



Framing the Ban on Afghan Girls' Education in Mass Media: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract:

This qualitative study utilized Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) approach to examine how mass media framed the ban on Afghan girls' education through both linguistic and visual elements. The study examined how textual choices, imagery, and text-image relationships shaped narratives of oppression and exclusion by analyzing reports from Al Jazeera, The Associated Press, and The Afghan Times. The findings revealed that these mass media employed specific linguistic strategies such as overlexicalization, quantification, and structural oppositions to emphasize the systemic nature of the ban. Simultaneously, visual elements, including gaze, composition, and lighting, reinforced these narratives, shaping public perception of the issue. In addition to this, the analysis highlighted the role of multimodal discourse in constructing ideological frameworks that influences societal attitudes.

INTRODUCTION

Discourse is a complex and multifaceted communicative process that extends beyond individual words or sentences to encompass larger units of language use, such as conversations, narratives, and speeches. It is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but an interactive and dynamic process shaped by context and communicative intent. In addition, discourse functions as a platform for interaction, knowledge dissemination, and power negotiation, wherein communicative events and their contextual backgrounds play a critical role in shaping meaning and interpretation (Kholboboeva, 2020; Abdelhameed et al., 2024).

The emergence of discourse analysis as a distinct field has been profoundly influenced by linguistic and post-structuralist theories, which emphasize the role of language in the construction of social realities. It serves descriptive, analytical, and educative functions by interrogating cultural and political questions through a critical lens. This analytical approach distinguishes discourse from mere textual representation,

proposing criteria to identify and examine contradictions within and between discourses. Furthermore, discourse analysis sheds light on how dominant discourses shape ideological, political, and social practices, including the mechanisms underlying the spread of misinformation and fake news (Parker, 1990; Gryshchenko, 2024; Speed, 2023).

The field of discourse studies has also expanded to incorporate a range of methodological approaches, including speech act theory, narrative analysis, and Foucauldian discourse analysis. These diverse traditions underscore the centrality of discourse in constructing cultural entities and historical narratives. Discourse, in this sense, functions as the principal site for constituting social objectivity, wherein relational arrangements of signifiers determine the meaning of objects (Marttila, 2016; Potter et al., 1993). The study of discourse has evolved through various disciplinary perspectives, including linguistics, psychology, and sociology. From a linguistic standpoint, discourse analysis examines how language constructs meaning in diverse contexts, revealing the intricate relationship between language, power, and society (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; Aliyeva, 2022; Mamirbaeva & Janabaeva, 2022).

Scholars approach discourse through various theoretical lenses, including communicative, structural-syntactic, and socio-pragmatic perspectives. These frameworks enable a nuanced exploration of discourse as both a process and a product, acknowledging its role in everyday communication and the cognitive mechanisms of participants. This dual nature of discourse shows its significance in understanding human interaction and meaning-making (Imatova, 2022; Gimadetdinova & Shevchenko, 2021; Boholm, 2015).

A crucial aspect of discourse studies is the strategic use of discourse as a resource for social and political influence. Individuals and groups employ symbols, narratives, and metaphors to introduce new discursive statements that evoke concepts and shape perceptions. This process intersects with circuits of performativity, fostering connectivity and facilitating social or political change (Hardy et al., 2000). Within this domain, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Discourse Theory (DT) serve as foundational approaches. CDA examines the ideological dimensions of everyday language, while DT explores the construction of hegemony through binary distinctions and articulatory equivalences. Both frameworks provide valuable insights into the interplay between language, ideology, and power, highlighting processes of semantic decontestation and the reinforcement or transformation of political thought-practices (Freeden, 2020).

While these approaches primarily focus on verbal and textual discourse, contemporary communication increasingly operates across multiple semiotic modes. This shift has led to the emergence of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), which extends beyond language to incorporate images, gestures, sounds, and spatial arrangements as integral meaning-making resources. By recognizing the inherently multimodal nature of communication, MDA offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing how various semiotic elements interact to shape discourse, power relations, and social meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020; Norris, 2004). This multimodal perspective enhances our understanding of how power, ideology, and social influence are constructed not only through language but also through visual and embodied communication (Jones, 2012).

The theoretical foundations of MDA are deeply rooted in social semiotics and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) introduced a social semiotic approach to visual communication, analyzing how images function as a structured language with their own grammar. Halliday's (1978) SFL framework further contributes by emphasizing the functional aspects of language and other semiotic modes in social contexts, highlighting their communicative roles. Additionally, multimodal interaction analysis, as discussed by Norris (2004), focuses on the interplay of multiple modes in face-to-face communication, examining gestures, posture, gaze, and speech in real-time interactions.

