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The Representation of Islam in the *National Geographic Magazine* Cover of the *Afghan Girl*: A Multimodal Analysis

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Abstract: The study is intended to delve into the portrayal of a Muslim identity that represents the constructed reality of Islam. Using Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) Multimodal Analysis of reading visuals, it focuses on the semiotic properties of the *Afghan Girl* image in order to uncover its interpretation of the religion. The findings reveal that the identity of the girl as the "war-torn frontier" tends to represent Islam as a religion that is aligned with violence, fear, abandonment, miseries, and poverty.

Keywords: Islam, Media, Multimodality, Representation, Social Semiotics

1. Introduction

'A picture is worth a thousand words'. The saying demonstrates the fact that visuals can be non-linguistically polysemous. Barthes (1977) even referred to a photographic image as "a message without a code" (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). Their capacity to be perceived as innocent and harmless presentations of reality makes them an ideal choice for communicating messages and be naturally persuasive at the same time. As mentioned by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), "visuals can represent people, places and things as though they are real, as though they actually exist in this way". This innocent nature of visuals may be driven by the perception that cameras cannot deceive and the results are the true representations of reality. However, we should also realise that visuals are not created without a purpose. The producers of visuals play an important role in deciding how the visuals can best deliver the messages that they have in mind. Because of this, we should be aware of the fact that visuals can be implicitly embedded with the ideology of their producers. In other words, reality is constructed by its mediators. The problem is when the messages are taken for granted, they are treated as a common sensical notion that further facilitates the naturalisation of the ideology. Truth and reality depend on whether or not the recipients of the messages possess the same cultural knowledge as the producers in order to be able to decode them. Despite this, our task here is not to be the judge of truth and reality, but rather to evaluate the implicit messages behind the presentation of the visual. Hence, the study is aimed at providing a semiotic interpretation of how the depiction of a Muslim contributes to the representation of Islam.

1.1 Understanding the Context: *The Afghan Girl* and the Afghan War (1979 – 1989)

The Afghan Girl is a name given to a previously anonymous girl whose picture was taken by the National Geographic photographer when she was in the refugee camp somewhere in Pakistan. Due to her captivating gaze, she was made a front cover of the magazine and has earned a massive reputation as the tenth best magazine cover by the American Society of Magazine Editors (ASME) (*ASME's Top 40 Magazine*, 2016).

The girl was the survivor and witness to the casualties of war that initially erupted as a result of the civil war between the rebels and the local rulers. As an aid to the local rulers, the Soviet Union intervened by sending troops to Afghanistan in its mission to fight the rebels. The war that lasted a decade had killed "more than one million Afghans" and caused many to leave

their homeland to seek shelter in a refugee camp of the neighbouring region, Pakistan (*BBC News*, 2009). When the photograph was taken, the girl was only 12 and became an orphan as both her parents were killed during the Soviet attack. The Soviet troops finally retreated from the land of Afghanistan after unsuccessful attempts of banishing the rebels as the latter had gained support from the United States.

1.2 Social Semiotics, Representation and Multimodality

The key to understanding the concept of multimodality lies in its relation with the theory of Social Semiotics. “Hippocrates” was known to have firstly referred to ‘*semiotics*’ as the Greek “*semeion*” which means a “*sign*” (Danesi, 2004). Its role in producing meanings is central to the theory of Social Semiotics as it is concerned with the “study of signs” and “*meaning* in all its appearances, in all social occasions and in all cultural sites” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2010). According to Chandler (2002), *signs* can appear as “words, images, sounds, odours, flavours, acts or objects”. However, a *sign* is considered to be meaningless if it does not refer to something else. For instance, a faulty traffic light makes it a sign without meanings. However, a normal traffic light bears the meanings of stop, caution and proceed as it flashes the red, yellow and green lights. Hence, meaningful signs are termed as “*signifying*” or “referring to or *standing for* something other than itself” (Chandler, 2002). In making meanings, Saussure perceived *signs* to be realised by the “*signifier*”, or “the form which a sign takes” and the “*signified*” which refers to “the mental concept represented by the *signifier*” (Chandler, 2002). Again, in order to make sense of the signs, it requires a “relationship” between the “*signifier*” and “*signified*”, a process which is also termed as “*signification*” (Chandler, 2002). To demonstrate this, again, consider the word “red” as the *signifier* to indicate its reference to a colour. As the “red” light is indicated from the traffic light, it becomes the *signified* which prohibits motorists from proceeding.

