AALBORG UNIVERSITET

Beyond Silence: Representations of Afghan Women's Voices on X After the Taliban Takeover in 2021

A Feminist Postcolonial Inquiry into How Representations of Afghan Women's Voices on X Constructs the Possibilities for Afghan Women to be Heard and Mobilize on Social Media.

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Abstract

Since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021, Afghan women have faced severe restrictions on their rights, freedom, and public participation. In this context, social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) have become important sites where representations of Afghan women are circulated, contested, and amplified. This thesis explores how Afghan women's voices are represented on X after the Taliban takeover in 2021, and how these representations construct possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and mobilize on social media. This thesis is a qualitative study that employs netnography to collect and select data upon X, which allows systematic observation and interpretation of online interactions and discourses within specific social contexts. The analysis draws on an empirical dataset of posts on X from 2021, selected to capture the most dominating discourses around the representations of Afghan women's voices. Drawing on poststructuralist discourses analysis using Bacchi's 'What's the problem represented to be' (WPR) approach, and on feminist postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak's interrogation of voice and representation in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western discursive constructions of 'Third World women', this study identifies four dominant discourses: agency, victimhood, international intervention, and local resilience. These discourses, while empowering, also risk reproducing homogenizing representations of Afghan women's voices that constrain the ways Afghan women can appear as political subjects. The analysis reveals that the possibilities constructed by these representations are entangled with postcolonial power structures that limit Afghan women's ability to be heard, define the language of resistance, and mobilize on social media. This underscores the complex interplay between visibility and silencing within digital spaces, highlighting how empowerment is often constrained by dominant narratives. Based on this, this MA thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of how the framing of Afghan women's voices on social media both reflects and reproduces broader postcolonial hierarchies, influencing how they are represented and who is heard. This study's findings highlight the importance of ongoing, nuanced efforts to amplify marginalized voices on digital platforms while critically challenging postcolonial power structures and avoiding the reproduction of hegemonic discourses.

Keywords: Afghan Women's Voices, Discourse Analysis, Feminist Postcolonial Theory, Representation, Netnography, Feminist Poststructuralism

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1. Introduction

Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, the rights and freedoms of women and girls in Afghanistan have been reshaped. Farkhondeh Akbari and Jacqui True (2022) describes how "Every aspect of social, political, and economic life has utterly changed for women and girls in Afghanistan since August 2021" (Akbari and True, 2022, p. 625). Afghan women have, since the Taliban's takeover in 2021, faced systematic oppression (UN women, 2024). They have been stripped from their fundamental and constitutional rights, and they are, according to Akbar and True (2022), living in a gender apartheid. Afghanistan is the only country in the world where girls are not allowed to receive a secondary education, women's employment has been severely restricted, and many women, previously working in the government, have been forced to flee or go into hiding. Their basic freedom to move around and express themselves has been taken from them, they are required to wear burqas, and they are not allowed to travel without a male guardian (Akbari and True, 2022, p. 626). However, despite the increasing marginalization of Afghan women's voices, social media platforms have emerged as one of the platforms through which marginalized voices can be expressed (Li et al., 2021; Görgülü and Çınar, 2023; Meraz, 2025). Osman and Bajoghli (2024) similarly argue that hashtags and social media campaigns have enabled Afghan women to use their voices. Yet, the nature of the representations of Afghan women's voices remains complex and uneven. Afghan women's voices are not only constrained by the Taliban rule, but also by the global power structures that often mediate which voices are amplified or silenced (Meraz, 2025; Chen et al., 2018). This is seen in multiple feminist movements driven by social media such as the #MeToo movement, which primarily highlights stories of white, wealthy women (Görgülü and Çınar, 2023; Dejmanee et al., 2020), and the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement in Iran where global support caused the attention to drift towards European women rather than Iranian women (Varme and Shaban, 2024). Social media platforms that are seemingly open and borderless are in fact embedded with power structures: they enable visibility, yet also reproduce silences (Chen et al., 2018; Meraz, 2025). Based on this, I ask the following research question

How are Afghan women's voices represented on X after the Taliban takeover in 2021, and how do these representations construct possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and mobilize on social media?

1.1 The Research Process

The process of answering my research question is completed through five chapters. The first chapter outlines and discusses the State of Art within my research area. Social media, hashtags, and hashtag activism is discussed in relation to how it shapes a space in which marginalized populations can construct possibilities to be heard and mobilize on social media. This is then contextualized through different examples of feminist movements driven by social media and hashtags. It is important to situate this, because it supports my analysis of how representations upon social media shape the possibilities that influence how Afghan women can be heard and mobilize on social media.

The second chapter outlines, discusses and reflects the methodological decisions taken in my MA thesis. My methodology builds on a feminist poststructuralist approach, which is equally reflected in my choice of analytical approach that is centered in Carol Bacchi's (2009), 'What is the Problem Represented to be?' (WPR). My empirical data is collected through a qualitative netnographic approach, accompanied by my reflections upon ethical considerations, researcher bias, and criteria for selection. My empirical data consists of multiple posts from X (formerly Twitter) under four hashtags, #AfghanWomen, #LetAfghanGirlsLearn, #EndGenderApartheid, and #FreeAfghanWomen. These posts serve as the empirical sample through which Afghan women's voices are interpreted. However, due to the restrictions Afghan women face and the lack of transparency in profiles on X, it is not possible to retrieve a sample solely consisting of authentic Afghan women's voices. Therefore, the posts represented under the four hashtags should be understood as representations of Afghan women's voices, rather than direct testimonies unless explicitly mentioned.

The third chapter includes my feminist postcolonial theoretical framework. I draw on Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (1988, 2007) critique of Western feminists' representations of Third World women as homogeneous and oppressed, and on Gayatri Spivak's (2010) revised essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* which explores the complexities of voice and agency within postcolonial contexts. This feminist postcolonial lens is applied to explore how Afghan women's voices are represented and how it constructs the possibilities that enable Afghan women to be heard and mobilize on social media.

The fourth chapter constitutes my analysis, which is a discourse analysis structured around Bacchi's (2009) analytical framework, WPR, which I have altered to fit my specific research field. I analyze posts from X, identifying four dominating discourses as well as discursive elements such as binaries and subjectification effects, which I examine through the lens of my theoretical framework and the presented state of art. The analysis includes an analytical reflection upon how the representations of Afghan women's voices construct the possibilities from which Afghan women can be heard and mobilize on social media. It is important to note that this analysis explores how Afghan women and their voices are represented on X, rather than making claims about their lived experiences.

The fifth chapter concludes and answers my research question. My conclusion does not assess whether Afghan women, in real life, are able to mobilize or be heard, as my empirical material does not allow me to determine whether such mobilisation or resistance occurs in tangible ways. Rather, my conclusion focuses on the discursive consequences of how Afghan women's voices are represented on X, which I argue construct the possibilities for their voices to be heard and for their potential mobilization on social media. The conclusion is therefore based on how Afghan women's voices are framed through representations and not grounded in lived experiences.

2. State of Art

In the following State of Art, I outline and discuss current research and theoretical contributions within the field of social media, hashtags, and feminist social movements. The State of Art serves as a scholarly map into existing research. The first section outlines and discusses existing research and literature upon social media, hashtags and hashtag activism. In my MA thesis, hashtags, and the posts under these, are the means through which Afghan women's voices are represented, and through which the possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and mobilize on social media are constructed. In the second section I present and discuss different examples of feminist movements, which multiple researchers (Varme and Shaban, 2024; Izadi and Dryden, 2024; Xiong et al., 2019; Li et al., 2021; Görgülü and Çınar, 2023; Dejmanee et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2018) have analyzed in relation to how voices are represented and what constructs these representations. Lastly, I sum up the key takeaways from the State of Art.

2.1 Social Media, Hashtags, and Hashtag Activism

The rise of social media, particularly X, has transformed the ways marginalized voices are represented and heard on a global scale. In recent years, platforms like X have served as digital spaces where individuals, especially those from oppressed communities, can share their experiences, raise awareness about social issues, and challenge dominant discourses. These digital spaces are often shaped by hashtags, which function not only as tools of activism but also as spaces where issues are contested, negotiated, and amplified (Meraz, 2025). Meraz (2025) notes hashtags as digital spaces for active "injection, negotiation, and contestation of issues and sentiment agendas for supporting and dissenting publics" (Meraz, 2025, p. 481). In extension of this, Xiong et al. explores how hashtags have become a form of "participatory culture [that] enables individual users to form groups around particular topics and events" (Xiong et al., 2019, p. 12). Hashtags have, as Chen et al. (2018) notes, evolved into a tool through which people seek political and social change. It provides a voice to marginalized and often silenced groups of people, and it contributes to social media's role in constructing the possibilities for women to frame themselves as agents of justice and empowerment (Chen et al., 2018, p. 198). In response to the evolving role of hashtags, a new concept has emerged, namely hashtag activism. Tombleson and Wolf (2017) define it "(...) as the act of fighting for or supporting a cause with the use of hashtags as the primary channel to raise awareness of an issue and encourage debate via social media" (Tombleson and Wolf, 2017, p. 15). Building

upon this, Görgülü and Çınar (2023) argues that "social media has become a powerful tool for facilitating social change, promoting awareness of important issues, and empowering marginalized groups to have their voices heard" (Görgülü and Çınar, 2023, p. 107). Meraz (2025) argues that Twitter (now X), has worked as a prime channel for the oppressed and marginalized part of the world's population in their claim for political and social change (Meraz, 2025, pp. 481-482). He builds upon this by emphasizing how "hashtag activist campaigns capture and direct attention to a cause, generate sympathy and awareness, and guide publics toward a better understanding of an issue" (Meraz, 2025, p. 486). Hashtag activism plays a significant role in campaigns led by and for oppressed communities such as the LGBTQ+, because it can make the discrimination and injustice, they face more visible (Meraz, 2025, p. 486). Hashtag activism essentially provides a voice to the voiceless (Chen et al., 2018, p. 199, p. 202), it allows e.g. feminist perspectives to have the possibility of defining their own space and presence online by sharing their own experiences and history (Chen et al., 2018, pp. 210-211). Further, it enables more women to participate because there are less barriers to overcome for a woman to post something under a hashtag than there is when voicing it out loud in an offline forum (Chen et al., 2018, p. 209). Hashtags, and the representations under these, are therefore not just symbolic, rather they allow marginalized groups to contest dominant discourses. Based on the above, it is evident that hashtags and hashtag activism play a vital role in constructing the digital spaces from which marginalized voices are heard and amplified. Therefore, in my thesis, I understand hashtags not only as tools of activism, but as spaces that construct the possibilities for Afghan women's voices to be heard.

While social media and hashtags can amplify voices, they can equally silence some when certain voices are legitimized over others (Dejmanee et al., 2020). Chen et al. (2018) argues that marginalized groups might be constrained by hashtag activism because it reinforces hegemonic discourses of victimhood. Hashtags provide a space that "gives voice, but also silences." (Chen et al., 2018, p. 212). The structural inequalities visible in the offline world are simply moved into the online world, where some representations and voices are legitimized over others (Görgülü and Çınar, 2023, p. 110). Dejmanee et al. (2020, p. 3948) notes that, on the one hand, hashtag activism gives a platform to people, but on the other hand, it causes some female voices and experiences to be heard and valued higher than others. Chen et al. (2018, p. 198) highlights how hashtags can constrain the power of women of color by reinforcing hegemonic discourses. Even when hashtags appear as powerful, they are not necessarily fostering an empowering community because of the power structures that influence the

discursive and digital landscape (Chen et al., 2018, p. 198). Meraz (2025, p. 484) equally emphasizes how the space that hashtags enable might be overtaken by hegemonic discourses, potentially constraining the opportunities for marginalized populations to have their voices heard. In extension of this, Sandoval (2000, as cited in Chen et al., 2018, p. 205) argues that it is essential to consider a feminist postcolonial view to avoid reinforcing notions of what is Western and what is 'Third World'. Based on this, I apply a feminist postcolonial theoretical lens in my MA thesis, which is elaborated in my theoretical approach (see section 4). When Afghan women's voices are represented through specific hashtags, it becomes central to examine whether these representations reinforce or challenge hegemonic discourses and power structures.

2.2 Feminist Social Movements and Hashtags

To understand how voices are represented through social media and hashtags, it is helpful to explore feminist movements where they have played a significant role in shaping both representation and resistance. Movements such as MeToo (Xiong et al., 2019; Li et al., 2021; Görgülü and Çınar, 2023; Dejmanee et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2018), the Iranian 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement (Varme and Shaban, 2024; Izadi and Dryden, 2024), and digital activism involving Nigerian and Kenyan young women and girls (Meraz 2024; Chen et al., 2018), provide relevant cases of how hashtags can serve as a powerful tool for visibility, while simultaneously be contested by postcolonial power structures. Examining these movements provides a critical framework for analyzing the representations of Afghan women's voices on X, particularly in relation to how they are framed within certain discourses, and how they construct the possibilities that influence Afghan women's ability to be heard and mobilize on social media.

The hashtag MeToo (#MeToo) has served as an example of how hashtag activism can construct a space that enables individuals to speak out about sexual assault and to form a sense of collective identity around shared narratives (Xiong et al., 2019, p. 12). It is a movement where stories are given life, while simultaneously educating women and calling for action. It is not only narratives of their experiences as victims of sexual assault, rather they are used to push for mobilisation (Li et al., 2021, p. 857). As Van Gils-Schmidt (2021, p. 93) argues #MeToo enabled survivors of sexual assault to create a community where their stories where accepted and recognized. The #MeToo movement illustrates how hashtag activism can construct a

collective space in which marginalized voices gain visibility and attention, something Chen et al. (2018) argue can be difficult to achieve through otherwise. However, despite its reach, the hashtag is not immune to existing hierarchies of power. Research has shown that #MeToo primarily amplified white female celebrity stories, ignoring the experiences of women of color, low-wage workers, and other marginalized groups (Görgülü and Çınar, 2023, p. 114. Dejmanee et al. (2020) refers to #MeToo as an example of popular feminism, which often overlooks how it relies on and draws upon white, middle-class and heterosexual notions and does not challenge the structural inequalities. If, as Görgülü and Çınar (2023) and Dejmanee et al. (2020) describe, representations are predominantly shaped around white, heterosexual women with prominent public profiles, the possibilities for diverse and marginalized voices and experiences to be recognized can become constrained. In my MA thesis, the #MeToo serve as an important example of how hashtags can construct a space for women's stories and experiences to be heard (Li et al., 2021), but, at the same time, illustrating how these spaces can be shaped and constrained by hegemonic discourses and representations that ultimately legitimize some voices over others (Dejmanee et al., 2020; Görgülü and Çınar, 2023). When exploring how Afghan women's voices construct the possibilities that influence Afghan women's ability to be heard and mobilize, it becomes essential to first examine how these voices are represented on X. If representations are shaped by postcolonial discourses, they risk silencing critical perspectives and limiting the ways Afghan women can be heard and mobilize.

