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**The Afghan Girl's Role in Creating a Pathway for White Feminism and American  
Intervention in Afghanistan**

Her gaze persists in the minds of Americans to this day. Wide, bright green eyes captivate viewers just enough to almost make them forget the red headscarf draped around her dark brown hair and tanned skin. She's propped up against a green background, making it unclear that she's currently being interrupted from a normal school day to be photographed by a strange American man. The United States first met Sharbat Gula, more widely known as the "Afghan Girl," in 1985, when her portrait was printed on the cover of the June issue of *National Geographic*. The photographer who took the photo, Steve McCurry, did not even ask her name when he met the Afghan Girl; it wasn't until January of 2002 that McCurry met Gula again to learn her full story—and her real name. McCurry's first encounter with Gula was in December 1984 in the Nasir Bagh refugee camp in Pakistan. She arrived at this refugee camp when she was just a child, escaping the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan at the time. A few years later, when she was only twelve years old, Gula became the face of "oppression" in the Middle East, despite a lack of name and story to go with the face. The Afghan Girl's image became the symbol adopted by Western feminist groups and various presidential administrations as justification for their intervention in Afghanistan, both on the grounds of human rights advocacy and military domination of the region, respectively; the justification for intervention depends on Orientalist thinking that categorizes certain groups as victims based on their physical appearance and asserts

that they must be in need of saving because they cannot help themselves to ameliorate their own circumstances.

This paper will be divided into three main sections as a method of ensuring clear understanding of each distinct argument made in the above claim. First, I will identify visual cues possessed by the Afghan Girl and how these cues ultimately define the reasons for humanitarian and military intervention in Afghanistan. Next, I will provide context for white feminism in relation to the “White Savior Industrial Complex,” and the significance of Western human rights advocacy on Afghan women. Finally, I will argue that the Afghan Girl has served over the span of three decades as justification for American military intervention in Afghanistan and how this intervention played out under the guise of liberation for the Afghan people.

### **Gazing back at the Afghan Girl**

Before starting my analysis, I will define Orientalism as part of the foundation for understanding how it is applied to the Afghan Girl. According to Edward Said, the Orient, or what we today understand as an area referred to as the “East,” is a “man-made” (5) discourse created by the West, particularly Europeans, to contrast itself with the East. For the purposes of this research paper, the area of interest is the Middle East, as opposed to the East as a whole. In Orientalist discourse, the West attempts to prop itself up as being more civilized and developed than the East. In turn, Western writers and artists reporting on the East tend to characterize the Orient to be a mysterious, exotic, and other-like kind of place that may be plagued with corruption and unconventional ways of life. Orientalist thinking, then, is applied to a multitude of contexts as a way to justify a fear of the Orient and develop ways to control the Orient.

Visual cues, such as the beauty that emerges from the Afghan Girl's gaze, help to explain the obsession that Americans developed over the girl featured in the image. As Holly Edwards notes in her contribution to *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain*, various powerful and beautiful images "have simultaneously come and gone" from the public eye, yet the Afghan Girl somehow manages to "elicit fascination and even activism" (76). When considering Said's *Orientalism* (Edwards 77), Gula perfectly embodies what is typically associated with the West's visualization of the Orient—a young Muslim Girl, covered slightly with a headscarf, yet still eroticized through her piercing eyes and dark complexion. She appears mysterious and different, leading to her otherization by American onlookers. Her otherization evokes a certain perceived beauty, and Americans have found comfort in knowing a beautiful and *real* girl has survived whatever horrors must be occurring in that part of the world (Edwards 77). Because Americans were given access to a visual representation of someone who was seemingly surviving a time of war and civil unrest, she was viewed as an anomaly. Gula may have lived on to be photographed by McCurry in an apparently isolated environment, but surely, this could not have been the case for thousands of other girls who were rooted in the same circumstances; this way of thinking mistakenly assumes that women living among the Afghanistan and Pakistan borders during the Soviet invasion were undoubtedly living lives under little freedom and immense oppression. Americans, as champions of liberty, then took it upon themselves to be saviors for these girls. As Edwards notes, "Men have written to McCurry asking to marry the girl; couples have offered to adopt her. Most importantly, many people have contributed money to the Afghan cause in response to her image" (76). With this in mind, it might be most troubling to think that Americans were so moved by the Afghan Girl's image even though they did not know her name nor her actual story. The Afghan Girl's image was so