It is this ability of using the *signs* “to relate, depict, portray, or reproduce something perceived, sensed, imagined, or felt in some physical form” that enables the brain to make sense of how they are used as a means of “*representation*” (Danesi, 2004). Hall (1997) defines the study of *representation* as “using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully to other people” which is also “an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture”. In this respect, language is seen as not being limited to codes but it is rather extended to cover meaningful *signs* or “*semiotic resources*” which van Leeuwen (2005) defined as any form of communication that has the potential to make meanings, be it verbal or visual. Based on the *constructionist* view of *representation*, it is believed that meanings are “constructed” by “the social actors who use the conceptual system of their culture and the linguistic and other representational systems” (Hall, 1997).

In the production of meanings, *multimodality* is concerned about the “issues common to all *modes* and to the relations between *modes*” (Kress, 2009). Here, the term ‘*mode*’ is used for bringing the “material form to meaning” (Kress, 2009). Colours are perceived as a *mode* as they are embedded with meanings. Again, whether or not it is related to traffic lights, the ‘red’ colour is universally accepted to mean ‘stop’ or ‘danger’. *Multimodality* perceives meaning-making in relation to the theory of Multimodal Social Semiotics which studies “meaning and form...as an integrated whole, a sign” (Kress, 2009). In other words, *multimodality* seeks to interpret meaning based on a combination of different semiotic modes like, in this case, visuals and language.

2. Previous Studies on Multimodal Analysis of Visuals

Similar studies have been conducted in order to gain an insight into the significance of the visuals in the study of representation. Using the Social Semiotic model of Multimodal Analysis by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) as their framework of analysis, these researchers

were able to explore the process of meaning-making involved in the interpretation of visuals in different contexts. While studying portrait and documentary photos, as well as manipulated images of the Iranian *Javanane Emrooz*, *Hamshahri Javan*, *Etelaate Haftegi*, and *Hamshari Diplomatic* magazines, Behshad and Ghaniabadi (2015) perceived that the meanings of the visuals were communicated by the metafunctions of ideational, interactional and textual as indicated in the present study. Besides, in the context of Nigeria, Abuya and Akinkulore (2013) who studied the cover pages of *TELL* magazine discovered that visual images such as pictorials, colour, signs, posture, distance and symbols did represent the country's current political and economic situations. Martínez and Ibáñez (2014) who conducted an analysis of the front covers of *Revista IO* magazine found that the visuals represented the poor as the producers and the rich as the consumers of the products. These distinctive roles of the represented participants further signified that their relationship was defined by money rather than by equality or social justice.

3. Applying Multimodality to Visuals

The framework in which the multimodal analysis is based on, follows the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) which are fundamentally rooted from Halliday's (1985) *Systemic Functional Linguistics* (SFL). There are two aspects of analysis involved in studying visuals; the social action or constructs and the interactive meanings. Since *the Afghan Girl* photograph is more of a concept than a narrative, the analysis will concentrate on the representation of visuals in terms of the conceptual pattern of a symbolic process. As pointed out in **Fig. 1**, the conceptual pattern of this nature focuses on "what a participant *means* or *is*" (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). The term 'participant' here refers to "represented participants (the people, the places and things depicted in images) and interactive participants (the producers and viewers of images)" (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). In a semiotic sense, the represented participants can be seen as the signifiers as they are responsible for the signifying practice in which they communicate meanings. As meanings depend on the semiotic constituents of visuals, it is important to be conscious of their differences through the *paradigmatic* and *syntagmatic* relations as the latter imbue a "structural context" for the interpretation of signs (Chandler, 2002). While a *paradigm* can be viewed as the "contrastive" of signs, a *syntagm* acts as a "chain" which emphasizes on the "part-whole relationship" (Chandler, 2002).