The 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement emerged after the death of Mahsa Jina Amini in 2022 while in the custody of Iran's morality police. Although rooted in physical protest, the movement was also shaped through digital expressions on platforms such as Instagram and X, where its slogan became a powerful discursive symbol of resistance (Varme & Shaban, 2024; Izadi & Dryden, 2024). As Izadi and Dryden (2024, p. 10) has noted in their research of the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement, the protest signs, and symbols, shared on Instagram and X, encompassing hopefulness and human rights, worked as a collective identity against the Iranian government. The movement is an example of 'new feminism' because it refuses to abide by formal institutions and instead leverages social media to gather collective action (Varme and Shaban, 2024, p. 125). The phrase 'Woman, Life, Freedom' is the ideological stance and shared belief system that was performed and reproduced through online representations (Izadi and Dryden, 2024, p. 2). These representations, rather than simply documenting activism, helped construct a space in which women's resistance became visible and politically meaningful (Izadi and Dryden, 2024). I argue that this is essential to my MA

thesis, because the way Afghan women's voices are represented, whether through discourses of victimhood or resistance, construct the possibilities of how Afghan women's voices are heard, made visible, and potentially mobilize on social media. Building upon this, Varme and Shaban (2024, pp. 120-123) have developed a theoretical framework that distinguishes between superficial and substantive feminist solidarity. Superficial refers to actions that might raise awareness, but often do it in a manner that reinforces the consensus of Western feminism. This means that awareness primarily talks into the concept of the 'White savior' (Varme and Shaban, 2024, p. 122). In contrast, substantive feminist solidarity manifests as "anti-colonial praxis that advances demands for social justice through a horizontal dynamic with people subjected to inhumane conditions." (Varma and Shaban, 2024, p. 125). This form of solidarity emphasizes the demands and perspectives of the people who are directly affected by the situation. Rather than solely using social media to declare disagreement with the occurring events, substantive solidarity refers to actually seeking out the opposition and dismantling the status-quo (Varma and Shaban, 2024, p. 122). An example is when Iranian women were cutting their hair and posting it on social media; they were risking their lives to make a point, in contrast, when actresses from France did the same and posted it, they were not risking their lives, rather they were centering themselves by mimicking Iranian women's actions (Varme and Shaban, 2024, pp. 123-124). In relation to my thesis, this becomes relevant when discussing the representations of Afghan women's voices, because whether representing superficial and/or substantial solidarity, it can construct the possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and mobilize on social media. If Afghan women's voices are represented in ways that primarily raise awareness through a Western feminist lens, this can constrain the possibilities for Afghan women's own agency to emerge. In contrast, representations grounded in local forms of resilience and resistance may amplify that space, making room for Afghan women's voices to be heard on their own terms. To sum up, the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement serves, in my MA thesis, as an example of a space shaped by digital representations of women's voices through text posts and visuals. Simultaneously, it provides a theoretical framework that emphasizes how digital representations are influenced and contested by power structures (Varme and Shaban, 2024; Izadi and Dryden, 2024). Interpreting digital representations through the lens of feminist solidarity is crucial because it reveals how feminist solidarity influences whose voices are amplified or marginalized, allowing for a deeper analysis of how Afghan women's voices are represented and how these representations shape the possibilities for their visibility and mobilization on social media.

While the #MeToo movement and the Iranian ‘Women, Life, Freedom’ movement offer well-documented examples of feminist movements that have provided a space for marginalized voices; it is equally important to consider other contexts where digital activism has played a critical role. Meraz (2025) presents the campaign #Bringbackourgirls, which rose in light of the abduction of multiple young girls in Nigeria. The hashtag emerged to educate and mobilize international support but was heavily criticized for adopting a hegemonic racist discourse (Meraz, 2025, p. 484). The involvement of international elite women overtook the local resistance and intervention, and the overly emotional posts on social media minimized practical solutions that could have eventually helped the Nigerian girls (Meraz, 2025, p. 484). Similarly, Chen et al. (2018) highlights a digital movement that emerged from social media and hashtags in response to a case in Kenya. A girl from Kenya was raped which sparked a movement, and a hashtag, on Twitter where multiple protests followed, which ultimately resulted in justice (Chen et al., 2018). Despite this, Chen et al. (2018, p. 210) notes that digital resistance amplified the notion of the ‘Western savior complex’ on social media. Kenyan women’s suffering was posted in a way that only allowed for it to be alleviated through a Western international intervention (Higgs, 2015, as cited in Chen et al., 2018, p. 210). The Western savior complex and the hegemonic discourses are pivotal concepts when analyzing the representation of marginalized groups and how it constructs possibilities for Afghan women’s voices to be heard and mobilize on social media (Chen et al., 2018; Meraz, 2025). The Western savior complex often perpetrates non-western populations, such as the case with the young girls from Kenya, and frames them as victims (Chen et al., 2018), while the hegemonic discourse of racism, which Meraz (2025) notes, can reinforce stereotypes such as how communities are in need of external intervention. Understanding these dynamics within representations on social media is essential for my MA thesis, because they play a key role in analyzing how Afghan women’s voices are represented and how they construct the possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and act. Whether represented through discourses of victimhood or local resilience, these portrayals influence how their voices are framed, ultimately shaping, limiting, or expanding their ability to be heard and mobilize on social media.

2.3 Key Takeaways

Based on the above presented State of Art, several key insights emerged which are relevant to the scope and direction of my thesis. Firstly, social media and hashtags can serve as means through which voices are represented, and as spaces that construct the possibilities for voices

to be heard (Chen et al., 2018; Meraz, 2015; Görgülü and Çınar, 2023; Tombleson and Wolf, 2017). It has made it possible for marginalized populations to express their opinions, raise awareness and create more visibility (Meraz, 2025). But the spaces are often contested with power structures that can either reinforce or challenge existing hegemonic discourses (Meraz, 2025; Chen et al., 2018; Varme and Shaban, 2024). The #MeToo movement, the Iranian 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement, and the two cases of digital activism in Kenya and Nigeria have equally highlighted this. They illustrate how social media and hashtags create spaces for voices to be represented, while also demonstrating how these representations can be challenged or undermined by power dynamics such as postcolonial discourses, which often portray women as people in need of saving (Görgülü and Çınar, 2023; Dejmanee et al., 2020; Meraz, 2025; Chen et al., 2018, Varme and Shaban, 2024). To sum up, there are multiple examples of how hashtags create spaces where marginalized voices are represented, and within these there are several accounts of how postcolonial power structures affect these representations. Building upon this, I am interested in exploring how Afghan women's voices are represented on X after the Taliban takeover in 2021, and how these construct possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and mobilize on social media. I build upon existing research and expand the research field on representations on social media, particularly through hashtags, and how they construct the possibilities for marginalized populations to be heard and mobilize on social media.

3. Methodology

In the following section, I outline and discuss my methodological decisions. The feminist poststructuralist methodology is presented and discussed. The netnographic data collection method is outlined, along with a discussion of its application in my MA thesis, including my investigative and immersive approach, selection criteria, and ethical considerations. Lastly, the analytical approach, Bacchi's WPR method, is presented. My interpretation of the WPR questions is introduced and discussed in relation to how I aim to conduct my analysis.

3.1 Feminist Poststructuralist Methodology

In this section, I explore feminist poststructuralism which challenges the traditional understanding of power and advocates for new ideas and strategies for change (Gavey, 1989). By using this methodology, I aim to examine how discourses construct meaning and power relations, including how dominant representations both enable and constrain possibilities for resistance and change (Gavey, 1989). While feminist poststructuralism does not solely revolve around research on women, my interest lies in Afghan women's voices, and therefore it challenges the normative representations rather than discussing the fixed qualities of both women and men.

Feminist poststructuralism is a way of thinking that combines feminist studies and poststructuralism. Gavey (1989) argues that feminist research and poststructuralism both challenge the traditional views of power, knowledge, and/or subjectivity, which allows the integration of the two. Feminist poststructuralism is described as "a mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change" (Weedon, 1987, as cited in Gavey, 1989, p. 460). Feminist poststructuralism does not subscribe to one valid truth, rather knowledge is situated within power and can never be regarded as neutral. The ones who hold the power are able to regulate what should be considered as truth (Gavey, 1989, p. 462). Building upon Gavey (1989), the goals of a self-proclaimed feminist poststructuralist scholar are to understand and develop theories that "are historically, socially, and culturally specific" (Gavey, 1989, p. 463), and explicitly relate to changing the oppression of marginalized groups. Rather than discovering or revealing the 'truth', a feminist poststructuralist should aim at disrupting and reconstructing dominant

oppressive knowledge (Gavey, 1989). As I take upon the feminist poststructuralist thinking in my MA thesis, my aim is not to find the truth about the representation of Afghan women's voices, rather it is to understand and disrupt the dominating discourses surrounding the representation of Afghan women's voices on X. This does not mean that I aim to conclude for or against certain discourses, rather it refers to how I question the discourses in relation to the power structures that intersect with the possibilities constructed. Through a WPR (Bacchi, 2009) analysis of the dominating discourses in my empirical data sample, I can challenge the dominating representation(s) of Afghan women's voices and discuss how these construct the possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and mobilize on social media.

A commonly used and arguably conform method within feminist poststructuralist thinking is discourse analysis (Gavey, 1989, p. 466). In my MA thesis, discourse is defined according to Hollway (1983, p. 231, as cited in Gavey, 1989) that argues that discourse is an interrelated "system of statements which cohere around common meanings and values . . . . [that] are a product of social factors, of powers and practices, rather than an individual's set of ideas" (Hollway, 1983, as cited in Gavey, 1989, pp. 463-464). In short, discourse is not solely about language and communication, rather it is also a key mechanism where power structures and social norms are created and maintained. There is never only one discourse, there are always multiple discourses that offer different meanings to the world that might be both contradictory and competing (Gavey, 1989, p. 464). I argue that posts and visuals on X from various profiles are not isolated personal opinions, rather they are expressions of a pattern in language, key concepts, and/or ideologies produced and reproduced through social and institutional meaning sites. In continuation of the State of Art, hashtags, in this context, function as spaces that organize and amplify these patterns, making visible how meanings are negotiated and represented. Feminist poststructuralism uses theories of language, subjectivity, social processes, and institutions (Gavey, 1989). Language in the feminist poststructuralist thinking is not neutral, rather it constitutes subjectivity. This refers to how meaning is actively constituted through language and should not be thought about as a fixed notion (Gavey, 1989, p. 463). In short, language shapes the way people understand reality and see themselves and/or others. Through language and discourse, subjectivity is constructed and constituted (Gavey, 1989, p. 465). Subjectivity refers to the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, including how she sees herself and the ways she understands her relation to the world (Weedon, 1987, as cited in Gavey, 1989, p. 465). Feminist poststructuralist scholars have to challenge the ways of being and behaving instead of subscribing to the existing normative

qualities of women (Gavey, 1989). Based on this, I aim to explore how dominant discourses, and the language used, shape the ways Afghan women are represented. In doing so, I examine how these representations construct subjectivities and reinforce or disrupt power relations, ultimately influencing how Afghan women are heard and able to mobilize.

An important part of being a feminist poststructuralist scholar is to challenge the traditional notions of power and knowledge. When doing this it is important to be aware of my own positionality, and therefore the following section discusses my positionality in light of Spivak (2010) and Bacchi (2009). Spivak (2010) argues that there is a crucial contradiction in how researchers often present and refer to the importance of the oppressed experiences, while not acknowledging their own cultural background that shapes their interpretation. When doing so, they inevitably reinforce the power structures they are otherwise critiquing (Spivak, 2010, pp. 27-29). Similarly, Bacchi (2009, p. xix) emphasizes that no one stands fully outside the premises, which means that none are free from their own biases and representations. No matter my intentions, my position is not objective or impartial, rather, as poststructuralist theory recognizes, it is situated in the power dynamics of the real-world. Therefore, it is important for me to acknowledge my own history and cultural background as a white Danish woman when I interpret the discourses, language, and subjectivity within the representation of Afghan women's voices. Spivak (2010, pp. 27-28) further argues that the concrete experiences of the people subjected to the circumstances are often described by the researcher(s), which entails that they are speaking on behalf of someone else's experiences. In light of this, I acknowledge that I am describing and analyzing how other people represent Afghan women's voices without knowing the intentions behind the posts. In an attempt to engage with this positionality, the choice of WPR as the analytical strategy was made. My analysis challenges the problem representations, which means that the knowledge presented is not taken for good measures, rather it is questioned and interrogated in order to understand the limits and/or different ways Afghan women's voices are represented. By doing this, I hope to present an analysis that provides a critical and nuanced picture while simultaneously being aware of my own positionality.

To sum up, feminist poststructuralism aims to provide in-depth analysis to understand how the power dynamics of the world shapes the dominating discourses, language, and subjectivity, while simultaneously highlighting the ways to challenge and disrupt the power structures through one's analysis (Gavey, 1989). I aim to provide an in-depth analysis of the dominating

discourses shaping how Afghan women's voices are represented on the social media X, and of how these representations construct the possibilities that influences Afghan women's ability to be heard and mobilize on social media.

3.2 Netnography

My MA thesis is based on qualitative data consisting of different text posts, pictures, and videos retrieved from X. The videos and pictures are not directly included in the thesis due to the ethical and legal ambiguities surrounding the use of visual content from X (X, n.d.). However, when relevant, they are described visually in the analysis. I have chosen a qualitative approach, specifically netnography (Kozinets, 2020), because it allows for an exploration of the social dynamics on social media platforms. As Kozinets (2020, p. 4) points out, netnography helps researchers maintain the cultural and experiential qualities of social media interactions, making it ideal for studying how Afghan women's voices are represented in these spaces and how these representations construct the possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and mobilize on social media. Netnography is a terminology within the field of social research on social media, that aids in making sense of the way people interact with and within social media. The method includes recipes on how social media data is collected, and which ethical implications to be aware of (Kozinets, 2020). In the following, I describe and discuss how netnography is used in this MA thesis.

Kozinets (2020) defines social media as a set of technical platforms and possibilities that are continuously changing by adding and removing new features. Therefore, social media is not a fixed and defined notion (Kozinets, 2020, p. 112). I draw on Kozinets' definition of social media in my MA thesis. The netnographic approach is chosen because of how it views social media as a medium for change. Social media platforms like X offer spaces for Afghan women's voices to be represented, and by doing so, it contributes to changing the world of meaning and culture (Kozinets, 2020, p. 112). In relation to this, Kozinets (2020), explains that the notion of community and sociality evolves as well. This connects directly to my research question. By analyzing posts under specific hashtags, I aim to uncover how Afghan women's voices are represented within shifting spaces, where language, power, and meaning are constantly evolving. Secondly, the approach is chosen because of its direct guidelines when it comes to ethical considerations. Other studies have used virtual ethnography, which is another method that studies the impact of the virtual world on the cultural world's meaning, but the distinct

difference is that netnography provides a direct and recipe look alike guideline on how to approach social media data research in an ethical way (Kozinets, 2020, pp. 6-7, p. 164). Given the sensitivity of the topic and the use of social media data, it is important for this thesis to uphold and respect the ethics of research. As Kozinets argues, "Online fieldwork is either an opportunity to be a goodwill ambassador or an ignorant exploiter" (Kozinets, 2020, p. 164).