moving that the portrait style used by McCurry was adopted by Amnesty International USA (AIUSA) when creating a brochure in 2002 for a campaign called “Imagine,” which aimed “to inspire a new wave of global rights activism” (Hesford 1). On the cover of the brochure, AIUSA used a photograph that McCurry had taken in 2002 called “Girl with Green Shawl” in a Peshawar refugee camp (Hesford 1), the same place McCurry first met Sharbat Gula. The Girl in the Green Shawl is almost a reincarnation of the Afghan Girl who was photographed seventeen years before her, with her “youth, beauty, and innocence” (Hesford 1) captivating the viewer’s attention. Across time, Afghan girls have become a symbol of the American desire to act as saviors for those who lead seemingly unfree lives. The image of Gula and many other Afghan girls was boiled down to an outlandishly generalized notion that the existence of an Afghan girl was inherently one that was subject to danger, and the West would need to intervene to save her and others like her.

Aside from her natural beauty, the Afghan Girl’s loosely placed shawl signals to viewers an unwarranted amount of oppression that the girl might face. The headscarf is automatically associated with Islam and the idea that Islam subjects women to limited freedom by requiring them to cover their bodies from their male counterparts. Dinah Zeiger’s chapter in *The Veil: Women Writers on Its History, Lore, and Politics* claims that to Western culture, “veiled women today signify tyranny, and lifting the veil has become a metaphor for freedom and democracy” (266). Because the dress of the Afghan Girl comes into direct conflict with the ways in which women’s liberation is understood in the United States, that women have the freedom to dress in any way that they choose (Zeiger 266), the social circumstance of Gula is reduced to a stereotypical image of Muslim women as being subjugated to patriarchal power and as submissive to a larger Islamic fundamentalist idea of modesty. Zeiger suggests that the West

fails to recognize other reasons for embracing the veil: maybe it serves as a “resistance to Western colonialism,” or a tool to increase privacy, or maybe even a way to demand attention to a woman’s mind rather than her body (267). As previously mentioned, concern for intervention in Afghanistan was largely due to images like the one taken of the Afghan Girl. It is safe to assume, then, that the visualization of the veil played a large role in motivating Americans to take on the challenge of “freeing” Afghan refugee women through foreign policy decisions as well as the formation of human rights advocacy groups. What may be most disturbing, however, is that photographs of veiled women would resurface in 2001 and be used as justification to bomb Afghanistan (Zeiger 271). The irony in this decision is that an attack on another nation was deemed necessary in order to free the “oppressed” women of the region, even though there were no explicit indications from these women that they wanted the United States to act on behalf of their liberation. In no way, then, are these women actually free if a foreign nation is making decisions for them. Taking note of the veil as a symbol of oppression is important in understanding certain attitudes that develop and which policy decisions are made against Islamic nations.

McCurry’s decision to photograph the girl is a reminder that those residing in the Middle East typically do not have a say over the ways in which they are presented to the Western world. What is quite overlooked in the discourse around the Afghan Girl is McCurry’s role as the photographer who was essentially deployed to capture photographs and return home with insight regarding what life is like in these places of social unrest and seeming oppression. As described in *Untold: The Stories Behind the Photographs*, “...[McCurry] was approached by *National Geographic* magazine with an assignment to photograph a feature article exploring the increasing numbers of refugee camps that had grown up along the Afghan-Pakistan border”

(*Untold* 71). It may appear that McCurry was merely doing his job and reporting on a frequently sought-after issue, but there is certainly intentionality in his decision to photograph the Afghan Girl. When McCurry first met Gula in the Nasir Bagh refugee camp, it was in a girls' school classroom. Of course, it was her "piercing eyes" and "intense, haunted look" (*Untold* 75) that caught his attention. There were about fifteen girls he could have chosen to photograph, but it was her photograph that he became determined to capture: "...for an instant everything was right – the light, the background, the expression in her eyes" (*Untold* 75). When he says this was the *right* photograph, he means this is the photograph that would sell, that would capture the hearts and minds of Americans, that would give people what they wanted to see. By circulating such a photograph in a publication as influential as *National Geographic*, people's Orientalist thinking about life in the Middle East as dangerous and oppressive for little girls like Gula is affirmed. Take note that photographs of the girls' school classroom *itself* did not go viral nor did photographs of families drinking tea and sitting in front of the television (*Untold* 75), both of which were well documented by McCurry during his visit to Peshawar. Any representation that these Afghan refugees lead a "normal" life, one that resembles a life of the West, would deconstruct Orientalist discourse. Therefore, McCurry, just like many writers, reporters, and artists before him, serves as a tool in confirming that the "East" is and always has been a symbol of corruption, violence, and misogyny.