A central concept within Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) is resemiotization, which refers to the transformation and recontextualization of meaning across different semiotic modes as social processes unfold. This concept provides analytical tools to trace how meanings shift and evolve when expressed through various modes, allowing researchers to examine the dynamic nature of communication (Iedema, 2003). Closely related to this is the notion of modal density, which offers insight into the concentration and distribution of semiotic resources within a communicative event. Understanding modal density helps analyze how different modes such as visuals, gestures, and speech interact to shape the overall meaning-making process (O'Halloran, 2008).

The practical applications of MDA span multiple fields, including education, media studies, and digital communication. In educational settings, MDA is used to analyze teacher-student interactions by examining speech patterns, body language, and the integration of digital tools in classrooms. Such analyses enhance our understanding of classroom dynamics and inform more effective pedagogical strategies (Jewitt, 2008; Martin et al., 2020). As well as, in media studies, MDA provides a framework for deciphering how text, images, and sounds interact in media narratives, shedding light on how different modes shape public perception and communicate complex messages (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Ledin & Machin, 2019). Similarly, in digital communication, MDA examines how multimodal elements such as emojis, videos, and interactive features on social media platforms influence user engagement and the dissemination of information. This perspective is particularly relevant in understanding meaning construction in digital spaces, where multiple semiotic resources operate simultaneously (Kress, 2009).

Beyond its methodological applications, one of MDA's most significant contributions is its ability to uncover ideologies embedded within multimodal texts. By analyzing how different semiotic resources interact to construct meaning, MDA enables researchers to identify power structures and ideological frameworks that are often naturalized in everyday communication (Machin, 2013). This critical perspective is essential for understanding how discourses are formed, maintained, and disseminated across media and cultural contexts, ultimately shaping societal beliefs and practices.

Although numerous studies have examined the sociopolitical roots of girls' education bans in Afghanistan, far less attention has been given to how these bans are discursively constructed through multimodal media representations. Existing research tends to focus on policy analysis or ideological motivations; while overlooking the ways linguistic and visual modes jointly shape public perception. Responding to this gap, the present study investigates how mass media employ specific linguistic choices to frame the ban on Afghan girls' education, how visual elements reinforce and legitimize these

narratives, and how textual and visual components interact to construct particular meanings within media discourse.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The education of Afghan girls has been a contentious issue throughout the country's history, shaped by political, cultural, and religious factors. Women's lack of access to education has remained a persistent challenge, deeply rooted in societal norms and historical precedents (Kissane, 2012). The political and social landscape of Afghanistan has significantly influenced the trajectory of girls' education, leading to periods of progress and regression.

Historically, formal modern education for girls in Afghanistan was not introduced until 1875, and it was only during King Amanullah Khan's reign (1919-1929) that primary education became compulsory for girls (Khwajamir, 2016). However, this progressive step was met with resistance, ultimately contributing to the king's downfall. The subsequent decades saw fluctuations in girls' education, heavily influenced by political instability and cultural opposition (Bukhari, 2023). The Taliban's rule from 1996 to 2001 marked one of the most repressive periods, as girls were entirely banned from attending school (Amiri, 2024). The international intervention following the fall of the Taliban in 2001 led to a remarkable improvement, with millions of girls enrolling in school (Oxfam International, 2011; Kirk & Winthrop, 2006). However, progress was uneven, particularly in rural areas where traditional norms continued to pose significant barriers (Deo, 2014).

Despite these advancements, systemic challenges persisted. Afghanistan has long had one of the lowest literacy rates in the world, with women being disproportionately affected (Lyons, 2023). Multiple studies have identified key factors limiting girls' access to education, including poverty, early marriages, a lack of female teachers, and inadequate infrastructure (Tareen & Muhammadi, 2021). Cultural beliefs and religious misinterpretations have also played a crucial role in shaping attitudes toward banning girls' education. While Islam has been used as a tool to restrict women's rights, scholars argue that Islamic teachings can also be interpreted to support education and gender equality (Kissane, 2012). The ongoing ban on women's education in Afghanistan presents a significant challenge both domestically and within the broader Islamic world (Sarwari & Adnan, 2023).

Following 2001, both the Afghan government and international donors prioritized girls' education, leading to substantial progress. But, insecurity, ongoing conflict, and logistical challenges remained significant barriers (Hassan, 2023). The political upheaval of August 2021, which marked the Taliban's return to power, once again reversed many of these gains. The new Taliban regime imposed severe restrictions on girls' education, leading to widespread emotional and psychological distress, forced marriages, and a loss of future prospects for many Afghan girls (Hamidi, 2024). Research has indicated that the ban has had devastating mental health consequences, with rising cases of depression and suicidal ideation among affected girls (Mohammadi et al., 2024).