Within netnography there are three distinctive kinds of data collection, 1) investigative, 2) immersive, and 3) interactive (Kozinets, 2020, p. 178). Investigative data is not produced by the researcher, rather it is created by unknown profiles on social media sites, and the researcher then selects the data for various reasons such as the research question or social group that is studied (Kozinets, 2020, p. 193). This raises important questions about bias and the selection process, given that the voices behind the social media posts do not have control over the meaning derived from the post (Kozinets, 2020, p. 205). This is elaborated and discussed in section 3.4. Immersive data collection is, as investigative data, also conducted by collecting data and coding it. But it is combined with an immersive journal where thoughts, observations, and reflections are noted during the data collection, which adds depth to the analysis by acknowledging the researcher's engagement with the data (Kozinets, 2020, pp. 135-136, p. 194). Although, it is important to note that this also carries certain biases, especially in regard to subjectivity because the data is shaped by the researcher's decisions, interest, and perspectives (Kozinets, 2020, pp. 193-194). Interactive data is, as it implies, where the researcher is participating in the field and interacts with the data either by liking or commenting on the posts, or by reaching out to the profiles and asking for interviews or further dialogue (Kozinets, 2020, p. 178). A combination of the data collecting methods are often used. I use investigative and immersive data collection, and how they are used is described in section 3.2.1.

3.2.1 Investigative and Immersive Data Collection

Investigative operations are selective, which means that I, as the researcher, chose between a massive amount of data found on one or multiple social media platforms. The data is not produced by me, rather it is created by others on social media and selected because of the research question and the underlying reflections upon this (Kozinets, 2020, p. 193). This implies that the data is selected and shaped by my decisions, interest, and/or perspectives, and they can, as Kozinets notes (2020), "never be free of them" (Kozinets, 2020, p. 193). Therefore, I am aware of the bias or skew in the data collection. The data sample is not representative of

the general population, rather the online traces collected state something about this particular sample. To address this bias, I apply coding based on the WPR analytical framework (Bacchi, 2009), ensuring that all posts are coded using the same predefined categories. This systematic approach aims to minimize the influence of my personal interpretations, as the coded categories guide the analysis and interpretation. In connection with the investigative data collection, I also employ an immersion journal. Kozinets (2020, p. 194) describes this journal as one in which the researcher can describe and reflect upon the collection of data. In my immersion journal a link to the data retrieved from X is copied into the immersion journal, which enables me to find it later on. This was later deleted because of the ethical implications (see section 3.5). A description of the data and why this was chosen is elaborated in section 3.7. Further, I use the immersion journal to reflect upon the language and patterns seen on social media sites, specifically X. The combination of investigative data and the immersion journal is essential to this project. Investigative data allows me to capture which discourses emerge through social media posts and how power dynamics interplay, while the immersion journal enables me to reflect critically on my own role and interpretations during the research process (Kozinets, 2020). It is important to note that I do not directly use or refer to my immersion journal in my analysis because it primarily serves as a reflective tool to guide my understanding and positionality rather than empirical data. Together, these approaches to data collections support a deeper exploration of how Afghan women's voices are represented and how these representations construct possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and mobilize on social media.

I structured the data collection process around Kozinets' (2020, pp. 213-216) five steps within investigative data collection. First, multiple searchable terms are identified through the research question and the epistemological perspective. Hashtags are, in this thesis, the spaces where Afghan women's voices are represented, and therefore the searchable terms centered around different hashtags such as *#LetAfghanGirlsLearn* and *#AfghanWomen*. In the next step, the hashtags are put into the search bar of all the relevant social media sites in order to discover what material is out there, and to narrow down which specific social media sites should be used to answer the research question. Through this, the relevant social media sites are mapped, and I concluded that the most relevant site was X. This is elaborated in section 3.3. The third step, scouting, took place from February 21st to March 10th. This process involves extensively clicking on different posts, reading them, watching any associated visuals, and listening to audio (Kozinets, 2020). The posts on X are described and documented using the immersion

journal (Appendix 2). During the scouting, the immersion journal is additionally used to reflect upon the patterns seen, the new hashtags that came about, and/or the specific discourses that stood out. The immersion journal serves as a personal tool from which I developed thoughts upon coding and theory, but it is not used as a direct source during the analysis. The fourth step included judging and weighing the scouted posts' relevance, activity, which implies whether there are multiple new posts occurring in present time under this particular hashtag, and/or richness, which refers to the amount of content the hashtag contains (Kozinets, 2020, pp. 227-229). The criterion for selection is elaborated in section 3.4. The fifth step of data collection entails saving the data selected, either by capturing, cutting, pasting and/or scraping the data (Kozinets, 2020). The majority of the data is captured through the immersion journal, where links to the post were copied and pasted in. These links are anonymized through pseudonymization of their profile name and some of the data is cloaked. Eventually, the links were also deleted. It is important that the quotes and/or visuals used in this project cannot lead back to the profiles, as it might be a vulnerable group of women posting on X. These five steps described above resulted in the anonymized immersion journal (Appendix 2) and the empirical data set, which is saved through a table that includes the pseudonymized name, a general description of the profile, the date of the post, the extracted quote, the hashtag it was from, and reflections upon the extracted quote. The data sample can be found in Appendix 1.

3.3 Map Over Relevant Agents

In order to outline the process of choosing the social media sites for this project, I return to the second step of the investigative data collection. In this step multiple hashtags were put into relevant social media sites. In the figure below the relevant social media sites are presented,

Figure 1 - Map over relevant social media sites

WhatsApp and Telegram were quickly filtered out, as their main function is messaging either individuals or groups. Further, news outlets such as BBC News and/or Rukhshana Media as well as NGOs such as Amnesty and UN Women were, after a quick search, selected out due to the lack of hashtags, which is, as previously described, the space where Afghan women's voices are represented (see section 2.1). Based on this, individuals such as Malala Maiwand were also sorted out. All relevant agents can be found in Appendix 4. The next social media site that was sorted out was TikTok, which primarily consists of videos, both in short and longer format. I explore how Afghan women's voices are represented and how these shape their possibilities to be heard and mobilize among a wider population, and therefore TikTok was excluded as its primary audience is mainly youth aged 16-34 (Cervi, 2021; Geuns, 2024).

After this sorting, Facebook, Youtube, Instagram, and X remained. Facebook and Youtube are firstly canvassed within the popular hashtags of e.g., *#LetAfghanGirlsLearn* and *#AfghanWomen*. The majority of the videos that came up were made by bigger news channels such as BBC, Channel 4 News and DW News. Through a viewing of the material, it was chosen that the focus should rather be on individual profiles and/or news media's text posts rather than longer videos. Therefore, Youtube was filtered out. Facebook was canvassed within the same hashtags, and here it was found that majority of the posts were of an older date, and the hashtags were not active enough, hence posts were not being posted frequently enough. Instagram and X were, in addition, canvassed with the use of the same popular hashtags. From this canvassing, multiple posts from individuals, news media, and smaller organizations that used the identified

hashtags were found, read, watched, and listened to. This additionally mounted in more hashtags being identified and searched (see Appendix 2). Despite Instagram being a social media site with a lot of activity within the popular hashtags, their privacy policies and terms of service enforce strict guidelines on data scraping, which limit the use of data from this platform (Instagram from Meta, n.d.). In light of the privacy policies and the timeframe of this thesis, Instagram was opted out as well. The search concluded in X being chosen as the relevant social media site, and from there scouting began. X has a massive amount of data, both in bigger and smaller posts, as well as visuals which serve as the dataset for this thesis. The visuals are not shown in my MA thesis because of private policies which prohibit me from doing so, but they are described in relation to what is occurring and included in this manner (X, n.d.). The data collection was, in alignment with investigative data collection, conducted manually through a review of the hashtags over two to three weeks. To conclude, the multiple post searched, scouted, and saved on X is the empirical data sample from where Afghan women's voices representations is analyzed and discussed in relation to how they construct the possibilities that influences Afghan women's ability to be heard and mobilize.

3.4 Criteria for Selection

To select the most relevant posts from the large amount of social media data present on X, it is important to define the precise searching criteria (Kozinets, 2020, p. 230). Therefore, in the following, the selection criteria are outlined and discussed.

The empirical data sample runs from Taliban's takeover in 2021 and forward. Therefore, posts made before 2021 are excluded from the dataset. It is important to note that as a result of the massive amount of data on X, posts from 2024/2025 have primarily been chosen. Additionally, I attempted to exclude profiles that are 'bots' and/or fake profiles. This included that the profiles were canvassed for whether they had followers and themselves followed individuals, whether they had one or multiple posts, and lastly a judgement call was done. These criteria are set up as a preventive measure, but it cannot be concluded whether this has resulted in all bots/fake profiles being excluded from the data sample. Moreover, it is important to note that many posts searched where in different languages such as Arabic, German, and French. It was decided that the posts selected should be in English, because it prevents some of the meaning from being lost in translation, which could cause a wrong interpretation of the representation of Afghan women's voices. Lastly, the data chosen is publicly accessible, which means that

the data is offered and available for everyone. In relation to this, it is important to note that the empirical sample found in publicly accessible data can be more skewed or biased than private data. Opinions are often more extreme, and therefore the data cannot be said to represent the general population. Rather, my empirical data sample only states something about these particular users (Kozinets, 2020, p. 205).

On a more thematic level, X was canvassed based on the identified popular hashtags. If the hashtags had under 1000 posts, they were excluded, because I argue that they are not active enough to reflect the contemporary cultural world (Kozinets, 2020, pp. 227-229). The hashtags and/or posts that represent Afghan women's voices are selected. The posts that purely criticized the Taliban or talked about the Afghan situation in more general terms, e.g., speaking about the poverty situation, are sorted out. Lastly, within the scouting and the selection of posts, themes such as education, work, freedom, Afghan women's rights, and empowerment is weighed the largest. This means that posts that reflect non-gender related issues, or more general political issues are sorted out. It is important to note that the data sample is a nonprobability sample, which means that the posts are chosen based on it fitting the above described criteria, and therefore it has to be viewed in the light of potential biases such as selection bias (Jager et al., 2017, p. 15). Selection bias refers to whether the created sample is representative of the broader community (Jager et al., 2017, p. 16). Through an extensive scouting of X, I aimed to retrieve a representative sample by achieving multiple posts and hashtags into the dataset. Despite this, it is important to be aware that the dataset might not be representative for the broader community of Afghan women's voices. There might be an overrepresentation of high-engagement posts, and the representation of Afghan women's voices on X does not reflect the demography of Afghan women. It is important to acknowledge the presence of selection bias, and the findings should not be interpreted as a generalization, rather, they should solely be understood within the specific data sample (Kozinets, 2020; Jager et al, 2017).

3.5 Ethical Considerations

A central part of netnography is the ethical considerations in conducting research on social media. Kozinets (2020, p. 203) emphasizes that if one is interested in the utterance and not the utterer, one does not need the personal information linked to the profile from which the utterance comes from. I am mainly interested in what is written on X, but I draw on the general information regarding the profile to create context around the posts. This includes whether the

profile describes itself as e.g., a researcher or a human rights activist. The profile names and other general information, such as nationality and/or age, which can lead back to the specific profile, are anonymized, this includes usernames being pseudonymized. This is additionally done to protect the person behind the profile of any potential harm. Kozinets (2020, pp. 182-186) argues that the researcher, in instances where the people behind the profiles might be subjected to harm, should alter the used dataset to ensure that it is not possible to link the post to the profile and/or person in question. Therefore, in addition to anonymizing the profiles, some of the quotes and visuals are cloaked by summarizing the post and/or leaving parts of it out. The information that is provided is the social media site from which the data is found on, the hashtag and date of the post, the extracted quote, and cloaked profile descriptions (see Appendix 1). This is applicable with the ethical considerations, as there are multiple posts being made every day on X, and therefore it should minimize the risk of it being traced back to the profile. Another ethical consideration is the role of consent and research integrity (Kozinets, 2020). I use investigative data, which means that I do not interact or in any other way put myself into the field. Therefore, no informed consent and/or research disclosure is done. In relation to this it is important that I am aware of the methodological implications of a passive researcher. It carries the potential of the data being interpreted solely based on my point of view, which can compromise the credibility of my analysis (Kozinets, 2020). I address this through my use of WPR, which enables me to engage critically and reflectively with how meaning is constructed in the representation of Afghan women's voices through specific discourses (Bacchi, 2009) and thereby strengthen the credibility of my findings.

Netnography further emphasizes the importance of discussing the benefits and the risk surrounding social media research, especially when research is conducted upon a sensitive topic and/or vulnerable population (Kozinets, 2020, p. 234). I research Afghan women's voices, which is both to be considered a sensitive topic and a vulnerable population because of the conditions they are currently subjected to (Akbari and True, 2022). Therefore, an extensive discussion was conducted to assert the risks and benefits. The benefits lie in its contribution to a deeper understanding of the dynamics between the representation of Afghan women's voices and how it constructs the possibilities that influences Afghan women's ability to be heard and mobilize on social media. The risks that I have to reflect upon are especially the risk of potential harm, as it is prohibited for Afghan women to speak in the public room (Akbari and True, 2022; Un Women, 2024). But after weighing the risks against the benefits, I concluded that, with the ethical considerations as described above, it is possible to highlight and discuss how Afghan

women's voices are represented on X after the Taliban takeover in 2021, and how these construct the possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and mobilize on social media without compromising or putting Afghan women in danger.

3.6 Carol Bacchi: What is the Problem Represented to Be?

Bacchi (2009) is known for her work on discourse and policy analysis, particularly how problems are constructed in political texts. She has introduced a new paradigm of problem-questioning through her policy analysis (Bacchi, 2009, p. xvii). It is important to note that this method has primarily been used for policies, but I use it upon social media data. I argue that the way social media frames problems in particular ways is closely related to the way policies are framed. Afghan women's voices are established through certain discourses in an online environment, and the WPR allows me to analyze and reveal the underlying representations. Therefore, this analytical approach is highly relevant in my analysis of social media data scouted on X. In the following section, I outline the method and discuss how I apply this approach in my analysis.

