggression and intimidation represent a rite of passage for adolescent boys and a symbol of manhood for men’ - United States Institute of Peace, 2018



Reproduction of Imaginaries by Afghans

‘The question now is why any Afghanistanis would put their faith in western values, if to do so is to put their lives at risk as the country slides back into conflict. A generation saw Britain and the West as a beacon of hope. They have been abandoned to the Taliban’ - Telegraph, 2021



What Does Freedom & Modernity Look Like?

‘Incredible scenes of women’s mini-skirt liberation in 1970s Afghanistan’ - New York Post, 2021

‘Afghanistan's untold story: Stability, tourists, miniskirts’ - CNN, 2009



Summary I

Representations of Afghanistan focus on women and girls, especially the chadari & education.

Such representations were/are central to the invasion of Afghanistan & the War on Terror.

Such representations (re)produce racialised civilisational imaginaries.



Summary II

Representations of Afghan women and girls:

- Obscure Afghan women's agency
- Homogenise Afghan women
- Are closely linked to racialised and gendered representations of Afghan men
- Reproduced by Afghans, including diasporas
- Connect freedom & modernity with clothing.



Seminar Preparation

- Read and take notes on:
 1. Manchanda, N. (2020). Framed: Portrayals of Afghan Women in the Popular Imaginary. In *Imagining Afghanistan: The History and Politics of Imperial Knowledge* (pp. 143-179). Cambridge University Press.
 2. Cloud, D. L. (2004). "To veil the threat of terror": Afghan women and the <clash of civilizations> in the imagery of the US war on terrorism. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 90(3), 285-306.
- Watch two short videos from the BBC and CNN on QMPlus
- Bring one item that depicts Afghan women

