

Critical Discourse Analysis of News Reports on Afghan Women in Malaysian Newspapers

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the representation of Afghan women in Malaysian newspapers during the Taliban's 2021 offensive based on Fairclough's (1988) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework. It uncovers the underlying linguistic and ideological biases in eight news articles, published by The Star and Free Malaysia Today. The findings indicate that The Star employs objective and formal terminology, while the adoption of a more critical stance was observed in Free Malaysia Today. A varied representation of Afghan women was also observed, and The Star focuses on their professional roles in the community. Meanwhile, Free Malaysia Today portrays them in a victimised manner. Direct and scare quotes were also highlighted, showcasing their roles in reinforcing and challenging dominant ideologies. The research demonstrates the media's role in shaping one's social realities and affecting public perception. This study also contributes to critical discourse analysis by producing valuable insights into how marginalised groups are represented during a political crisis. The findings revealed that The Star described Afghan women with professional identities using formal and neutral language while Free Malaysia Today emphasised their victimhood and resistance through the usage of emotionally charged language, showcasing different ideological stances adopted by each platform's editorial stance. The findings are relevant to language students, future researchers, policy makers, and academicians in linguistics and media studies.

Keywords: Afghanistan; Critical Discourse Analysis; media portrayal; news discourse; Taliban

INTRODUCTION

Inarguably, the news serves as a window to our world. One can access and learn about current events with a simple tap on the screen. Such events could range from glad tidings to global conflicts, with the Taliban's conquests and aggressions having remained under surveillance by the media since the events of September 11. Two decades after the United States of America's invasion of Afghanistan, President Biden announced in 2020 the decision to withdraw military troops from the country. He followed up on the proposal negotiated between the Taliban and the Trump administration (Mellen, 2021). According to the Council on Foreign Relations (2022), the decision to withdraw U.S. troops was a key component of peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government. It was found that both sides expressed their enthusiasm to achieve amenities in Afghanistan and construct a structure for the nation after the withdrawal of foreign powers. While Afghanistan negotiated for a cease-fire, the Taliban reiterated its demand for an Islamic system-

based country. President Biden asserted that the withdrawal would be conducted irrespective of whether there is a development in the intra-Afghan peace talks or the decline of the Taliban's assault on the Afghan defence force and residents.

The 2021 Taliban offensive occurred concurrently on the same day the United States troops and other international forces departed from Afghanistan (Reuters, 2021). Few had anticipated the rapid and substantial regional advances where the Taliban-controlled districts had increased from 73 to 223 within the early months of the incursion (Roggio, 2021). Baker (2021) asserts that the Taliban's triumph raised significant local and international concerns regarding human rights and the propagation of terrorism, which have been widely discussed in multiple facets of the media. The prominence of media cannot be doubted, especially in the contemporary age. This medium is considered the vehicle that carries information that influences the perspectives of society. While news is ostensibly seen as the medium for disseminating current events, it can also be wielded as a powerful tool by certain groups of people. Nadeem et al. (2019) assert that the media tend not only to provide appraisals of policymakers' performances but also to reinforce individuals' worldviews and construct social realities. Further, the tie that binds conflict and communication can be traced back to ancient times. However, in the present, it is virtually unattainable for dominant powers to claim victory in wars without safeguarding the information channels that span the globe (Hussain, 2016). Hence, the media play a significant role in shaping public perspectives on current events.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Discourse

Numerous linguists and social scientists have contemplated the meaning of discourse. Brown and Yule (1983, as cited in Kamalu & Osisanwo, 2015) define discourse as language in use. It refers to the norms, preferences, and expectations that connect language to context. In addition, discourse is understood as a form of social action carried out by social representatives and is used in various settings, including medical discourse, media discourse, and other domains (Al-Ahmad & Awwad, 2020). It is undoubtedly true that the presence of ideologies in news discourse is inescapable. Amer (2017) asserts that ideologies and stances of elite groups are prevalently reflected in media discourse. Fairclough (2001, as cited in Amer, 2017) claims that media discourse only displays a 'one-sided' perspective with an acutely distinguished separation between producers and interpreters.