Bacchi (2009, p. xi) argues that the way in which a problem is represented interplays with how it is governed. This entails that one should not look at the assumed problems, rather the attention must be on how these problems are represented (Bacchi, 2009, p. xi). In this MA thesis, I do not just describe Afghan women's voices, rather I question how Afghan women's voices are represented on X in certain discourses; hence I do not accept the dominating representations as a neutral or universal concept. Instead, I am interrogating how it is constructed and framed. As previously mentioned, Bacchi (2009, p. xix) highlights that no one stands fully outside the premises, which means that none are free from their own biases and representations. Consequently, it is important to note that my analysis is not free from potential biases, and the reader should be critical and continuously interrogate the analysis and discussion. Bacchi (2009, p. 1) argues that how the problem is represented matters, because the way the problem is framed carries implications for how the issues are thought about and how people are treated and/or think about themselves. In my MA thesis, this refers to how Afghan women are continuously represented through the discourse of e.g., victimhood, which could evoke them to think this about themselves, or it could mount in them being viewed as so. As a result of the potential implications a specific framing or representation of the problem carry,

Bacchi (2009, p. 2) has evolved six interrelated questions used to interrogate the data/policies as shown in the figure 2 below,

Questions of the WPR – The Original
What's the 'problem' represented to be in a specific policy?
What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?
How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?
What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?
What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?
How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated, and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted, and replaced?

Figure 2 - The six questions of WPR (Adapted from Bacchi, 2009, p. 2)

I do not include questions three and six in my MA thesis. Question three refers to the historical or cultural evolution that has led to the problem at hand, which in this thesis is the forgoing history of Afghanistan. As I use social media data to answer my research question that often is contemporary and decontextualized, tracing its development over time would require a different methodological approach or additional sources beyond the scope of my MA thesis. Question six refers to what could or should change in the problem representation. I am not able to, based on the limited data, conduct a study of what could or should change. Rather, I analyze and discuss the representation of Afghan women's voices and how they construct the possibilities that influence Afghan women's ability to be heard and mobilize on social media. Thus, I focus on question one, two, four and five.

The original questions of Bacchi's WPR are altered and developed to suit my MA thesis' research question. In the figure below, the four questions which are applied in the analysis are presented,

The WPR questions applied in my MA Thesis
What is the problem represented to be in the dominating discourse(s) through which Afghan women's voices are represented?
What discourse(s) are dominating how Afghan women's voices are represented?
How do dominant discourses shape what can be said or known about Afghan women's experiences and autonomy?
What are the discursive consequences / effects of Afghan women's voices being represented through the dominating discourse(s)?

Figure 3 - The WPR questions in my MA thesis

The first question asks what the problem(s) is represented to be, and it is the basis from which the rest of the analysis is developed (Bacchi, 2009, pp. 2-3). The first question centers around what the problem within the discourses are represented to be. In short, I ask what the problem is represented to be within the specific discourse(s) in relation to Afghan women's voices. This is done to uncover the underlying assumptions within the discourse and to critically examine whether these representations are limiting or reflective of dominant representations. The second question interrogates through various discursive elements such as key elements, binaries, and categories (Bacchi, 2009, pp. 7-9), which is elaborated in the section on coding, what the dominating discourses are and what they construct. This includes looking at the underlying presuppositions and assumptions. The third question allows me to be critical and question what fails to be problematized in the framing and representation of Afghan women's voices (Bacchi, 2009, p. 12). This is done through questioning the discourses of Afghan women's voices, and how this impacts their self-understanding (subjectivity), e.g., do they come to see themselves as victims when portrayed as so? (Bacchi, 2009, pp. 15-16). The fourth and last question aims to identify the effects of the problem representation in order for them to be critically assessed. Often problem representation affects groups differently and therefore it is important to scrutinize whether they benefit some and harm others (Bacchi, 2009, p. 15). Through this question, I analyze the effect(s) and consequence(s) it has for Afghan women's voices that they are represented through a number of dominating discourses. It is important to note that the analysis is not built up around the four questions in a methodological order, rather they are addressed throughout the analysis as it unfolds. In line with the WPR method (Bacchi, 2009), the aim is not to answer each question separately, but rather to use the empirical social media data to continuously question and challenge how the 'problems' are represented. A linear

structure would risk a binary analysis of the main discourses, and nuances within the problem representations could be lost (Bacchi, 2009).

This elaborated review of the WPR method and questions is done in order for the reader to follow the analysis, and to understand what is being questioned and interrogated. The critical view of the representation is necessary in order to analyze whether the way Afghan women's voices are represented construct the possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and mobilize on social media. The WPR additionally consists of multiple discursive elements which are used to code the data and eventually used in the analysis. The discursive elements of the four questions are elaborated in section 3.7.1. The discursive elements expand on the representation of the problem(s), which gives this thesis a better base to analyze and discuss upon, because it helps me emphasize how the way Afghan women's voices are represented ultimately construct the possibilities for them to be heard and mobilize on social media.

3.7 Presentation of The Empirical Data Sample

In the following, the empirical data sample is presented. The data sample is, as previously described, collected through a manual search and scouting of text posts and visuals on X (see section 3.2.1). In this section, I present what data I have chosen, why this data is chosen, and how it is used in the analysis.

I have found and selected several posts that consist of shorter and longer texts, in which some have visuals that are related to the text post. More specifically, I found more than 350 posts which I judged and weighed in accordance with their relevance, richness, and/or activity (Kozinets, 2020). Many of the posts conveyed the same meaning, reflecting recurring patterns in how Afghan women's voices are represented on X under the four hashtags. Out of more than 350 posts, I chose 91 posts to conduct my analysis upon. This decision is made for both practical and analytical reasons. Firstly, given the depth of a discourse analysis, it is important that I am able to get a nuanced understanding of the empirical data. The WPR analysis encourages a critical review of the data (Bacchi, 2009), and if I were to analyze more than 350 posts this might get lost in a superficial analysis. Secondly, the posts were selected in relation to their relevance for the analysis (Bacchi, 2009; Kozinets, 2020). It is important to note that while nonprobability sampling ensures analytical focus, it also introduces the possibility of sampling bias. When I, as a researcher, have a specific research question in mind that I want to

answer, I risk choosing data that can specifically answer this question, and certain other relevant nuances or discourses might be lost (Jager et al., 2021, pp. 15-16; Kozinets, 2020). I try to avoid this through transparency in criteria for selection and continuous reflections on my own positionality.

The four hashtags in the figure below are the ones from which the empirical material has been scouted and selected.

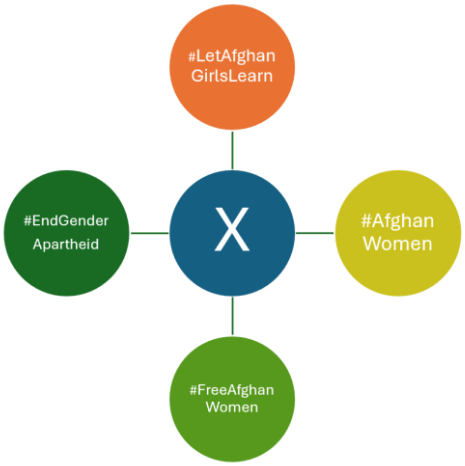

Figure 4 - The selected hashtags

Based on my objective of analyzing the representation of Afghan women's voices on X, these hashtags are found to contain the most relevant posts. While this approach excludes less commonly used hashtags, and therefore potentially other marginal perspectives, it allows for a focused exploration of the most influential and widely shared spaces. The three hashtags, #LetAfghanGirlsLearn, #AfghanWomen, and #FreeAfghanWomen mainly consist of posts that comment on Afghan women's fight for their rights, where #EndGenderApartheid also has posts that comment on the situation in Iran. These posts are selected out and only posts that comment on or provide insights into Afghan women's voices are selected. Within the other three hashtags a necessary filtering is also done in order to obtain the dataset that is best fit for my MA thesis.

The data is chosen based on the selection criteria as previously outlined and discussed in section 3.4. The analysis is based on retracted quotes from the posts, where some are cloaked, either by altering it or by cutting in it, and on specific descriptions of visuals such as what is being done or what they are wearing in the picture and/or video (Kozinets, 2020). Therefore, only posts that consisted of text and/or connecting visuals are selected, posts that only wrote the

hashtags are not selected. The quotes and descriptions of the posts are found in Appendix 1. In the analysis, the profiles behind the posts are written and referred to as e.g., User001 (see Appendix 1).

3.7.1 Coding

In this section, I describe how I have coded the empirical data sample. The coding is done in alignment with the discursive elements of the WPR approach such as binaries and categories. This contributes to the analysis, and it ensures a systematic interrogation of the discourses. The coding categories are found in Appendix 3.

As previously described the WPR approach presents multiple discursive elements which are used to question and interrogate the problem representation (Bacci, 2009). The coding reflects my MA thesis WPR questions, including the relevant discursive elements. Firstly, the posts are coded in relation to how the problem representation is described and framed, and how this affects how Afghan women's voices are represented. This includes the formulation and language used to describe Afghan women's voices. This revealed the dominating discourses, which structures the analysis. Next step emphasizes the hidden meaning of the discourses and narratives present in the posts. In this step the discursive elements of binaries, key concepts, and categories are additionally coded for (Bacchi, 2009, p. 7). This is for example the binary, *empowerment vs. victimhood*, and the categories of *Afghan women* and/or *the international community* (see Appendix 1 and 3). These helps uncover how meaning is constructed in the representations of Afghan women's voices and equally reveals the dominating discourses. The third and final step includes coding the data for discursive effects and/or subjectification effects. Discursive effects refer to whether it affects groups differently, including what ways of speaking are made possible or constrained because of these representations, and subjectification effects highlight that how other people describe others can become the way they are seen, see themselves or are treated (Bacchi, 2009, pp. 15-16). Throughout the coding, I question the data on e.g., whether the subjectification might be enabled by how Afghan women's voices are represented. Despite the coding being described in specific steps, they are all interconnected and are conducted alongside each other.

4. Theory

In the following section, I outline and discuss the theoretical framework of my MA thesis. Firstly, I present and discuss the theoretical understanding of feminist postcolonialism. Secondly, I outline Gayatri Spivak's (2010) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (1988) theoretical frameworks, respectively. Afterwards, I present and discuss how these two theories relate to each other, and how I use them as theoretical frameworks in my analysis. I use the revised edition of Spivak's essay (2010), in which she continues to highlight how the subaltern cannot speak, but different to her first edition of the essay, acknowledges the subaltern's agency (Spivak, 2010, pp. 63-64). I have chosen the revised edition because it emphasizes the complexity of agency within subaltern voices, aligning with Mohanty's (1988) critique of Western feminist representations of Third World women as homogeneous and oppressed. Lastly, I present my theoretical and analytical framework.

4.1 Feminist Postcolonialism: An Introduction

Feminist postcolonialism studies how colonialism and neocolonialism intersect with other systems of power such as race, class, and gender to shape women's lives in different ways. It explores how these power structures affect women's rights and/or agency depending on different contexts (Rajan and Park, 2005, p. 53). It is a unique theoretical way of thinking because it focuses on colonialism as a barrier in achieving an equal world, and it views women, as a group, as the most affected by the injustice, and the ones who will lead the changes towards a more just future (Rajan and Park, 2005, p. 67). In my thesis, feminist postcolonialism is central, because it provides a critical lens to analyze how Afghan women's voices are represented on X through the intersection of power and colonialism.

Within postcolonial feminism the scholarship upon the Third world and 'Third World woman' is central, and the research often focuses on issues within representation and/or questions of location (Rajan and Park, 2005, p. 54). Rajan and Park (2005, p. 54) point out that postcolonial feminists often criticize the notion of the 'universal woman', because it oversimplifies women from the Third World as one and the same, ignoring their diverse experiences. Mohanty (1988) highlights this in her criticism of Western feminism by pointing out how "the analysis of these group identities cannot be based on universalistic, ahistorical categories" (Mohanty, 1988, p. 78). If 'Third World women' are regarded as one universal and homogenous group, the

complexity of their experiences are lost, and the layers of 'Third World women' are removed. In short, Western feminist merely reproduce the colonization of the Third world (Mohanty, 2007, p. 220). Based on this, Mohanty's (1988) scholarship, situated within postcolonial feminism and anti-imperialism, attempts, according to McEwan (2001, p. 97), to reorient Western feminism so it is no longer regarded as the normative and exclusive understanding of feminism, rather it is just one of plural feminist directions that are situated within specific contexts. In relation to this, it is evident that the positioning of the scholar is important. My position within the context of my research upon Afghan women's voices have to be systematically foregrounded in order to acknowledge my position, bias, and limits (Rajan and Park, 2005, pp. 56-57). As previously discussed in relation to my positionality (see section 3.1), I am a white Western feminist doing research on women from Afghanistan. Rajan and Shark (2005, p. 57) argues that the researcher's primary responsibility is to resist the hegemonic discourses of Third World women that often frame them as victims. The researcher should engage with "issues of power, inequality (...), and resist focusing on text, imagery and representation alone." (McEwan, 2001, p. 105). Building upon this, I use Spivak's (2010) and Mohanty's (1988) theoretical frameworks to analyze what Afghan women's voices are represented as to understand the underlying power dynamics and discuss how this constructs the possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and/or mobilize on social media. In light of how feminist postcolonialism cautions against focusing solely on text or imagery, as written by McEwan (2001), I treat social media posts, under the four hashtags, on X, as discursive practices that construct meaning and reproduce power. Using Bacchi's WPR approach (2009), I analyze how the representations of Afghan women's voices on X are constructed as part of broader feminist postcolonial power relations. This allows me to go beyond simply describing representations and instead examine how discourse shapes what is seen as a problem and what forms of mobilisation are made possible or limited. To sum up, I acknowledge my position as a Western feminist by critically interrogating postcolonial power structures, rather than simply reducing Afghan women's voices to a category of victims as 'Third World women' are often portrayed as (Mohanty, 1988).

Another critical point within feminist postcolonialism is the way First world women, or Western feminist, are often portrayed in direct contrast to 'Third World women' (Mohanty, 1988, 2007). Mohanty argues that the representation of Western feminism is enabling and sustaining the representation of 'Third World women'. When women from the Third World are categorized as in need of saving and/or oppressed, it stands in direct contrast to Western

feminist who are described as empowered, educated, and free to make their own decisions (Mohanty, 2007, pp. 222-223). Mohanty views this construction or contrast as a form of discursive colonization by Western feminist because they are discursively positioning themselves as the opposite (Arnfred, 2007, p. 210). By doing so Western feminist forgoes the consequences of what this particular research has on the world order (Mohanty, 2007, p. 220). They disregard the consciousness of research ethics and overlook how the way they position Western feminism in contrast to 'Third World women' is reproducing existing colonial power dynamics (Mohanty, 2007, p. 220). In my MA thesis, this is relevant because I question how Afghan women's voices are represented, and which problems this raises. By critically engaging with these discourses, I aim not to reproduce dominant power structures, but to question their legitimacy and remain attentive to how different forms of power intersect (Arnfred, 2007, p. 209). To sum up, in my MA thesis, I build upon Mohanty's (1988, p. 82) critique of how 'Third World' differences are enabling and sustaining Western feminist identity. Rather than reproducing these notions, I aim to disrupt them by critically interrogating the self-presentation of Western feminism and its role in shaping the dominating discourses. This is reflected in my analysis, where I research how Afghan women's voices are represented, particularly through discourses of victimhood and agency, and how these discourses either reinforce or resist the dominating portrayal.