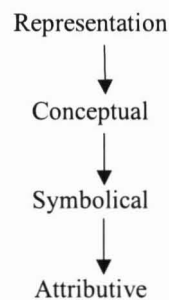


Fig 1. Representational Structure of Conceptual Visuals
(Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996)

As *symbolic* processes are somewhat akin to Halliday's relational processes, they are concerned with the 'being' of the represented participant which are called as the *Carrier*. Four distinctive features that identify the *Carrier* of *Symbolic Attributive* are:

- 1) Salience; foregrounded, exaggerated size, well-lit, fine detail or sharp focus, or conspicuous colour or tone

- 2) Non-action gestures connecting visual to verbal realisations, a relation of identity through 'pointing'
- 3) Out of place in the whole, in some way
- 4) Symbolic values

(Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996)

The aspects of lighting, texture, focus, colour and tone of visuals can highlight the important role of the *Carrier*. Besides, as the name suggests, this type of participant is valued symbolically, from simple gestures to how it is made to appear.

Another aspect of the analysis that should be taken into account is the perspective of the interactive participants who assume the role of the viewers. **Fig. 2** presents the analytical structures that compose the interactive meanings in images.

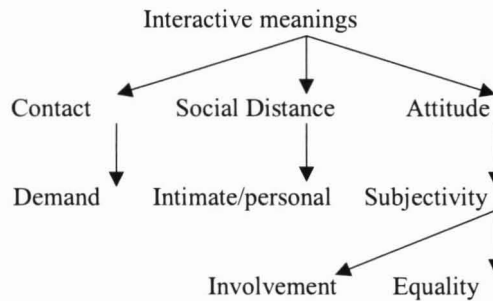


Fig 2. Interactive meanings in images (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996)

The configurations of the medium used to record the image can determine the kinds of signifieds that are intended to be communicated. The position of and the distance between the camera and the represented participants can signify their paradigms of contact, social distance and attitude. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) defined “gaze at the viewer” as “demand”, “close shot” as “personal” depiction, “frontal angle” as “maximum involvement”, and “eye-level” framing as a sign of “equality”.

Because *the Afghan Girl* appears as a front cover, it is typical for the visual of that form to be accompanied by the written mode. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) and van Leeuwen (2005) perceived that the typeface of the written mode can influence the meanings that are intended to be expressed to the viewers. Opting for specific font type, size, weight and style can determine the salience of the messages. For instance, boldface font carries a heavier weight compared to the normal ones (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). Similarly, a font type like Times New Roman may illustrate the formality of the message. Besides, the placement of the elements of the written mode in the left or right can indicate the value of the information as the *given* or *new*. The elements placed on the left are the *given* while those on the right are the *new*. The difference between the two structures is that as the *given* directs the attention towards the issue at stake, the *new* “instantiates and dramatizes the *given*” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996).

3. Reading the Visual of *the Afghan Girl*

Our scope of analysis pertains to the semiotic resources of the visual and will not deal much of the linguistic elements of the written mode. **Fig. 3** shows the *Afghan Girl* as the *National Geographic* magazine cover.

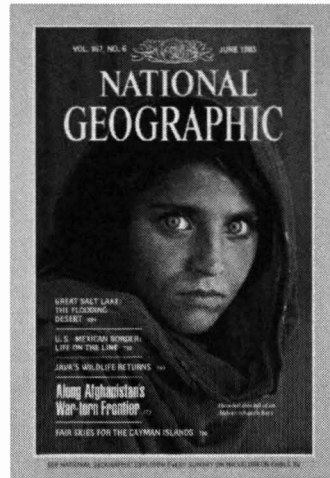


Fig 3. The *Afghan Girl* as the magazine cover of National Geographic (Newman, 2002)