Newspaper as a discourse

There is a consensus among social scientists and linguists that newspapers are an impactful type of discourse. While it is observed that the readership of printed newspapers has significantly declined over the years, they have mainly been replaced by online news (Sari, 2019). Lombardi (2018) defines online news as a cluster of information circulated or broadcast in digital versions of traditional media through different platforms, including social media, news outlets, blogs, and more. It is considered the leading source of information in the contemporary age. However, its objectivity has been continuously scrutinised under sceptical eyes. According to Chen (2016), newspapers and their associated news agencies tend to declare their independence from any governmental influence or involvement. Additionally, Chen (2016) argues that spoken or written discourse about the world is fundamentally expressed from a specific ideological stance. This means that it is inevitable for any discourse to be influenced by one's ideological perspective. This notion is supported by Mulyani (2014), who asserts that texts cannot be inherently objective and liberated from ideologies. The meanings themselves are established through vernaculars, and their neutrality is improbable. This is due to the media's use of language, which may inevitably affect people's understanding and knowledge of the world. Al-Ahmad & Awwad (2020) contribute to this argument by explaining that the language used by the media is not inherently authentic and factual, as it is often structured through explicit ideologies and perspectives. Therefore, while newspaper

discourse serves as a cohesive and substantial source of information, its credibility may be affected by the author's ideological manipulation.

Representation of Afghan women in the news

The Taliban authorities continue to enforce severe gender-based discrimination against women despite facing national and international concerns regarding systematic gender discrimination, being identified as an unrecognised state, and suffering from sanctions and diplomatic leverage (Mosamim & Villeneuve, 2024). This situation simultaneously draws global awareness and reflects a broader historical pattern whereby political agendas and media narratives often shape the representation of Afghan women. Past studies have discussed the representation of Afghan women in the news. It is found that prior to the American invasion of Afghanistan, women were underrepresented in the news. Hatef & Luqiu (2020) report that the rise of news coverage on Afghan women occurred directly after the events of September 11, where it was reported under the Western lens. They assert that after the act of terrorism occurred, superficial interpretations of Afghanistan's female citizens as suffering under tyranny appeared in newspapers and on television screens. Mitra (2019) asserts that the situation revolving around Afghan women provides Western military powers with a justification to engage in war in the name of women's liberty. To illustrate, the Council on Foreign Relations (2020) assert that they saw growth in the number of female voters, consequently birthing the democratic government of Afghanistan after the U.S. invasion. This is viewed as a symbol of political progress in a highly conservative and patriarchal society. However, Mitra (2019) argues that the subjugation of women did not occur only after the Taliban's policies were implemented but has instead happened for centuries.

News media in Western nations are responsible for the representation of Afghan women as victims yearning for freedom from Western military powers. Accordingly, Afghan women were described as feeble, dependent, susceptible, submissive, and veiled against their will. Eide (2016) supports this notion as the standard narrative for Afghan women was observed as subordinates or holding passive roles, including victims of war or as recipients benefiting from an aid program. Zahra & Amin (2023) reveal minimal coverage on the political and social activism spearheaded or supported by Afghan women. Sahill (2023) affirms that the efforts of young Afghan women who resisted against the Taliban's advance in 2021 go unnoticed by the media. This mobilisation does not reflect how they are typically represented in the media, and instead shows "defiance, resistance, and Afghan women's agency" during the enforcement of Taliban-based *sharia* law (Joscelyn, 2021).

Critical discourse analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been identified as a suitable approach for this study. It is an analytical study that mainly researches how social power abuse, control, and discrimination are endorsed, propagated, and opposed through text and talk in a particular social and political context (Van Dijk, 2001, as cited in Chen, 2016). Amer (2017) asserts that Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) ultimately aims to manipulate the current social reality in which discourse is connected to other social components in specific ways. Fairclough (2014, as cited in Amer, 2017) elaborates that these social components comprise power relations, ideologies, economic, and political strategies, and policies. Discourse in media reflects the ideological interests and positions of influential people, including the elite, politicians, journalists, and others. Hence, media discourse is deemed a biased occurrence with an astutely distinguished divide between the producers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Fairclough's three-dimensional critical discourse analysis framework

This study utilises Fairclough's (1988) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework. According to Nurjannah (2017), CDA serves as a framework for investigating or inspecting how individuals or

institutions utilise language by distinguishing not only the textual features but also the contextual interpretation and interaction within it. Fairclough (1992, as cited in Nurjannah, 2017) asserts that CDA reflects language performance within a particular society. Weiss & Wodak (2003, as cited in Nurjannah, 2017) expand this notion by including the demonstration of power in social life to connect linguistic analysis to social analysis (Woods & Kroger, 2000). Hence, researchers have a consensus that CDA focuses on analysing the power and ideologies entrenched in both linguistic and social facets.