Feminist postcolonialism, as described above, examines the colonial power dynamics that intersect with other systems of power (Rajan and Shark, 2005). This has a conceptual expression, namely intersectionality, which is an analytical approach that aims to ensure that none of the different power axes such as race, gender, and class, from which power is often structured, is left out of the analysis (Arnfred, 2007, p. 209). While intersectionality is a central critical tool within feminist postcolonialism (Arnfred, 2007), I do not use it as an approach in my thesis, because I am not able to, as mentioned in Methodology, analyze from who the different posts on X are from, and therefore cannot identify which intersecting categories of power are in play. The representations of Afghan women's voices are the texts and visuals found under the different posts within certain hashtags. This being said, intersectionality of power is still utilized in this thesis, because I analyze how the intersecting power of colonialism affects the representations posted upon X. Therefore, while intersectionality is not being used to analyze the intersecting power of race, gender, and class, it is still used to explore how postcolonial power dynamics intersect with the discourses through which Afghan women's

voices are represented, and how this constructs the possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and mobilize on social media.

4.2 An Introduction to Spivak's and Mohanty's Theoretical Framework

In the following section Spivak's (2010) and Mohanty's (1988) theoretical framework is introduced and outlined. Both Spivak (2010) and Mohanty (1988) are important figures within feminist postcolonialism, and they provide critical tools to analyze the representation of 'Third World women', the Subaltern, and the power dynamics embedded in dominating discourses. While their frameworks are only introduced here, they are discussed in greater depth in later sections (see section 4.3)

Spivak (2010), in alignment with her feminist postcolonial thought, critiques the structures of representation that prevent the subaltern from fully speaking or being heard, emphasizing the epistemic violence embedded in these discourses. Spivak argues that when the subaltern is continuously ignored, it willingly prolongs the arm of the imperialist project (Spivak, 2010, p. 51). The subaltern, in feminist postcolonialism, does not simply refer to being a member of an ethnic minority or from a postcolonial background (Spivak, 2010, p. 65), rather it refers to "the structured place from which the capacity to access power is radically obstructed" (Morris, 2010, p. 8). In short, a subaltern is understood as those in deeply marginalized positions in a postcolonial context where structural conditions actively prevent them from speaking or being heard on their own terms (Spivak, 2010, p. 65). The subaltern's experiences cannot be fully represented or understood because their positions are entangled in power, silence, and structural barriers, hence their experiences cannot be completely brought into the objective world of representation (Spivak, 2010). Spivak (2010) notes that this is because "the staging of the world in representation (...) dissimulates the choice of and need of 'heroes', paternal proxies, [and] agents of power" (Spivak, 2010, p. 33). In other words, Spivak argues that the dominant representations often hide or obscure the underlying power structures that authorize certain actors to speak on behalf of others, while marginalizing and silencing the subaltern voices (Spivak, 2010). Within her feminist postcolonial critique, Spivak applies the concept of epistemic violence to explain how certain voices are silenced from predominating representations (Spivak, 2010, pp. 35-36). The concept of epistemic violence is explicitly articulated in Spivak's well-known phrase, "White men are saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak, 2010, pp. 48-49). It discloses a narrative of the masculine imperialist savior,

which women cannot escape. This narrative is a hallmark of feminist postcolonial critique, as it reveals how power structures construct colonized women as passive victims, stripping them of complexity and agency, and positioning the Western feminist as rescuers (Spivak, 2010). Spivak (2010) presents an example of epistemic violence in her own research, namely the concept of widow sacrifice in India that the British imperium tried to remove. She argues it is an example of how the Western savior is trying to 'save brown women from brown men' and points out how the saving of women becomes a signifier for a 'good society' (Spivak, 2010, pp. 49-51). Spivak (2010) critiques reductive representations of women as victims and emphasizes that "the feminist project is not simply to stage the woman as a victim" (Spivak, 2010, p. 52). This underscores how feminist postcolonial approaches engage critically with power relations and resist simplistic framings of victimhood (McEwan, 2001).

Mohanty (1988) offers a foundational feminist postcolonial critique of the ways Western feminist portray 'Third World women' as a homogeneous group of passive victims, arguing that this representation overlooks the agency and complexity of their lived experiences. She emphasizes the need to understand these women within their socio-political context instead of through the lens of Western discourse of victimhood (Mohanty, 1988). Mohanty argues that feminist analysis must critically examine how the category of woman is positioned within different geopolitical contexts. The assumption that women form a homogeneous group, regardless of class or race, is a colonial logic that underpins much of Western feminist discourse (Mohanty, 2007, pp. 222-223; Mohanty, 1988, p. 64, p. 66). If the woman is used as a universal category it feeds into the assumption of women being oppressed, which then reproduces the picture of the 'Third World woman'. This leads to an existence of Third World women as victims which are in need of saving, and this can ultimately erase their agency and reduce their struggles to discourses of victimhood (Mohanty, 1988, pp. 65-66; Mohanty, 2007, pp. 222-224). In the context of feminist postcolonial theory, this reinforces Western power structures that deny the subaltern's voice (Spivak, 2010). Such representations, particularly in relation to Afghan women, limits their agency, reducing them to symbols of victimhood while silencing their potential social and political roles (Mohanty, 2007, p. 242). Mohanty (1988) argues that the Western feminist portrayal of 'Third World women' stands in contrast to the representation of Western women, who are often depicted as educated and free to make their own decisions (Mohanty, 1988, p. 65). This dichotomy is key to understanding how Western feminism positions itself as the norm or referent that defines and 'rescues' the 'Third World women' (Mohanty, 1988). The image of Western women as empowered and the 'Third World woman'

as helpless, is actively sustaining the Western feminist framework that defines and controls the representation of women in non-Western contexts. By framing 'Third World women' as victims, Western feminism not only erases the diversity and agency of these women but also reinforces its own authority, enabling the continued dominance of Western thought and ideals (Mohanty, 1988, p. 64-65; Mohanty, 2007, p. 246). In short, the binary between Western feminist and 'Third World women' reinforces hierarchies of power, which feminist postcolonial theorists like Mohanty seek to dismantle (Mohanty, 2007, pp. 223-224). Building upon this, my MA thesis' analysis focuses on a deeper interrogation of the discourses and discursive elements that construct women as either powerless or empowered.

4.3 Applying Spivak and Mohanty: A Framework for Agency and Representation

In addressing how Afghan women's voices are represented on X after the Taliban's takeover in 2021 and how this, subsequently, construct possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and mobilize on social media, I draw on insights from Spivak's (2010) and Mohanty's (1988) theoretical frameworks. Both theories offer critical tools from which representation can be analyzed, and by merging these frameworks, I am able to interpret how representations of Afghan women's voices on X can shape possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and mobilize on social media.

4.3.1 Representation of Afghan Women's Voices

The representation of Afghan women's voices is deeply intertwined with postcolonial power dynamics, where certain discourses often shape how they and their voices are understood and heard (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 2010). Therefore, it is important to examine the representations of Afghan women's voices. As previously mentioned, Spivak (2010) argues that the subaltern cannot speak because they are silenced by underlying power structures. In my MA thesis, the subaltern is Afghan women, because their capacity of access to political power is obstructed. Afghan women are in a deeply marginalized position, because laws prohibit them from speaking or moving freely in Afghanistan (Akbari and True, 2022). When the subaltern cannot speak, others speak for them, and who this 'other' is, is often determined by the power dynamics of the real world (Spivak, 2010). Spivak (2010) illustrates this logic through a parallel to Freud's psychoanalysis, where the subject, particularly the woman, is interpreted rather than allowed to speak. Drawing on this, she argues that postcolonial power structures similarly

construct colonized women as passive figures, whose experiences must be represented by others. This reinforces the subaltern's silence by positioning them not as speaking subjects, but as those in need of help (Spivak, 2010, p. 49). It is inevitably creating a hierarchy within the world, where the West is seen as superior, and the 'other' is seen as the subaltern (Spivak, 2010). Mohanty (1988) equally supports the notion of a hierarchy because one group is subscribed to certain discourses which the other group is not. She argues that when women are presented as a homogenous category, it entails an assumption of women being an already constituted group that is characterized by victimhood and powerlessness (Mohanty, 1988, p. 66). Mohanty (2007, p. 222) further argues that universal ethnocentrism can be produced through analysis, and therefore it is important that I am aware of how Afghan women are represented to question whether a reproduction of the 'Third World woman' is occurring.

4.3.2 Agency in Representation: Colonial Discourses and Power Dynamics

When researching how Afghan women's voices are represented in light of the global power dynamics, it is relevant to analyze how these representations constrain or enables the agency of Afghan women's voices. In different ways, Spivak (2010) and Mohanty (1988) both offer perspectives in relation to women's agency. As discussed above, Spivak (2010) argues that the subaltern cannot speak for themselves, and therefore others are speaking on their behalf. It may seem like she removes Afghan women's agency through this, but she simultaneously highlights how they do have the possibility to resist. In short, agency does exist, but the structures of power hinder the expression of that agency (Spivak, 2010, pp. 63-64). Mohanty (1988) equally emphasizes that 'Third World women' possess agency and often actively negotiate their socio-political realities. Despite Spivak (2010) and Mohanty (1988) both arguing that women indeed have agency, they equally argue that this agency is constrained by postcolonial discourses and real-world power dynamics. Mohanty (1988, p. 79) argues that when women are assumed to be an oppressed group by Western feminist, they alone become true subjects, and 'Third World women' never rise above their object status. Third world women are described as poor, ignorant, and victims, whereas western women are described as educated, modern, and autonomic (Mohanty, 1988, p. 65). This distinction between women in the Third World and the self-presentation of Western feminist contributes to a discursive colonization that simplifies diverse realities and erases the agency and complexity of women in postcolonial contexts (Mohanty, 1988, p. 65; Arnfred, 2007, p. 210). In short, when Afghan women's voices are represented through postcolonial discourses on X, their historical, social, and cultural

background is often removed, and they are solely described as victims. Similarly, Spivak (2010, p. 52) argues that when imperialists position themselves as the establisher of 'the good society', they are marking women as an object of protection, which entails that they cannot protect themselves. Building upon this, both Mohanty (1988) and Spivak (2010) argue, as previously described, that when the subaltern/'Third World women', thus Afghan women, are positioned as a homogenous group, their lived experiences and identity is deduced to one single understanding. This, Mohanty (2007, p. 242) argues, removes the historical and political agency of women, hence they just become what other people ascribe them to be. One should rather, as Spivak states understand the subaltern as "irretrievably heterogenous" (Spivak, 2010, p. 38), which refers to how people consist of multiple experiences, and not something that can be analyzed as a universal group (Mohanty, 1988, p. 78).

4.3.3 Constructed Possibilities Through Representations

The above described theoretical perspectives on framing and agency are crucial for the analysis of how the representations of Afghan women's voices shape possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and mobilize on social media. Spivak suggests that "(...) the possibility of collectivity itself is persistently foreclosed through the manipulation of female agency" (Spivak, 2010, p. 38). This highlights how the manipulation of female agency by dominant power structures suppresses women's voices and their potential for action. The structures of power prevent women from standing together by restricting their autonomy (Spivak, 2010). In short, I argue that the way in which Afghan women's voices are framed, within the dominating discourse, constructs the possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and mobilize. When their voices are framed through e.g., victimhood, the possibilities for Afghan women to self-represent and mobilize on social media might be significantly restricted. Mohanty similarly argues that when Third World differences are produced, through e.g., discourses, Western feminism colonialize the complexity of women, which takes away the layers of the 'Third World women' (Mohanty, 2007, p. 220). Building upon this, a dominant discourse not only creates its own 'other' but also asserts itself as the point of reference, using this position to shape and regulate how marginalized groups are represented and understood (Mohanty, 1988, p. 64). This entails that when someone creates or reinforces an existing discourse through e.g., posting/re-posting on X, they often use their own lived experiences as the standard. The 'other', in my MA thesis, Afghan women, are then understood in relation to this standard, which can lead to a misrepresentation of their experiences and/or voices. The act of defining the other is,

whether done consciously or not, a form of power. By setting oneself as the standard, those in power control how 'others' are perceived and represented, which reinforces their dominance over the 'other' (Mohanty, 1988). To sum up, when certain discourses are employed, they establish the standard for the possibilities constructed, exercising power by shaping how Afghan women are represented. These representations in turn shape the construction of possibilities, influencing the possibilities for their voices to be heard and for them to mobilize on social media.

4.4 My Theoretical Framework and Analytical Lens

In the following, I narrow down how I use Spivak (2010) and Mohanty's feminist postcolonial theories to interpret my empirical data. The analysis itself is structured through Carol Bacchi's (2009) WPR analysis, which I have outlined and discussed in section 3.6, whilst the theoretical framework is the lens from which I analyze and unpack the power relations embedded in the main discourses.

My theoretical lens is based in a feminist postcolonial theoretical framework. As previously described, this line of thinking sets out to analyze the intersecting power structures. In my thesis, I analyze the postcolonial power dynamics that intersect with the representation of Afghan women's voices on X. I use the fundamental theoretical principles from Spivak (2010) and Mohanty (1988) to analyze upon the Subaltern and 'Third World women', which in my project is Afghan women. I analyze which discourses are dominating the representation of Afghan women's voices and building upon Spivak (2010) and Mohanty (1988), I analyze whether these discourses impact the Subalterns ability to speak and be heard. Are Afghan women discursively described in a way that portrays them as victims and/or agents? In relation to this I equally use the theoretical insights to analyze whether Afghan women's voices are grouped and homogenized into a single narrative or if they are represented as a diverse group. It is important to note that I, in my analysis, use phrases such as "Afghan women's voices" and "Afghan women". These should not be understood as unified or direct experiences, rather they should be read as the way Afghan women and their voices are constructed, represented, and interpreted in posts on X. Further, I apply the theoretical insights upon how Western feminism positions itself in contrast to 'Third World women' to analyze how posts on X potentially frames Afghan women's voices as either legitimized or marginalized.

I use Spivak's (2010) and Mohanty's (1988) theoretical perspectives to analyze and interpret upon the discourses and discursive elements identified in the empirical data sample from X. I apply key theoretical concepts such as the subaltern and 'Third World woman', I ask whether Afghan women can speak or be heard, and if the way they are represented is reproducing postcolonial power structures (Spivak, 2010; Mohanty, 1988). I argue that the way postcolonial power dynamics prevents women, specifically Afghan women, from exercising their agency and instead are described as victims in need of saving, or as agents from a Western or homogeneous perspective, frames the possibilities for how Afghan women are heard and understood within the dominating discourses. When Afghan women's voices are represented through victimhood rather than agency and activism or opposite as locally resilient rather than in need of external saving, it influences how Afghan women are discursively heard and imagined. If they are continuously represented through postcolonial discourses, the constructed possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and participate are constrained and, as Spivak notes, "(...) the possibility of collectivity itself is persistently foreclosed (...)" (Spivak, 2010, p. 38).