### **The rise of white feminism as explained by the "White Savior Industrial Complex"**

Teju Cole's "White Savior Industrial Complex" can be used to explain the rise of Western feminist intervention on behalf of Afghan women that accompanied the circulation of the Afghan Girl, which ultimately discredited existing modes of activism among Afghan women

themselves. First, I will define the White Savior Industrial Complex as explained by Cole within the context of which he is writing; then, I will use his ideas and apply them to intervention on behalf of the Afghan Girl. In an article for *The Atlantic*, Cole writes in the context of *Kony 2012*, a documentary film created by Invisible Children, Inc. to raise awareness around an issue that aimed to arrest Joseph Kony, a warlord and the leader of the Lords Resistance Army in Uganda (Curtis and McCarthy). Cole criticizes intervention by groups and advocates, such as Invisible Children, because they fail to recognize “the idea that those who are being helped ought to be consulted over the matters that concern them.” This characteristic of the White Savior Industrial Complex is paired with the American sentiment that “we have to save them because they can’t save themselves” (Cole). Cole explains that this is simply untrue, and Ugandans have done and continue to do work “to improve *their own* country” (emphasis added).

Ugandans’ efforts at self-determinism are being discredited by American human rights advocacy groups, and the same can be said about the feminist fight for women’s rights in Afghanistan. Even before the portrait of Gula was taken and distributed for the public to speculate, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) was formed in 1977 as an “independent women’s organization designed to appeal to the widest possible range of women in Afghanistan” (Farrell and McDermott 36). Part of RAWA’s mission is to document atrocious and unjust executions of Afghan women (Farrell and McDermott 33). With the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan just a couple years after RAWA’s creation, RAWA decided to also adopt national liberation into its aims. This seemingly autonomous organization would soon lose its independent cause to the Feminist Majority Foundation, an American non-profit organization dedicated to aiding in the increased living conditions of women. Organizations like the Feminist Majority would remember the Afghan Girl’s image and use her as a symbol for the girls who are

“in need of rescue” in Afghanistan. In the mid-1990s, RAWA and the Feminist Majority came together in a campaign called Coalition to End Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan, but the Feminist Majority would later give “little or no credit to the women of RAWA” (Farrell and McDermott 35) for the work that they did. Instead of simply aiding the women of RAWA in their fight for self-determination and combating corruption, violence against women, and economic inequality, the Feminist Majority practically hijacked RAWA’s operation in Afghanistan because RAWA was not deemed the *right* kind of feminism. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty explains in “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” Western feminist thought tends to assume that “all of us of the same gender, across classes and cultures, are somehow socially constituted as a homogeneous group identified prior to the process of analysis” (337), disregarding any consideration of intersectionality and how identities other than gender can shape the way one experiences the world in which they are situated. With this, there is also a belief that what binds women together is a sociological notion of the ‘sameness’ of their oppression” (Mohanty 337). Therefore, it becomes apparent that the Feminist Majority has internalized this white feminism when they decided to guide RAWA’s efforts in Afghanistan rather than simply supporting them and allowing RAWA to lead their own work and achieve self-determinism. It even exists in the name Feminist *Majority* itself: this organization has positioned itself to represent *all* women, regardless if these women elect the Feminist Majority to fight on their behalf. Despite existing efforts among Afghan women to ameliorate their own situations in Afghanistan, organizations such as the Feminist Majority interjected into these efforts upon seeing images like that of the Afghan Girl because of an idea that these women did not have the means to improve their own status and because they must inherently share the same plight as white women.



## **The Afghan Girl as a prop for American military intervention in Afghanistan**

It is hard to believe that American intervention in Afghanistan was solely on behalf of women like Gula; in fact, there is disturbing reason to believe that the United States became involved in order to elevate its status in the eyes of the international community. Edwards explains that “Afghanistan served as a strategic proxy in the burdened contest between the Soviet Union and the United States” (76), encouraging the United States to intervene on the basis of democracy and human rights. The ideological war between the United States and Soviet Union prompted the United States to aid the Afghan people living under Soviet occupation or being displaced by the Soviet invasion as a way to indicate that the United States embraces freedom not only within its own borders but also for oppressed people abroad. To preserve its institutional integrity, the United States worked to “defeat” communism in every way possible, and by objecting to Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the United States was essentially rejecting Soviet ideology and bringing itself a step closer to “winning” the Cold War. In convincing Americans that intervention was necessary, then, the Afghan girl was situated in a position where she and others like her would be threatened by the Soviet Union if the United States did not act. Not only was this problematic because it was merely a selfish ploy created by the United States, but it also removed choice from the Afghan people in deciding what their fate would be, suggesting that Afghanistan wasn’t capable of standing against the Soviet Union itself. United States imperialist thought that advocated for intervention as a duty of Americans was used to better the status of the United States under the guise that it was for the good of the Afghan people.