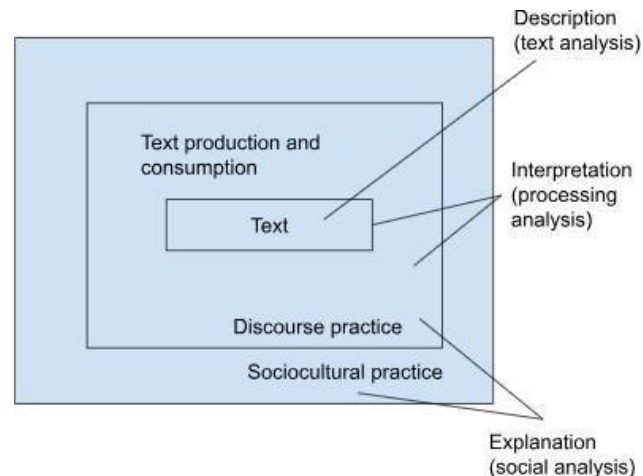


Figure 1. Fairclough's 1988 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Adapted from *Fairclough Critical Discourse Analysis* by Norman Fairclough (2010), Routledge. 2010 by Routledge.

Fairclough's (1988) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework comprises three components: description, interpretation, and explanation. The first domain, Textual Analysis, involves analysing linguistic features such as word choices, sentence structures, and grammatical forms. The second domain, discourse practice or interpretation, involves applying organisational techniques and the alterations that texts undergo during reading and interpretation (Mullet, 2018). Lastly, the Sociocultural Practice domain seeks to identify the interaction between texts and sociocultural practice, mediated by discourse practice.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

A qualitative research methodology was selected for this study as it allows researchers to investigate the context of and the affiliation between language, discourse, and society. Qualitative research expects the author's reflection before and after the research was conducted, to provide the context and better comprehension for readers. Sutton (2015) asserts that it is inevitable that the reflection may be affected by a researcher's personal bias and understanding of reality. This is especially relevant for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as it requires close analysis of textual and contextual interpretations instead of generalisations.

Reflexivity entails the researchers reflecting on their preconceptions and prejudices when analysing representations. Dang (2025) asserts that a more self-aware and ethical approach to discourse analysis is ensured through acknowledging the influence of one's viewpoints in shaping interpretations of discourse. This study conducted reflexivity through continual self-assessments and peer reviews during the data collection and analysis. Thus, these practices carefully enhance the findings' credibility and reflect CDA's emphasis on revealing the underlying ideologies in discourse.

Sample

This study utilises purposive sampling, where items are “selected based on having a significant relation to the research topic” (Amer, 2017). To construct a systematic sample of newspaper coverage on the representation of women during the Taliban-Afghanistan takeover, the researchers manually searched for keywords including “Taliban,” “Afghan women,” and “Afghanistan” in the search bars of The Star and Free Malaysia Today, the selected digital newspaper platforms. This was carried out to ensure the newspaper articles collected are relevant to the objectives of this study.

Next, eight Malaysian English-language news articles were analysed, with four articles selected from each platform. While the number was decided after reviewing past study approaches (Sivandi & Dowlatabadi, 2015; Tian, 2018), the rationale behind this decision is not due to its numerical precedent, but due to its richness of data following the narrow scope of the study. The study exclusively focused on the representation of Afghan women in news discourse during the outset of the Taliban’s 2021 takeover, from August 2021 to January 2022. Albeit small, the corpus is determined as information-rich and sufficient for meaningful analysis. This reflects the principles of qualitative research, where depth and analytical insights are prioritised over breadth.