5. Analysis

In this section, I analyze how Afghan women's voices are represented on X after the Taliban takeover in 2021 and discuss how they construct possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and mobilize on social media. The analysis is done upon the empirical data sample collected on X from four different hashtags: #AfghanWomen, #LetAfghanGirlsLearn, #EndGenderApartheid, and #FreeAfghanWomen, which can be found in Appendix 1. The empirical data sample is analyzed through Bacchi's (2009) analytical framework, WPR, which I have altered to align with the aims and scope of my MA thesis (see section 3.6). The data is simultaneously interpreted through the theoretical lens of feminist postcolonialism, specifically Spivak's (2010) essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* and Mohanty's (1988, 2007) critique of Western feminist's representations of 'Third World women'. The analysis is built up around four main discourses, which are presented in the section below, and each one is analyzed through the analytical and theoretical framework. The analysis ends in an analytical reflection on how the representations of Afghan women's voices on X construct the possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and mobilize on social media.

5.1 Introduction to the Main Discourses and the Analytical Framework

In the following section I outline and present the four main discourses identified in my empirical data sample. Discourses are, as previously written, defined as a system of statements and shared meaning shaped by social and institutional factors rather than individual opinions (Hollway, 1983, as cited in Gavey, 1989, pp. 463-464). I argue that the posts from X are not isolated personal opinions, rather they are an expression of a pattern in language, key concepts, and/or ideologies produced and reproduced through social and institutional meaning sites. Drawing on this understanding, I have identified four main discourses in posts on X from the four different hashtags; the discourse of agency, the discourse of victimhood, the discourse of international intervention, and the discourse of local resilience. The discourses are identified through a systematic coding of the empirical data material, specifically through the language, key concepts, categories, and binaries (see section 3.7.1). The discourse labels are not absolute or fixed in the empirical data, rather they are interpretive categories that help expose how meaning and power is constructed.

My analysis draws on posts from X under the four hashtags that, in my MA thesis, represent Afghan women's voices. However, due to the nature of the platform, information about the

socio-political contexts of these users is limited. As such, I do not claim to represent Afghan women as a unified category, but rather I explore how their voices are articulated and represented within the four main discourses. Throughout this analysis, the phrase 'Afghan women's voices' and 'Afghan women' therefore refers to the way they and their voices are constructed and represented in posts on X.

Overall, in the discourse of agency, Afghan women's voices are represented as empowered individuals described through strength and bravery. Within the discourse of victimhood Afghan women's voices are represented as helpless and hopeless women. The discourse of international intervention represents Afghan women's voices as in need of external saving, often from Western actors. And lastly, the discourse of local resilience constructs representations of Afghan women's voices as resisting and coping with the situation they are in. Each of these discourses represent Afghan women's voices in different ways and contributes to constructing the possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and participate on social media. The discourses are, in this section, set up in a binary way, but are in the analysis critically questioned and interrogated. The four discourses not only define the problem but also shape the ways in which Afghan women's voices are heard, understood, and acted upon. Therefore, the discourses are questioned in relation to how the Afghan women's voices are represented and how it shapes the possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and mobilize.

It is important to note that the analysis does not follow the four questions of WPR in a fixed sequence, rather they are addressed throughout the analysis as it unfolds (see section 3.6). The posts used in the analysis are written and referred to as e.g., User001, and can be found in Appendix 1; the page number refers to where the post appears in the Appendix.

5.2 Agency and Voice: Empowerment or Constrain?

In alignment with Bacchi's (2009) WPR framework, I ask what the problem in the discourse of agency is represented to be. The problem is framed around the need to acknowledge the resistance and resilience of Afghan women despite the circumstances they are facing, namely how Afghan women's voices are constrained because of the patriarchal system that Taliban has enforced since the takeover in 2021 (Akbari and True, 2022; UN Women, 2024). This framing, however, may narrow the understanding of Afghan women's agency by focusing

predominantly on a homogenized notion of agency, potentially overlooking other forms of agency that exist beyond.

Afghan women's voices are, within this discourse, represented as agents who are able to resist Taliban's constraints. User026 (2024, p. 6) emphasizes a representation of Afghan women's voices as being, regardless of the consequences, at the forefront of defiance. Representing a global civil society alliance dedicated to empowering citizen action, including that of Afghan women, User026 (2024, p. 6), frames Afghan women in a way that is set to empower. This representation depicts Afghan women as refusing to fully submit to the conditions that Taliban has imposed, instead they are finding varied ways to resist and assert agency. This is equally highlighted when a user, who states that the purpose of the profile is to advocate for Afghan girl's right to an education, writes that "Afghanistan women refuse to go backwards" (User075, 2025, p. 20). Drawing upon Mohanty (1988, 2007), this illustrates how 'Third World women' actively negotiate their agency within complex socio-political contexts. Such representations frame agency in ways that challenge what Afghan women have previously been subjected to, instead recognizing Afghan women, or those represented within this discourse, as active participants in shaping their own voices. This is equally highlighted in posts from User023 (2025, p. 6), a human rights researcher, User024 (2024, p. 6), an Afghan student, and User025 (2025, p. 6), a journalist for women and human rights, featuring videos where women are singing and protesting for Afghan women. User024 (2024, p. 6) is a video of a woman with a hijab and a mask, who is singing about the conditions which many Afghan women are subjected to, and how they will fight it. She sings, "My voice is not awrah" (User024, 2024, p. 6). The word awrah refers to the intimate parts of a woman's body which should be covered and hidden (Women's Studies in Religion Program, 2023). It can, in context of this, be read as a symbol for resistance against silencing Afghan women's voices. Rather than being seen as shameful, such voices are framed as expressions of agency which should not be covered up. Given that User024 (2024, p. 6) identifies as an Afghan student, it highlights how Afghan women, in various contexts, exercise their agency to mobilize and be heard. Equally, it displays how hashtags and social media are powerful tools for visibility and amplifying marginalized voices (Meraz, 2025; Chen et al., 2018; Görgülü and Çınar, 2023; Dejmanee et al., 2020). When videos are being posted and re-posted on social media, they reach a bigger audience often across borders (Görgülü and Çınar, 2023, p. 106), which potentially amplifies the representations of Afghan women by creating spaces where their voices can be heard and support can be mobilized.

Despite this, it is necessary to question whether the way Afghan women's voices are represented through the discourse of agency, is contested with postcolonial power structures. As previously mentioned, a 'problem' within the discourse of agency is that the representation is often narrowed to a homogenized notion of agency. Drawing on Mohanty (1988), when women are presented as a homogenous category, it entails an assumption of how women form a fixed, unified group that is often characterized by victimhood or powerlessness. I argue that this is equally valid when analyzing the discourse of agency. When Afghan women's voices are predominantly framed through a singular representation of agency, it entails an assumption that all Afghan women are exercising the same form of agency which flattens diversity. This is reflected in the following post where a simplification of Afghan women's agency is found, "Afghan women have been banned from schools, workplaces, and public life, yet they refuse to be silenced." (User089, 2025, p. 25), where the phrase 'Afghan women' is used to refer to a homogenized group rather than recognizing individual experiences and perspectives. Other examples include User003 (2025, pp. 1-2) and User036 (2025, pp. 9-10) who describe the "strength in their survival" and "they persist with unimaginable courage". The posts from the three different profiles that represent human rights advocacy (User089, 2025, p. 25), justice-seeker (User003, 2025, pp. 1-2) and an individual who believes in stars (User036, 2025, pp. 9-10) frames Afghan women's voices through the words "their" and "they", which implies that they are speaking about all Afghan women without distinguishing or acknowledging that their might be different forms of agency exercised by Afghan women. This risks homogenizing Afghan women and the key concept of agency into a singular framing which is dominated by a Western ideology of agency, because it is defined by profiles who might not be Afghan women. Further, agency, within these posts, is primarily depicted as a personal or emotional triumph, rather than a form of political resistance. As such, the focus remains on their ability to endure rather than on their capacity to act and resist within specific socio-political contexts. A consequence of this is that Afghan women cannot move away from the object status which they have been imposed, rather they continue to be framed as an oppressed group due to the ongoing reproduction of 'Third World women' (Mohanty, 1988, p. 79). This simplification and reproduction might produce subjectification effects, as Afghan women, in various contexts, are represented through a homogenized notion of agency. They become subjects who are represented as courageous, and not as diverse resilient agents shaping their own conditions. Such representations can take away the local activism and resilience of many Afghan women, and instead of encouraging empowerment, it can marginalize some of their voices. This is

equally reflected in a post from User065, a human rights activist, who writes, “Their unwavering determination to resist oppression must not be forgotten by the world.” (User065, 2025, pp. 16-17). Although it might come across as supportive for certain representations of Afghan women’s agency, it lacks critical engagement with the power structures involved. Rather than acknowledging the diverse ways Afghan women exercise agency, it frames them as vulnerable individuals in need of rescue. Building upon Mohanty’s (1988) feminist postcolonial critique, I argue that this is an example of ethnocentrism because it reproduces the notion of ‘Third World women’. As a human rights activist it would be expected for the profile to challenge these power structures involved, but instead by writing how “they must not be forgotten by the world” (User065, 2025, pp. 16-17), it centers the attention of the Western world who must not forget Afghan women instead of interrogating how some Afghan women resist and navigate in the oppression they face. In many ways it simplifies Afghan women’s experiences into one and falls into an ethnocentric pattern that disregards the different experiences of agency Afghan women might have or exercise.

The above section has analyzed how Western and colonial power dynamics shape the discourse of agency, highlighting how Afghan women’s voices are, in different posts, represented and often constrained by a homogenized key concept of agency. Through this analysis, it has become evident that the discourse of agency is shaped by a binary between empowerment and victimhood, which shapes how Afghan women’s voices are represented. User077, a surgeon, writes, “The future of Afghanistan is being (...) led by brave Afghan women” (User077, 2024, p. 20) and User080, an anonymous profile with a picture of a woman with a headscarf, posts, “Afghan women are resilient, courageous, and unwavering in their fight for justice and equality.” (User080, 2024, p. 21). The way Afghan women, in these posts, are framed as brave, resilient, and courageous are empowering on the surface, but these representations are only made possible because of the underlying narrative of victimhood. The anonymity of the profile, combined with the symbolic imagery such as the headscarf, may contribute to the binary framing of Afghan women as either victims or empowered agents. This framing risks reducing their agency as a simple reaction to oppression rather than recognizing the complexity of their political subjectivity (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 2010). The concept of being brave is because they are resisting oppression, resilience is conditioned by hardship, and courage is necessary as a response to their suffering. In short, the binary between empowerment and victimhood is constructed through the specific ways Afghan women’s experiences are represented in the discourse of agency. It limits how certain Afghan women’s voices are or can be represented

because it does not allow the nuances within the multiple experiences. A discursive effect of this binary is the construction of an idealized form of agency that must be represented through or based on victimhood in order to achieve tangible support. In many representations, Afghan women's voices are only recognized as empowered agents if they are framed as having overcome victimhood or hardship. For instance, posts such as "The bravest, most resilient women I know are in Afghanistan (…)" (User061, 2024, p. 15) or "the heroic women of Afghanistan who have been fighting injustice and gender inequality" (User091, 2025, pp. 25-26) highlight empowerment through narratives of struggle and resistance. I argue that the binary between empowerment and victimhood is an example of epistemic violence (Spivak, 2010) because it erases or misrepresents certain Afghan women's voices within the discourse of agency. Their own knowledge and actions of agency are overlooked, and instead uniform concepts of empowerment are imposed. This is reflected in posts that describe Afghan women as "symbols of bravery and courage" (User030, 2025, p. 8), which, while seemingly positive, construct agency through emotional endurance rather than political resistance. As a result, Afghan women's agency becomes constrained within the binary of empowerment versus victimhood, restricting the complexity of their agency. To sum up, Afghan women's voices are represented through the discourse of agency, but it is often represented in a manner that constrains them to a homogenized concept of agency that oversimplifies their experiences, and the consequences of this is that Afghan women's voices might not be heard.

5.3 Victimhood and Silence: A Limiting Frame

The second discourse identified in the empirical data sample is the discourse of victimhood, where Afghan women's voices are primarily represented as victims and/or oppressed. The problem within this representation is that Afghan women are, automatically, perceived as victims, a framing that limits their agency and confines them to representations of victimhood. Their voices are described through words such as hopeless, disappearing, and oppressed (User002, 2025, p. 1; User011, 2024, p. 3; User039, 2025, p. 10), and through posts such as "Afghan women isn't just oppressed, it is extermination from public life" (User040, 2025, p. 10), "Afghan women will remain trapped in a cycle of oppression" (User047, 2025, p. 11), and "the lives of Afghan girls have been shattered, with no hope for education, freedom, or a future." (User050, 2024, pp. 11-12). Although the posts are from profiles representing a human rights activist (User050, 2024, pp. 11-12), a political science student (User047, 2025, p. 11), and a figure opposing illegal occupation (User040, 2025, p. 10), each approaching Afghan

women's voices from different perspectives, they all discursively categorize Afghan women's voices as victims. This, as Mohanty (1988, 2007) points out, oversimplifies their lived experiences, and deems them into a uniform group, which ultimately prolongs the arm of postcolonial power structures. The framing of Afghan women's voices is a central concern within feminist postcolonial critique because it exposes how postcolonial power structures silence subaltern women, casting them as passive victims rather than recognizing their agency (Spivak, 2010). When Afghan women's voices only represent the key concept of victimhood, their agency is stripped from them, and their autonomy is often rendered invisible. They become positioned within rigid binaries of freedom versus oppression, much like the binary of empowerment versus victimhood, which reduces their experiences and silences the complexity of their voices. When Afghan women are represented in this way, one is either oppressed or free, with little space for the nuanced realities in between, and the consequences is that Afghan women's voices are reduced to symbolic figures rather than diverse individuals who act on their own behalf (Mohanty, 1988). The discourse of victimhood could ultimately subjectify Afghan women as victims who are passive and powerless, and it can become how they see themselves, and how others regard them.