As mentioned earlier, we have identified the visual as representing the conceptual pattern of a symbolic process. The represented participant is the persona of the image who is the *Carrier of Symbolic Attributive*. On the *paradigmatic* level, she is symbolically valued by the signifiers of physical attributes (eyes, skin, hair, etc) and appearance (scarf) which communicate information about her identity. On the *syntagmatic* level, her physical attributes reveal her female gender, youthful age and Asian origin. The scarf that she wears and her nationality are *signifieds* of her faith as a Muslim due to the knowledge that Afghanistan is known as the Islamic Republic. Her unkempt hair, grimy face, worn out and torn scarf signify the result of abandonment and poverty. The *given* and *new* information about “War-torn Frontier” and “Afghan refugee” further confirm our knowledge about her status as a victim of war who assumes the role of a refugee and an orphan as a sign of the abandonment. As the background is blurred, the image of the represented participant is foregrounded and the focus is drawn to the pair of eyes which are symmetrically positioned to the page. The constriction of the pupils is the result of sufficient exposure to light which produces an image that is sharply focused with true to life colours. The eye-contact that she establishes with the producer of the image can be treated as a non-action gesture that is meant for the viewers.

Interactively, the eyes which enact a piercing gaze signify a visual demand directed towards whoever is looking at them. The gaze which appeals to the viewers seems to indicate the dominant role played by the eyes. Our cultural knowledge of the saying, “The eyes are the windows to the soul” provides the implicit information of the *signifieds* interpreting her feelings. The *new* information further suggests the ‘directionality’ of the piercing gaze as it dramatizes the effects of being “War-torn” like “haunted” and “fears”. In other words, it is seen to be, in a semiotic term, an *index* to sufferings and miseries. Apart from this, as the close shot of the image focusing on just the face and shoulder alludes to the notion of personal or intimate relation that the participant has with her viewers. The image is made to appear as if there is no barrier separating the girl and those on the other side which seems to have made communication between them possible. In addition, the frontal angle of the image contributes to the notion of intimacy as it indicates maximum involvement on the part of the viewers. This means that as they are highly involved with the girl, they are absorbed into her world and experience the same sufferings as hers. Moreover, as the image is framed at eye-level, it indicates a sign of equality in the power relations between the two sides. This absence of authority implies that both the girl and the viewers of the image are in the same social position.

The choice of the ‘Impact’ type of font in the *given* information can be perceived as an attempt to align the visual with the constructed reality as it brings the literal sense of the word to

the idea of “War-torn”. Besides, the boldface of the already bold style of the ‘Impact’ font is further intended to demonstrate the gravity of the impact of war.

Thus, our next analysis is to relate the depiction of the *Afghan Girl* to how Islam is represented according to the lens of the *National Geographic* magazine. In order to do this, we need to evaluate the signs *syntagmatically* by analysing the profiling of the *Carrier* as presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. The profiling of the *Carrier*

Carrier	Process	Attribute
The girl	is	poor. afraid. sad. young.

The semiotic properties of the visual construct our perceptions of the represented participant who is depicted as poor, afraid, sad and young. The construction of the identity also forms the *Value* of the girl as an Afghan, a Muslim, a child, an orphan, a refugee and a victim as shown in **Table 2**.

Table 2. The *Value* as the signified of identity

Token	Process	Value
The girl	is	an Afghan. a Muslim. a child. an orphan. a refugee. a victim.

The *given* and *new* information are seen to have aimed at materialising the impact of “War-torn” and navigates it towards “Afghanistan” as a *sign* of war. The inclusion of “Afghanistan” in both the *given* and *new* signifies its foregrounding. Although there is no specific mentioning of Islam in the visual, our knowledge of the world provides us with the information that the country is named as the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. As the reference to Islam is backgrounded, it appears as being naturalised in the environment of war that alludes to violence which further breeds fear, abandonment, miseries, and poverty. The girl is perceived to be an *index* of the viciousness of war that robs her of her childhood, parents, and home which would invite the viewers’ feelings of empathy and compassion. As the violence is ignited as a result of the feud between two groups of Muslims, it tends to align Islam with the allusion to violence and thus, causes the religion to be perceived negatively.

4. Conclusion

While we may take the easy path and take visuals at face value, we have to be aware of the fact that they are created for the reason of none other than realising the ideology of their producers. As consumers of any visuals, we have to take into account that visuals are always embedded with ideology. In the case of the *Afghan Girl*, she was purposely depicted as a living example of the destructive impact brought about by war that erupted out of conflicting views of Islam. It is hoped that the study can shed light on the importance of understanding that reality can be constructed, and visuals may not be a true representation of the reality that is depicted.

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