Furthermore, this study compares a government-affiliated newspaper platform with an independent one to record diverse perspectives, revealing how affiliations may affect representations and framing strategies. The Star has historically been government-aligned, as it is owned by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a prominent political organisation of the coalition party Barisan Nasional (BN). According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021, it was found that The Star scored 65% in brand trust scores in Malaysia, falling second to Astro Awani (The Star, 2021). Most newspaper readers who participated in the survey find The Star trustworthy. Comparatively, news coverage by The Star has proven to be more objective than the other two conventional papers, New Straits Times and The Sun (Wong, 2017).

The second news platform chosen for this study is Free Malaysia Today, an independent news outlet. Independent or alternative news media claims that balancing or countering systematic imbalances with politically, socially, or culturally radical content are its core responsibilities (Ihlebaek et al., 2022). Despite its editorial policy emphasising its centrism and neutrality, Free Malaysia Today still doubts its objectivity (Koya, 2017). Independent and alternative media are not precisely obligated to government interventions, raising concerns regarding their reporting quality due to the absence of a publication editor (Hussein, 2018).

Instrument

Fairclough’s (1995) three-dimensional framework was used as the primary analytical tool to analyse the selected corpus. The framework comprises textual analysis, discursive practice analysis, and social practice analysis, which assisted the researchers in systematically investigating the corpus.

Furthermore, a coding scheme was developed to identify and categorise the corpus by its key characteristics. The researchers first highlighted salient linguistic features, including lexical choices and reporting verbs. Reporting verbs were considered significant as they assist in identifying the speaker’s social status or position and reveal how the newspaper frames quoted sources. The coded elements were then organised into broader categories, including types of lexical choices, discursive strategies, and sociocultural representations. These categories were aligned with Fairclough’s three analytical levels, allowing the researchers to construct an analysis that effectively addressed the three research questions. Finally, researchers practised reflexivity through ongoing self-assessment and peer review, which enhanced interpretive clarity and helped minimise potential bias.

Data collection

The researchers have produced a simple and conducive blueprint for data collection procedures. To ensure a straightforward and uncomplicated way of collecting data, the researchers have accessed the news articles through the reader mode on the Safari web browser. This allows the researchers to gather the textual data without manually removing advertisements and irrelevant information such as hyperlinks. The newspapers gathered for this study are all publicly available online on The Star and Free Malaysia Today websites. The data collection procedure was adapted from the study conducted by Amer (2017). The researcher has formulated a list of criteria to ensure the data gathered is relevant. Firstly, the researchers only gathered the news articles from each newspaper platform's homepages, news pages, and international pages. This choice of sample is due to its relevance to the study, hence discounting commentary articles. Furthermore, most of the articles were gathered from international news pages since the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. The researchers manually searched for keywords relating to the study, including "Taliban," "Afghanistan," and "Afghan women" in the search bar of the two digital newspaper platforms. Lastly, the news articles gathered for this study were published from August 2021 to January 2022, as the Afghanistan takeover only occurred from May to August 2021. After collecting the data, the researchers compiled the news articles in one document for further analysis.

Data analysis

After compiling the data, the researchers took the initiative to code the texts manually, as using an application or software may not explicitly uncover the items the researchers aim to analyse in this study. This study utilised a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which analyses the linguistic features, discursive practices, and sociocultural practices. Firstly, the linguistic features of texts were investigated through their lexical choices, as they are an essential element of the ideological production in news discourse. The choice of vocabulary used in a particular news media will manipulate how the readers imagine what occurred in the event in the news reports. Comparing two types of newspapers will eventually prove that linguistic codes do not objectively replicate reality, as they deduce, systematise, and classify discourse subjects and reveal different world perceptions (Fowler, 1986, as cited in Wang & Liu, 2015). Then, the discursive analysis refers to interpreting texts, where it uncovers the implicit. At this stage, the selected newspapers were analysed through intertextuality, including news source and reporting verb. Lastly, the sociocultural practices aim to explain the text's social context to elucidate the relationship between language, power, and ideology. Hence, the data is analysed concerning the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Text analysis

In this domain, the lexical choice will be examined. The lexical choice is vital in rendering the stance and outlook of the two newspaper agencies. It fundamentally describes the author's perspective towards a particular piece of news, where he is given the complete sense of agency in choosing lexical items describing a news event. Machin & Mayr (2012, as cited in Han, 2015) assert that it also refers to specific types of distinctiveness, standards, and the train of events that are not overtly stated. In the articles, there are several lexical items depicting the Taliban and Afghan women. Firstly, it is observed that there is a difference in the lexical choice addressing the Taliban between The Star and Free Malaysia Today. The findings are tabulated in Table 1.