When Afghan women are positioned as passive victims who are dependent on others, as User032 writes "Their worlds burn while the world scrolls by" (User032, 2025, pp. 8-9), it can silence their voices, and position them as voiceless (Spivak, 2010, p. 49). User032 (2025, pp. 8-9) is an advocate for Afghan girl's rights to education and therefore represents an external person talking on behalf of Afghan women. This raises a critical question posed by Spivak (2010), "Can the Subaltern speak?" (p. 37). The framing and imagery in the post of how the world is burning amplifies how Afghan women are represented as suffering, while the notion of how the world is just observing through indifferent scrolling underlines the international community's failure to listen to their voices (User032, 2025, pp. 8-9). It underscores Spivak's (2010) argument that the subaltern's voice is silenced by dominant discourses, here, a discourse of victimhood that frames Afghan women's voices primarily as oppressed. So, when the suffering is framed in this post, the agency of Afghan women's voices is spoken over, hence it constructs a binary between the oppressed and the savior. This binary, drawing on Spivak's (2010) and Mohanty's (1988) critiques of hierarchical representations, is constructed when Afghan women's own expressions of agency and solutions are overshadowed or spoken over because hegemonic narratives are shaped by dominating actors, which limits the possibility for Afghan women's voices to be heard and recognized as autonomous agents. This binary is

equally reflected in these posts by an eco-feminist, “suicide seems to be the only option” (User018, 2024, pp. 4-5) and an individual who represents justice “[Afghan women are] sentenced to a slow death behind closed doors” (User007, 2025, p. 2). The way the profiles are framing death and/or suicide as the only option for Afghan women to escape is directly reinforcing representations of Afghan women’s voices as helplessness and reinforces the binary between victim and savior. In light of what the profiles (User018, 2024, pp. 4-5; User007, 2025, p. 2) claim to represent, it is striking that they are reproducing representations of Afghan women’s voices as victims and not challenging them. They are, ultimately, reinforcing the dynamic of the subaltern by rendering Afghan women visible only through suffering without enabling them to speak on their own terms (Spivak, 2010). This is supported by Chen et al. (2018, p. 198), who note that hashtag activism can sustain marginalized groups by reinforcing dominant discourses of victimhood. The framing of posts on X under certain hashtags can directly impact how Afghan women’s voices are heard; when posts, such as those by User018 (2024, pp. 4-5) and User007 (2025, p. 2), represent Afghan women primarily as oppressed, they risk perpetuating silence and hindering recognition of Afghan women as active agents.

Drawing on Mohanty’s (1988, pp. 62-65) critique, I argue that characterizing Afghan women as hopeless or helpless (User002, 2025, p. 1; User015, 2024, p. 4) perpetuates a discursive binary between ‘Third World women’ and the self-representation of Western feminists. Afghan women’s voices are being re-colonized, because Afghan women are described in contrast to Western feminists who are framed, implicitly, as empowered, and/or free to make their own decisions (Mohanty, 2007, pp. 222-223). As written in this post by a human rights defender, “Women in Afghanistan have truly lost everything” (User019, 2024, p. 5), Afghan women are represented through the category of victims, and they are, despite their possible role as agents, framed as powerless individuals who have nothing left. In contrast, it positions Western feminist as the ones who ‘have it all’, and, in line with Mohanty’s critique (1988), it suggests that progress for Afghan women depends on intervention from external actors. This is echoed in a post by an anonymous profile on X that states, “Afghan women and girls, who are currently treated worse than animals.” (User069, 2024, p. 18). It is a highly emotionally charged message that dehumanizes Afghan women’s voices, and it, implicitly, might suggest that the ‘the imperial’ could offer a better solution. Building on this, I argue that the post (User069, 2024, p. 18) creates a notion of Western feminists being on a moral higher ground, and it reinforces Spivak’s (2010) argument, that dominant Western discourses often construct the subaltern as voiceless and in need of rescue, thereby reinforcing power relations that prevent the subaltern

from speaking on their own terms: it situates one in power and one in need of rescue. The consequences of this are that it oversimplifies diverse realities, and much like within the discourse of agency, erases the complexity of Afghan women. This can, through Bacchi's analytical framework, be analyzed as a discursive effect, because it allows Western feminist to be legitimate agents of change, whilst it deduces Afghan women's voices to represent powerlessness. User069 (2024, p. 18) is not the only one who posts emotionally charged messages, another user asks, "Does dying mean something other than this?" (User088, 2025, p. 24). This post, posted by a reporter and human rights activist, similarly participates in the construction of Afghan women as passive subjects reinforcing the subaltern positioning that Spivak (2010) critiques. Rather than amplifying their agency, the posts are situating Afghan women's voices in a framework of victimhood. A subjectification effect of this is that Afghan women might come to see themselves as victims in which the only escape appears to be death. The political, social, and historical context that Mohanty (1988) emphasizes as essential to avoid universalizing ethnocentrism, is neglected. As a result, Afghan women's voices are framed in a way that reinforces the stereotype critiqued by feminist postcolonialism, namely, the portrayal of Afghan women as oppressed victims, echoing Spivak's (2010) critique of how, "White men [or women] are saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak, 2010, pp. 48-49).

While the discourse of victimhood, as shown throughout the analysis, constructs a binary of oppressed vs. savior, it is important to note that such representations can also be empowering. Building upon Meraz (2025, pp. 481-482), posts on X work as a central channel for the oppressed and marginalized populations in their fight for political and social change. The way Afghan women's voices are framed as "Afghan women [who] enter [the] new year 2025, with heavy heart and no hope." (User066, 2025, p. 17), can in fact draw attention to the discrimination and/or the injustice that Afghan women are facing. It can lead to political changes, disruption, and mobilize international support. This can equally be argued given that the profile behind the posts represent an Afghan chapter of an international women's organization (User066, 2025, p. 17). Based on this, it is important to acknowledge the other implications it can have when Afghan women's voices are represented through the discourse of victimhood. They can, ultimately, contest the dominant discourses and move from superficial feminism to substantial feminism (Varme and Shaban, 2024), where it is the needs and voices of Afghan women who are being heard and acted upon. However, the risk of, as previously described, silencing and homogenizing Afghan women's voices as 'Third World

women' through these representations remain at the forefront, and the continuous interrogation of the discourse of victimhood is essential to understand the underlying postcolonial power structures that are in play. As Chen et al. points out, "It gives voice, but it also silences." (Chen et al., 2018, p. 212).

5.4 International Intervention: Can the Subaltern be Heard?

The discourse of international intervention does, in many ways, address the same representations that the discourse of victimhood does. Despite this, it presents a narrative of Afghan women in need of saving, particularly from the West, which is not commented upon in the discourse of victimhood. The problem within this discourse is that Afghan women's voices are represented as needing external intervention in order to persist and be empowered. As posted on X, "The international community must not turn a blind eye" (User016, 2024, p. 4). The discourse of international intervention frames Afghan women as needing help, while positioning the international community, as Spivak (2010) argues, as the Western intellectual speaking on behalf of the subaltern. This reinforces the hierarchy that both Spivak (2010) and Mohanty (1988) points out is created when the West is positioned as the one who can speak, act, and be heard, whilst the 'other', in this case Afghan women, are the ones who need to be spoken and acted for. This is equally shown in this post by a travel content creator, "The world must recognize this as a crime (...) and take action to restore their rights" (User087, 2025, p. 24), where it is directly stated that the world has to take action upon Afghan women's rights. A discursive effect, based on Bacchi's (2009) terminology, is that the option of local activism could be closed off for Afghan women, and instead the power of action is enabled and legitimized only by the international community. This is equally a direct example of how postcolonial power structures are being reinforced and intersect with the discourse of international intervention, because Afghan women are not described in the post as agents in their own right, rather they are positioned as ones who need to be saved. User020 writes, "(...) be their voice & stand up for their rights since they unfortunately can't" (User020, 2024, p. 5). Spivak's (2010) postcolonial critique is central to understanding the power dynamics intersecting within these examples. When Afghan women are framed as people who cannot speak up for themselves, it limits their agency and silences the local knowledge they possess. Their experiences cannot be fully represented and/or understood because their position is entangled in power, silence, and structural barriers (Spivak, 2010). It reduces Afghan women to passive subjects that are in dire need of international intervention. This being said, the

discourse of international intervention might also be a discourse that brings attention to Afghan women's voices. While the hierarchy between the West and the 'other' is problematic, it can play a role in directing attention to the challenges Afghan women face. When Afghan women's voices are represented through international intervention, it might be mobilizing support. It provides a platform from where their voices can be heard, especially because, as Chen et al. (2018) notes, hashtags are tools that amplify marginalized voices and mobilize collective action. In light of this, the posts from User016 (2024, p. 4), User087 (2025, p. 24) and User020 (2024, p. 5) can also be read as a way of amplifying Afghan women's voices, creating a platform for them to shape the representations and challenge the dominating discourses of victimhood and agency.

As previously mentioned, Spivak (2010) asks whether the subaltern can speak. I ask a similar question: are Afghan women's voices able to be heard? With this in mind, it is essential to interrogate the empirical data to be able to determine whether Afghan women's voices are included or overheard. In the following posts it is clearly written how Afghan women need others to speak on their behalf, "Together, let's be the voice of Afghan women" (User010, 2024, p. 3), and "Let's be their voice. Let's stand together for their future" (User078, 2025, p. 21). If we dive into who and how these posts are written, key concepts such as the subaltern and/or call for action are at the forefront. The post by User010 (2024, p. 3) is written by an organization that advocates for women's rights, and User078 (2025, p. 21) represents an interest in regional analysis. These profiles could, in light of what they represent, construct an understanding and advocacy for global solidarity, but their framing of the posts could equally constrain the representation of Afghan women's local agency. While the calls for action might be seen as efforts to amplify Afghan women's voices on an international platform, from the perspective of the subaltern, such calls risk reinforcing a dynamic where the West assumes a superior position, potentially limiting the agency and voice of Afghan women. It is positioned within the catch-all term of feminist solidarity, which building upon Varma and Shaban (2024, p. 120), entails a risk of it enabling a dynamic where Afghan women's voices become the subalterns that need others to speak on their behalf. It reflects what Spivak (2010) emphasizes, that the postcolonial power dynamics continuously affect the subjectification of Afghan women's voices. It reveals how Afghan women's voices are shaped as victims waiting for 'others' to save them.

Further, as Chen et al. (2018) notes, this way of writing might create a false sense of connectedness between Western feminists and Afghan women, because their language frames it as a shared struggle, particularly the way User010 (2024, p. 3) and User078 (2025, p. 21) are using the phrasing of “let’s”, which in full writes “let us”. This implies that Afghan women and the West are, in some way, fighting the same battle, enabling the West as the agent who gets to speak and Afghan women as the victims who are waiting for an intervention. The framing, in short, enables the continued dominance of Western authority and ideals (Mohanty, 1988). Based on the posts (User010, 2024, p. 3; User078, 2025, p. 21) it is easy to claim that Afghan women’s voices are in fact not heard, rather they are buried under the hierarchy of the Western savior. But in alignment with what has previously been written, the discourse of international intervention should not be understood solely through the binary between victim and savior. The discourse of international intervention can also be viewed as an example of hashtag activism (Chen et al., 2018). A post like this by a self-proclaimed women’s rights activist, “#DearWomenOfAfghanistan we will have to make them care about you!” (User063, 2025, p. 16) might very well be an attempt to ensure that Afghan women are indeed heard. But the post is written as, “we will”, which implies that it is not Afghan women, rather external actors express it, hence it is framed as someone else speaking on behalf of Afghan women. Building on Dejmanee et al. (2020), the post offers a platform for Afghan women’s voices while potentially amplifying the women’s rights activist voice (User063, 2025, p. 16) more than those of the Afghan women themselves. This is equally found in this post, “but I will talk about you, for you. I will shout for you” (User022, 2024, pp. 5-6), where “I will” is similarly used by a profile which has many posts and re-posts that are of an international political character. It might come across as fairly innocent to write how others should fight for the rights of Afghan women, and, as written, it might very well cause mobilisation. But these posts (User063, 2025, p. 16; User022, 2024, pp. 5-6) risk reinforcing feminist postcolonial power structures because of the savior mentality. The posts, whether intentionally or not, construct a discourse of intervention in ways that justify its own role, framing the situation as one that requires a ‘hero’ to step in (Spivak, 2010, p. 33). When the posts, written by women’s rights activists (User063, 2024, p. 16) and a profile interested in international politics (User022, 2024, pp. 5-6), write either “we will” or “I will”, it frames the them as the hero who should step in and ensure that Afghan women persist or can be heard. To sum up, the posts by User022 (2024, p. 6), User078 (2025, p. 21), User010 (2024, p. 3), and User063 (2024, p. 16) illustrate how the representations of Afghan women’s voices are shaped by the discourse of international intervention, which risks silencing Afghan women’s voices by positioning them primarily as

subjects in need of saving. This results in a missed opportunity to acknowledge the complexity of Afghan women's voices and instead reproduces the West as the savior.

5.5 Local Resilience: Representing Voice or Reducing Complexity

In contrast to the above discourse of international intervention, the discourse of local resilience suggests that Afghan women's voices represent an ongoing resistance against oppression. The problem within this discourse is represented as follows: Afghan women face oppression and continue to resist and cope with their struggles, but the way it is represented risks framing their local resilience as a singular narrative of agency. While this problem might be similar to the problem represented within the discourse of agency, the following analysis highlights how they are different.

Afghan women's voices are not purely represented as victims who need to be saved. Rather, their agency and local awareness is acknowledged and highlighted through multiple examples on X (Appendix 1). User049, an advocate for change, writes, "Afghan women are denied education, yet they continue to learn through Women Online University." (User049, 2025, p. 11), which displays how Afghan women are, despite the circumstances they are subjected to by the Taliban (Akbari and True, 2022; UN Women, 2024), continuously resisting by taking an education in an online university. Another example posted by a human and women's rights defender includes an Afghan woman who is painting graffiti on a building which writes, "Freedom is the motto of Afghan women" (User082, 2024, p. 22), and a video of four women singing a protest song, posted by a human rights researcher (User005, 2025, p. 2). These examples of Afghan women's voices represent them as exercising local resilience, a point equally emphasized by both Spivak (2010) and Mohanty (1988). They both argue that the subaltern and/or 'Third World women' do possess agency, and they, in many cases, practice this when navigating in their own socio-political reality (Spivak, 2010; Mohanty, 1988, 2007). Building upon Varme and Shaban (2024, p. 122), this can also be viewed as examples of substantive feminist solidarity because it is constructed as advances that are grounded in the demands and views of the people it affects. The singing and the slogan are directly connected to the people of Afghanistan because it revolves around the situation they experience. For example, the slogan written in graffiti could actively be seeking out the opposition, trying to dismantle the status quo (Varme and Shaban, 2024). A discursive effect from these particular examples is that Afghan women may start to conceptualize their agency; instead of being

framed as passive subjects, they are framed as agents who are capable of resisting. The way Afghan women's voices are represented on X could, ultimately, contribute to shaping framings of empowerment that may support diverse forms of agency, rather than reinforcing frames of victimhood. It could increase the substantive feminist solidarity and ensure that actions are grounded in the local context of Afghan women (Varme and Shaban, 2024). On the other hand, the discursive effect could also be that Afghan women are taking their own voice back through posting these activist acts on X. For example in this post by an Afghan women's activist, "We are Afghan girls and we demand our right to learn" (User035, 2025, p. 9), her framing can be interpreted and read as a challenge to the notion that Afghan women cannot themselves speak or act. Instead, it asserts they are more than capable of acting. This can also be interpreted, through Bacchi's (2009) analytical framework, as a subjectification effect; the acts of activism posted on X can result in Afghan women seeing themselves as able to act and be heard, which ultimately, can disrupt the reproduction of postcolonial power structures.