The Afghan Girl may have been photographed over three decades ago, but the role she plays in American military decisions never disappeared; the documentary film *Search for the Afghan Girl*, directed by Lawrence Cumbo Jr. for *National Geographic* is a clear indication of

that. In 2002, seventeen years after McCurry's first visit to the refugee camps in Peshawar, people were still itching to know: *Who* is the Afghan Girl? Interestingly enough, this journey to find the Afghan Girl occurred less than a year after the United States invasion of Afghanistan in response to the September 11 attacks in 2001 (*Untold* 76). During the search, a man clued in McCurry and his team about the Afghan Girl's new residence. Ironically enough, it was in one of the most dangerous parts of Afghanistan—one that was “being shelled by American forces” (*Untold* 77). This is where the Afghan Girl's legacy becomes most disturbing. The girl who was the face of oppression in Afghanistan, the justification for the invasion of both United States military forces and white feminism, was now living her life subject to the plight that came with American warfare. The irony in all of this is that “representatives of the Bush administration invoked images of veiled Afghan women and girls to gather support for the War on Terror” (Hesford 5), when in fact, the Bush administration did more harm than good in improving living situations for these women. In her work titled “Portraying the Political: *National Geographic's* 1985 Afghan Girl and a US Alibi for Aid,” Rae Lynn Schwartz-DuPre calls this “relationship between US representations of Afghan women and imperial policy” the “Afghan Alibi,” and asserts that there are six visual cues that are essential in creating this Afghan Alibi: the “veil, childhood, eyes, anonymity, refugee, and femininity” (336). The constructed narrative that women in Afghanistan and other parts of the Middle East are victims of misogyny, violence, and inequality might have some truth to it, but the role of American invasion is rarely to blame for the harsh living conditions that these women must deal with. We never consider how American invasion has an effect on women's ability to make economic gains or how it inhibits children's ability to attend school because it is too unsafe to go outside during certain times of the day. So, if American intervention is justified on the basis of liberation for the Afghan people, how can we

“reconcile” (Pastor 111) this claim with the hypocrisy that is instilled in the violent actions the United States has taken against Afghanistan? A clear explanation is the United States offers these “statements of principle to disguise its narrow self-interest” (Pastor 111). In McCurry’s description of the meeting, he writes that the Afghan Girl and her family took “a hazardous ten-hour journey” (*Untold* 77) to arrive in a small village where McCurry and the documentary team were staying. The team, then, understood just how arduous of a task it would be for Gula and her family to help in the creation of this documentary yet went on with the production, for the sake of the American public’s desire to finally *meet* the girl behind the red shawl—Sharbat Gula, with little consideration for the conditions she has to endure because of American intervention in Afghanistan.

## **Conclusion**

When taken out of the context of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the refugee crisis that resulted because of it, the portrait taken of the Afghan Girl is exactly what it appears to be—a photograph of a beautiful young schoolgirl, who happens to be partly veiled. But because of the context in which the photograph is taken, paired with Orientalist thought about victim-making and perceived otherness of Middle Eastern women, the legacy created by Sharbat Gula’s gaze is one that resulted in white feminism and military intervention on behalf of all the other girls just like her who must have been suffering under Afghan and Soviet corruption. In no way does this research paper suggest that Afghan women did not suffer from violence and inequality in Afghanistan because that is simply untrue. We see that with the creation of RAWA and its dedication to increasing equality for women. However, it is still important to be critical of the American invasion of Afghanistan within permission of the Afghan people to represent them on

the basis of morals and ethics. As Farrell and McDermott suggest, American feminist organizations should stand in solidarity with Afghan women, but they should not be making decisions (45) on how these women write their own destiny and take back their country. Additionally, as Cole notes, American policy makers and executive leaders should “consider evaluating foreign policy” with countries like Afghanistan before invading these countries and worsening their conditions because of underlying economic greed and sense of ideological supremacy. With this, the Afghan Girl’s individuality will be given back to her, and her role as a symbol of oppression will have to be deemphasized.

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