Table 1. Difference in the lexical choice in addressing the Taliban rulers

Lexical choice in addressing the Taliban rulers	
The Star	Free Malaysia Today
1. Islamist Taliban rulers	1. Taliban fighters
2. Taliban-led administration	2. Taliban's religious police

Table 1. (continued)

3. Taliban delegation	3. A deeply conservative Islamist movement
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The Star tends to refer to the Taliban as the official representatives of Afghanistan. They utilised formal words such as “rulers,” “administrations,” and “delegation”, which are observed to have neutral connotations. This shows that The Star is admitting and acknowledging that Afghanistan is currently under the rule of the Taliban. The choice of lexical items here indicates that The Star had attempted to use unbiased language. In contrast, Free Malaysia Today still recognises the Taliban as a militant force rather than a legitimate government. This is shown in the lexical choice describing the Taliban, including “fighters,” “religious police,” and “a deeply conservative Islamist movement.” It can be implied that Free Malaysia Today endeavoured to give readers insight into how the Taliban government has yet to achieve its recognition internationally. The author also views them as uninvited terrorist leaders who have taken control of the country. It can also be observed that “Taliban,” “Taliban-led,” and “Islamist” were used as adjectives which describe the current Afghan leaders. Adjectives provide a clearer vision of specific information (Louisville University Writing Centre, n.d.). Thus, it can be inferred that both newspapers aim to deliver accurate information on how Afghanistan is now under a new government.

Next, it is observed that Afghan women are represented differently in The Star and Free Malaysia Today. The findings are tabulated in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive attributes of Afghan Women

Descriptive attributes of Afghan women	
The Star	Free Malaysia Today
Politicians, journalists, activists, advocates, police officers, media workers, judges, medical workers, targets, and vulnerable women fully cover their bodies and faces.	Wearing the all-covering burqa, four bodies, one of the dead, a rights activist, a public sector employee, accompanied by male relatives.

It is observed that women are represented through their occupations in The Star, including “politicians, journalists, activists, advocates, police officers, media workers, judges, medical workers.” This portrayal offers readers an insight into how Afghan women are intelligent and have careers. This finding is similar to Free Malaysia today, where they have also asserted “public sector employees” and “rights activists.” However, Free Malaysia Today has a higher number of vocabulary words that denote the victimisation of Afghan women, including “wearing the all-covering burqa,” “four bodies”, “one of the dead”, and “accompanied by male relatives.” Here, it is implicit that Free Malaysia Today represents women as passive actors or objects affected by a particular action.

Discursive practice

The second domain of Fairclough's (1988) Critical Discourse Analysis revolves around interpreting the relationship between the discourse practice and the text. Hence, discursive practice refers to the process involving text production, distribution, and consumption. Wang and Liu (2015) assert that this stage inherently discusses the intertextuality of the text. This is supported by Chen (2016), who asserts that texts or discourse are intrinsically intertextual, composed of other pre-existing texts and possibly from distinct text types. In news discourse, intertextuality can be exposed through investigating speech reporting, including news source, reporting mode, and reporting verb. Findings show that there are two types of quotations, including direct-indirect quotes and scare quotes. Additionally, it is also observed that there are both definite and indefinite news sources.

Quotation

It is accurate that quotes and reported speech are pivotal in news reporting. Eissa (2014) asserts that quotations tend to reflect ideologies of both the producer and their affiliated organisation. This

notion is supported by Nurjannah (2017), who asserts that since readers may not have a pre-existing knowledge of the subject, the author can manipulate their perception through their reporting. Thus, quotations should not be considered as mere citations of newsmakers' reporting. It is also detrimental to analyse whether the form of verbs was presented in direct or indirect speech acts. Fairclough (1995, as cited in Nurjannah, 2017) asserts that the absence of direct speech may result in hesitation in readers as the way the author structured the text may not accurately represent a particular situation.