As previously mentioned, the discourse of local resilience contrasts with the discourse of international intervention, which portrays Afghan women's voices as dependent on external rescue. The expressions of agency and local resilience demonstrate that Afghan women's voices should not be understood as a singular form of agency. This diversity is illustrated by the three different examples of resilience described above (User049, 2025, p. 11; User082, 2024, p. 22; User005, 2025, p. 2). Building on Meraz (2024), these representations enable Afghan women, as a marginalized group, to challenge dominant narratives such as victimhood and external intervention. Moreover, social media activism, through posts and visuals on X, can function as a form of resistance, highlighting issues that might otherwise remain unheard (Görgülü and Çınar, 2023; Chen et al., 2018). A subjectification effect of these representations could be that Afghan women come to perceive themselves more as active agents in shaping their own futures, amplifying their voices to keep resisting and posting it on social media platforms such as X. Despite these representations of Afghan women's voices as strong and resilient, Mohanty (1988) argues that caution is necessary because these representations can still homogenize Afghan women's voices into a singular experience. A post such as this written by a profile that represents itself as an Afghan individual, "Our voices deserve to be heard, our dreams deserve to come true, and our rights in Afghanistan must be restored." (User053, 2025, pp. 12-13) essentially underlines how Afghan women are speaking up for themselves by using words like 'our voices', and 'our dreams', but the word could also cause a construction of a shared belief between Afghan women which neglects the individual desires and experiences.

Afghan women's voices are not a monolith group, and they should not be represented as so, because the dreams or voices can be different depending on where in Afghanistan you are from, which religion you have, and the socio-political context (Mohanty, 1988). Another example is, "Her voice is her power, and no one can silence it." (User004, 2025, p. 2), which similarly implies a homogenized thinking of agency. It suggests that all women in Afghanistan have the same voice, which overlooks how some might have different historical and political barriers that affect their ability to speak out. Further, it might imply that their voice is the only form of empowerment Afghan women can exercise, which oversimplifies their agency and local resilience. This can, building upon Mohanty (1988, 2007), remove the layers of Afghan women's voices, and reproduce the colonization of 'Third World women', which sustains a simplified framing of strength rather than engaging with political struggle or diverse voices.

As shown, the discourse of local resilience simultaneously amplifies and silences Afghan women's representations, which in turn constructs a binary between voice and silence. On the one hand, the acts of taking an online education (User049, 2025, p. 11), painting graffiti with activist slogans (User082, 2024, p. 22), and singing protest songs (User005, 2025, p. 2) celebrate and promote the resilience of Afghan women. But on the other hand, the way local resilience is discursively described through phrases such as "our voices" (User053, 2025, pp. 12-13) and "her voice is her power" (User004, 2025, p. 2), simplifies Afghan women's representations of local resilience into one uniform group. The experiences within Afghan women's voices are, in short, flattened into a 'universal' narrative of resistance. The binary between voice and silence is significant because it reveals a contradiction within how the problem is represented to be. The problem within the discourse represents how Afghan women, despite facing systemic oppression, continue to resist and cope with their circumstances. Yet, within this framing, agency is both promoted through the celebration of their acts of resilience, and through silencing because these acts are often represented in a way where agency is ultimately constrained to a uniform framing. As a result, the discourse asserts the presence of an agency while simultaneously limiting its expression and diversity.

5.6 Reflections on the Four Main Discourses

In the following section I outline and discuss the findings from the analysis of the four main discourses: agency, victimhood, international intervention, and local resilience. Next, I reflect on how the four main discourses interact and contradict each other.

While distinct, the four main discourses can be grouped into two pairs that, in many ways, function as discursive binaries of one another. The first pair is the discourse of victimhood and the discourse of international intervention which, in various ways, have the same effect: namely positioning Afghan women's voices as victims in need of rescue. The representations of Afghan women's voices are within the discourse of victimhood framed as oppressed and hopeless, while simultaneously comparing their situation to suicide and death (User002, 2025, p. 1; User039, 2025, p. 10; (User018, 2024, pp. 4-5; User007, 2025, p. 2). Afghan women's voices are homogenized into a singular narrative of victimhood, a representation that reproduces the category of 'Third World women' and removes the layers of their cultural, social, and/or historical background (Mohanty, 1988, 2007). This is equally reflected in the discourse of international intervention where I problematize the way Afghan women's voices are represented as needing rescue from an external actor. The representations reflect how Afghan women's voices remain subalterns who are not fully heard, because postcolonial power structures are dominating the way their voices are represented. The other pair is the discourse of agency and the discourse of local resilience. Afghan women's agency is represented through words such as brave, strength, and/or resilience, which in many ways captures how Afghan women's voices are in fact represented as agents (User077, 2024, p. 20; User080, 2024, p. 21; User036, 2025, pp. 9-10). But the representation is often reflecting superficial feminist solidarity (Varme and Shaban, 2024) because it does not talk into the actual acts of agency, but rather groups agency into one homogenized category without interrogating the power structures that intersect within the representations (Mohanty, 1988). Similarly, the representations within the discourse of local resilience frames Afghan women's voices through local acts of resilience such as painting graffiti on the walls with slogans (User082, 2024, p. 22), but it oversimplifies the acts of agency by forgoing the many layers Afghan women's resilience holds. The discourses of agency and local resilience highlight Afghan women's agency and ability to act within their local context, yet both remain embedded in postcolonial power structures that often marginalize and silence their voices.

As previously mentioned, the two pairs function, to a large extent, as discursive binaries of each other. The discourse of victimhood and international intervention derive their meaning through the discourse of agency and local resilience. There is no category of victims in need of rescue, if there is nothing to be a victim off, and opposite, there is no category of agency, if there is nothing to resist or be resilient against. The discourse of victimhood and international

intervention implies the presence of harm and domination, whilst the discourse of agency and local resilience is grounded in resisting and challenging various forms of oppression. Based on this, I argue that the discourses are mutually dependent, each constructed in relation to what the other discourse is not. What the four main discourses share is their entanglement with postcolonial power structures. Across these representations, whether portraying Afghan women's voices as agents or victims, there is a tendency to represent them as a homogenized group, whose ability to speak, be heard, or act independently is often overshadowed by the framing of external intervention, as necessary. While not entirely silencing, such representations risk narrowing the space for more diverse expressions of agency. As User085, a researcher and photographer, writes, "Afghan women aren't silent, they are being silenced; (...) being pushed into invisibility." (User085, 2025, p. 23). The statement, albeit not the intention, captures how Afghan women's voices are represented as agents, while often being silenced by the postcolonial power structures that intersect.

5.7 An Analytical Reflection on How Representations on X Construct Possibilities for Afghan Women on Social Media

Having discussed the four main discourses; agency, victimhood, international intervention, and local resilience, it is clear that they do not work in isolation of each other. Instead, they interact in ways that both open and limit the possibilities for Afghan women's voices to be heard and recognized. This raises a key question, namely do these discourses shape a space where Afghan women can be heard and engage in mobilization, or do they constrain the possibilities of resistance? Based on this, I reflect on how the representations of Afghan women's voices shape the constructed possibilities. I, in line with the above analysis, use both Mohanty (1988, 2007) and Spivak's (2010) feminist postcolonial theoretical frameworks and the research outlined and discussed in the State of Art to analyze this particular question.

Drawing on my State of Art (see section 2), hashtags create and define a space where people, especially marginalized groups, are represented, making their resistance both visible and politically meaningful (Meraz, 2025). Based on this, one should think that Afghan women's voices represented as agents and locally resilient could indeed facilitate possibilities that allow for Afghan women to be heard and mobilize. But social media and hashtags are, as shown, riddled with power structures that equally exist in the offline world (Meraz, 2025; Chen et al., 2018). Some representations and voices are, in light of this, legitimized over others (Görgülü

and Çınar, 2023). While the discourse of agency and local resilience highlights how Afghan women's voices represent various forms of activism such as singing, painting slogans on public buildings, and attending online universities (User049, 2025, p. 11; User082, 2024, p. 22; User005, 2025, p. 2), they are often overshadowed by the discourses of victimhood and international intervention. The power imbalances found within the representations of Afghan women's voices may restrict the constructed possibilities because of how Afghan women's resistance and agency is framed as a singular narrative, isolated as a spectacular instance, and not set in sustainable political force. This is highlighted in posts by human rights activists and advocates, "The world must not stay silent. Action is needed—now!" (User086, 2025, p. 24), and "The world cannot stay silent while an entire generation is erased." (User029, 2025, p. 8). These emotionally charged calls for intervention positions resistance as a response to spectacle and urgency rather than as part of a political struggle led by Afghan women themselves. Building upon Mohanty (1988), when Afghan women's resistance is framed through isolated or individualized acts, rather than through a collective political lens, it becomes difficult to recognize 'Third World women' as political subjects capable of organizing and enacting sustained change. In many ways, this constrains the possibilities and influences Afghan women's ability to be heard and engage in mobilisation.

In line with Bacchi's (2009) analytical framework, I argue that the four main discourses construct what is seen as legitimate resistance. When Afghan women's voices are represented through discourses of victimhood and international intervention, the opportunities for Afghan women to be heard narrows, because these representations position them as passive subjects rather than active agents, limiting how their voices are heard and legitimized. Building on Spivak's (2010) argument, when female agency is manipulated, it forecloses the possibility of a collectivity. In other words, when Afghan women's voices are represented as, "They're silenced, erased from public life, (...). This is pure oppression." (User052, 2025, p. 12) or "Afghan women are mourning their stolen freedom" (User083, 2025, pp. 22-23) it affects the constructed possibilities from which Afghan women can gain visibility and garner support on social media, because they are framed as passive victims and not political agents. This limits the space for alternative representations of agency and resistance to emerge and be recognized, ultimately constraining how Afghan women can be imagined. Despite this, many posts on X attempt to construct a space based on a shared slogan or motive in light of Afghan women's struggle against the Taliban. Multiple users write, "Do share and light a candle" (User012, 2024; User013, 2024; User014, 2024, pp. 3-4), and there are several examples of posts that

shows the amount of days Afghan girls and women have been without school and education (User042, 2025; User043, 2025; User044, 2025; User045, 2025; User046, 2025, pp. 10-11). Although these posts are an attempt of mobilizing support on social media that is rooted in the political struggle, they can also be viewed as an example of superficial feminist solidarity (Varme and Shaban, 2024). These posts do not take the local context of Afghan women into consideration, they do not actively try to create changes, rather they are merely raising awareness in a manner which reproduces Western representations of agency. Building upon Mohanty's (1988, p. 65) critique, the Western feminist is implicitly positioned as the benchmark, while Afghan women, as the 'other', are defined primarily through perceived deficits such as lack of rights and agency. This representation limits the scope of their agency, trapping them in a shared space where resistance is not imagined as a local force but as something externally imposed. Even though these posts aim to construct possibilities that enable Afghan women's ability to be heard and mobilize, it fails to break free from the postcolonial power structures because it continues to represent Afghan women's voices as 'secondary' to the dominant Western narrative.

To sum up, I return to the question: how do the representations of Afghan women's voices on X construct possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and mobilize on social media? Based on the four dominating discourses and the possibilities that they enable, the answer is that how Afghan women's voices represent both victimhood, agency, international intervention, and local resilience does impact the constructed possibilities. This does not mean that Afghan women are not trying to be heard, or that I can conclude that Afghan women are not able to engage and mobilize. It entails that when Afghan women's voices are continuously presented through discourses that are colored by a discursive framework of postcolonialism, it can become difficult for Afghan women's voices to be heard. Afghan women's voices can become homogeneous, confined to a single narrative of victimhood, local resilience, agency, and/or international intervention that does not account for the diversity of experiences which Afghan women have. This may ultimately remove the possibility for Afghan women steering the narrative and conversation in the way they deem important, and instead they might be rendered to a position which others determine for them (Mohanty, 1988). Further, the way Afghan women's voices are positioned within the four dominant discourses does not necessarily let them define the space, instead, their voices are spoken for and represented in ways that prevent them from being heard. If Afghan women cannot speak about the situation they are within, if they cannot act on and be heard within their social and political agency, if they are solely

represented as victims in need of rescue from an external actor, it is not them who is at the forefront. I argue, in line with Varme and Shaban's (2024) concept of substantial feminist solidarity, that being heard and mobilizing support on social media depend on the ability of those most affected to define their own struggles and lead their own resistance. I argue that the representations of Afghan women's voices on X after the Taliban takeover in 2021 shape the discursive conditions in a way that is silencing more than it is empowering. My analysis has ultimately shown that Afghan women's voices are represented through discourses that are intersected with postcolonial power structures, and therefore the constructed possibilities for Afghan women to be heard, define the language of resistance and mobilize support is limited.

6. Conclusion

I have, in my MA thesis, critically explored how Afghan women's voices are represented on X after the Taliban takeover in 2021, and how these representations construct possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and mobilize on social media. My analysis revealed that Afghan women's voices are represented through four main discourses: agency, victimhood, international intervention, and local resilience. The four discourses are entangled with postcolonial power structures that shape and constrain the possibilities through which Afghan women are heard and mobilize. Afghan women's voices are homogenized, silenced, and/or reproduced as 'Third World women'. The discourses construct a space where it is difficult for Afghan women's voices to be heard in their own local context, and they are often rendered to representations of victims in need of external intervention. This highlights, as mentioned in section 1, that social media and hashtags are indeed embedded with power structures that can take away the layers and complexity of Afghan women's voices and instead silence them. That being said, Afghan women's voices are also represented through expressions of agency and local resilience, which contributes to their visibility. However, the broader framing of these voices, particularly in contrast to Western feminism, often undermines this visibility and inadvertently reproduces forms of discursive silencing. I argue that one way to challenge the intersecting power structures that shape the representation of Afghan women's voices on X is by centering their voices within a framework of substantive feminist solidarity (Varme and Shaban, 2024). Afghan women's voices should be represented through a local voice and context, and they should be the ones who define and lead their own resistance. By doing this, it might be possible for Afghan women's voices to be represented in a way that amplifies their voices and ensures that the possibilities for Afghan women to be heard and mobilize on social media is constructed by them and not by postcolonial power structures.

In relation to what my analysis has revealed, it is important to note the limitations that surround them. As a white, Western woman from Denmark, I must acknowledge that my own positionality inevitably shapes the lens through which I interpret how Afghan women's voices are represented and the possibilities it shapes. From a poststructuralist standpoint, knowledge is never neutral, it is produced through specific discursive and cultural positions (Spivak, 2010). My cultural and social background have influenced how I approached the data, selected representations, and framed the analysis. Therefore, there is a risk that I have overinterpreted and/or reinforced certain Western frameworks of understanding. I have, through my WPR

approach (Bacchi, 2009), sought to address this specific bias by critically examining the empirical data sample to recognize the limitations and possibilities within the four main discourses representing Afghan women's voices. Rather than claiming to speak for Afghan women and their voices, I have reflected on how their voices are made visible, shaped, or silenced within dominant discourses.

To return to my research question, I conclude that Afghan women's voices on X are represented through four main discourses that simultaneously empower and silence them. These representations construct possibilities that, intersecting with postcolonial power structures, both enable and limit Afghan women's ability to be heard, shape the language of resistance, and influence their capacity to mobilize on social media.

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