Table 3. Quotation used in the newspaper discourse

Quotations used in the newspaper discourse	
The Star	Free Malaysia Today
"They at least recognize it's an issue, which is a start," Shaheen told Reuters. Shaheen, who is also on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said women's rights had been discussed at every briefing she had been to.	"It's a moment of joy for us that our classes have started," said Zarlashtha Haqmal, who studies law and political science at Nangarhar University. "But we are still worried that the Taliban might stop them," she told AFP.
"Lives are at risk," said Teresa Casale, advocacy director for Mina's List, which advocates for women's representation in governments around the world. "Women leaders are being actively targeted and killed by Taliban forces. They receive threats against their lives and safety every day."	The international community should not use women's rights as an excuse to harass Afghans," claimed Deedar. "Those who act against the Islamic and national values of the country are not representatives of Afghan women."

Findings show that The Star tends to quote officials, while Free Malaysia Today is more focused on quoting the citizens living in Afghanistan. Wang & Liu (2015) assert that news reporters pledge to deliver an accurate visual of the event through directly citing statements uttered by individuals. This encourages readers to trust newspaper reporters to produce authentic and objective information that is considered factual. Providing the names and their position or occupation also increases the report's authenticity. Both excerpts in The Star are statements by American officials, indicating that the reporter for The Star, or Reuters, has a Western-centric ideology. It is implicit that they gather information from the officials who are outside of what occurred in Afghanistan. This is supported by past literature, whereby Western powers tend to act as the "voice" for Afghan women (Eide, 2016). In contrast, Free Malaysia Today brings another perspective: Deedar, a female school principal, asserts her displeasure at how Western powers blocked their public funds. Hence, it can be said that Free Malaysia Today has a higher tendency to quote "the unheard" while The Star quotes "the powerful" more (Eissa, 2014).

Scare Quote

There are common occurrences where some words, rather than the entire sentence, are quoted. Nurjannah (2017) refers to this as scare quotes, as they are similar to normal quotation marks. Fairclough (1992, as cited in Nurjannah, 2017) asserts that the author deliberately did this type of quotation to indicate an emphasis or stress on a particular word. It also indicates a disagreement on the lexical item to which the word belongs, as well as the writer's or reader's perception (Fairclough, 1992, as cited in Nurjannah, 2017). It is found that both news organisations use scare quotes in their articles.

Table 4. Scare quotation used in the newspaper discourse

The Star	Free Malaysia Today
Under the Taliban, women were barred from education or work, required to fully cover their bodies and faces and could not leave home without a male relative. "Moral offenses" were punished by flogging and stoning.	On Tuesday, at the Taliban's first press conference since seizing Kabul on Sunday, spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid said women would have rights to education, health and employment and that they would be "happy" within the framework of sharia.

Table 4. (continued)

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told the Security Council on Wednesday that Afghanistan was "hanging by a thread" and called for countries to authorise all transactions needed to carry out humanitarian aid.	But U.N. chief Antonio Guterres warned on Monday of "chilling" curbs on human rights under the Taliban and mounting violations against women and girls.
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In the first excerpt from *The Star*, it can be inferred that the author finds "moral offences" disagreeable. On the contrary, the author believes women deserve liberty in choosing clothing and travel. This implies that the author disagrees with what the Taliban considers as "moral offences" and the way they dictate to the marginalised, in this case, women. This is like the first excerpt from *Free Malaysia Today*, in which "happy" was quoted. It can be implied that the reporter disagrees with the word, mainly due to its origins, where it was uttered by the Taliban representative Zabihullah Mujahid. It can be said that the author is sceptical about whether Afghan women would live peacefully within the Taliban's sharia framework. Next, the second excerpts from *The Star* and *Free Malaysia Today* have different types of scare quotes. Eissa (2014) asserts that this strategy is called "Perspectivation Through Others", where the author's voice is indicated in the statements. The author agrees with the U.N. Secretary-General that Afghanistan is "hanging by a thread" because the international community blocks its funds. The author deems this an emergency, interpreted as an attempt to persuade readers to agree. Similarly, the author agrees with Antonio Guterres' claim that the curbs are "chilling." This is especially true when considering the context explained in both statements, where obstructing Afghanistan funds may increase the violence against Afghan citizens.

Sociocultural practice

In this domain, the discourse is investigated through analysing its socio-political context. This is to uncover the power and ideology embedded in the discourse and constructive effects both on text and discourse practice. Wang & Liu (2015) elaborate that studying the sociocultural context of a particular discourse is detrimental as it exposes the ideology embedded in the linguistic features and clarify the connection between language, power, and ideology.

This domain provides the means to understand why different newspapers account for the same event from distinguishably opposing perspectives (Chen, 2016). The textual analysis and discursive practice analysis show that both *The Star* and *Free Malaysia Today* present different perspectives on the same event. The former describes the discussion between international communities, specifically Western powers, while the latter focuses on the female citizens living in Afghanistan. Since the conflict in Afghanistan has been occurring for the past century, including invasions from Great Britain and the Soviet Union, the Taliban and the United States of America, Afghans understandably deem themselves as survivors. This makes Afghans resistant to external meddling in internal politics (Cultural Atlas, 2018). This explanation is found in the *Free Malaysia Today* article. It describes how Afghan citizens participated in a Taliban-approved protest where they urged international powers to release their funds.

The *Star* and *Free Malaysia Today* depict female citizens of Afghanistan as dependent and needing help. The findings of this study are aligned with a study conducted by Pacwa (2019), who asserts that Western-centric news reports tend to highlight the valour of the U.S. government and the victimisation of Afghan women. The depictions in the reports may shape readers' understanding that perhaps the Taliban is the sole offensive group responsible for the crimes against human rights. At the same time, there is no portrayal of the role the U.S. military officers played in the Soviet-Afghan War. Bamik (2018) asserts that while the United States tends to declare the liberty of women as one of its gains, the number of female students attending school in post-Taliban Afghanistan claims otherwise. This indicates that the percentage of women attending school was not as significant as it was thought to be. Thus, this indicates that the contribution of the United States of America to the status of girls' education and freedom may be exaggerated, which is reflected in the newspapers.

Other than that, the visualisation or writing of women outside of Afghanistan is significantly

different, as they are portrayed to act in active leadership roles, including a Democrat or a United Nations member. This inherently portrays the Western powers as saviours who are constantly fighting for Afghan women's rights. Meanwhile, the newspapers frequently fixate on the veil forcibly worn by Afghan women, directing readers to focus on the otherness of Afghan women. Pacwa (2019) asserts that this fixation strengthens the theme of civility and barbarity as well as freedom and oppression. Thus, it can be said that both newspapers propagate the idea of Western powers as the white knight while Afghan women are victims of war.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper analysed newspaper discourse based on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Prior studies examined newspaper discourse, particularly about wars and conflicts. This paper will contribute to discourse studies by analysing how the news depicts Afghan women during the 2021 Taliban offensive. Two research objectives were formulated: (1) to investigate the linguistic features used to represent Afghan women in the newspaper discourse on the Taliban's 2021 takeover, and (2) to analyse the discursive and social practices found in the newspaper discourse on the Taliban's 2021 takeover. The researchers themselves are the instrument for this study. Hence, its objectivity may be affected due to inevitable pre-existing beliefs and emotions. However, the researchers have considered reflexivity, whereby their stance related to their methodology, theory, and self has been analysed. After collecting the data, they were coded manually to identify themes concerning Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework. Findings reported that the lexical choices news reporters use to frame Afghan women and the Taliban reflect their perspectives of the news. The Star depicts the Taliban through formal titles, while Free Malaysia Today refers to the Taliban with informal titles with negative connotations. Meanwhile, The Star describes women through their occupations while Free Malaysia Today visualise them through a victimisation lens. The findings also report that direct quotes show authenticity, while news authors use scare quotes to declare their disagreement or understanding. Finally, the sociocultural practice reflects that both newspaper articles shape readers' realities by asserting the heroism of Western powers and further propagating the victimisation of women. A news report cannot be considered an absolute, objective, and unbiased source of information. It is merely a construction from a specific ideological perspective, not a wholly encompassing representation of social reality.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this paper. There are no financial, personal, or professional affiliations that have influenced the analysis, interpretation, or conclusion presented in this paper. All efforts have been made to ensure objectivity and academic integrity in the study.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Nurul Syuhada carried out the research, wrote, and revised the article. Nurul Syuhada had also conceptualised the central research idea and provided the theoretical framework. Wan Aisyah and Muhammad Harriz designed the research and supervised the research progress. Nurul Syuhada anchored the review, revisions and approved the article submission.

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