The prohibition of girls' education in Afghanistan has been widely criticized both nationally and internationally. Critics argue that these restrictions not only violate fundamental human rights but also hinder societal development. Some studies suggest

that engaging with local cultural actors and leveraging existing values can help promote education for girls despite these challenges (Fayaz, 2015).

The history of Afghan girls' education illustrates a complex interplay of progress and setbacks. While significant strides were made post-2001, the recent political changes present formidable challenges. Addressing these issues requires a collaborative effort from both national stakeholders and the international community to ensure that Afghan girls retain access to quality education and that previous achievements are not permanently undone.

METHOD

Data collection

I have selected three multimodal texts from The Associated Press (AP), Al Jazeera, and The Afghanistan Times Daily, each presenting different perspectives on education ban in Afghanistan. The selected reports span from August 15, 2021, to January 2025, marking the period when the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan, significantly altering policies on governance, women's rights, and press freedom. This timeframe is crucial as it reflects the global and regional media discourse on the evolving sociopolitical landscape under Taliban rule (Ruttig, 2021).

The media outlets were picked based on three criteria. Firstly, global and regional relevance to Afghan political reporting. Secondly, multimodal richness such as availability of text-image combinations. representational diversity, including both international (AP, Al Jazeera) and Afghan-based (The Afghan Times) perspectives. These criteria ensured that the dataset reflected a range of ideological standpoints and multimodal practices.

Data analysis

This study employs Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) to examine the linguistic and visual framing of the ban on Afghan girls' education in mass media. MCDA, rooted in Social Semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020), which allows for an in-depth analysis of how meaning is constructed through both textual and visual elements. This approach has been successfully applied in similar research. For example, Jewitt and Jones (2008) used multimodal discourse analysis to investigate how 'ability' is framed in UK secondary school classrooms, demonstrating the effectiveness of integrating linguistic and visual elements in educational discourse analysis. Similarly, Ledin and Machin (2018) highlighted the importance of analyzing multiple semiotic resources beyond language to fully understand how media construct ideological meanings.

Building on these frameworks, this study analyzes linguistic framing strategies such as word choices, metaphors, and syntactic structures to examine how media outlets construct narratives around the ban. The visual framing analysis follows Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Visual Grammar, focusing on the representation of social actors, image composition, and text-image relationships (e.g., anchorage and relay). By combining these approaches, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how mass media shape public perceptions of the ban on Afghan girls' education through multimodal discourse.

Analysis

The following analysis is thematically structured. It first examines the linguistic framing strategies used to construct the ban on Afghan girls' education as a deliberate act of oppression. This is followed by an analysis of the visual framing techniques that reinforce the narrative through symbolic imagery and composition. Finally, it explores how the interplay between text and image shapes public perceptions and underscores the broader social and political implications of the ban.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of Al Jazeera's Report

Linguistic Framing Strategies

The headline, "Taliban 'deliberately deprived' 1.4 million girls of schooling: UN", establishes a strongly negative frame by emphasizing the intentional nature of the Taliban's actions. The phrase "deliberately deprived" signals agency and responsibility, positioning the Taliban as the direct perpetrators of injustice. The use of statistics (1.4 million girls) provides a sense of scale, reinforcing the gravity of the issue. The word "deprived" further implies a violation of rights, evoking sympathy and moral outrage in the audience. By attributing this claim to the UN, the headline enhances its credibility and presents the ban as a globally recognized crisis rather than an isolated event.

The subheading continues this framing by stating that "the future of an entire generation of girls is 'in jeopardy,' UN says." The phrase "in jeopardy" evokes fear and urgency, focusing the long-term consequences of the ban. Instead of simply stating that girls are currently out of school, the wording suggests a much broader and irreversible effect, portraying education as not just temporarily interrupted but systematically erased. The emphasis on an "entire generation" expands the scope of the issue beyond individuals which makes it a collective tragedy rather than a personal misfortune. The subheading thus supports a crisis narrative, shaping public perception of the ban as a dire, large-scale human rights violation.

Beyond the headline and subheading, the article's textual elements likely employ overlexicalization, a key linguistic strategy in discourse analysis, by repeatedly using key terms such as 'deprived,' 'denied,' and 'banned.' These words emphasize the systematic denial of education to Afghan girls, framing the Taliban's actions as a deliberate restriction rather than a mere policy shift. The repetition of such terms serves to underscore the severity of the issue. Additionally, structural oppositions play a significant role in shaping the narrative, particularly through binary contrasts such as education vs. deprivation, progress vs. regression, and freedom vs. restriction. These oppositions simplify the issue into clear categories, where the Taliban's policies represent regression and global educational rights represent progress.

The selection and placement of sources and quotations also contribute to the linguistic framing. By citing the UN as an authoritative voice, the article appeals to institutional legitimacy, presenting the information as factual and globally acknowledged rather than subjective.

Visual Framing Analysis

The image used in the report further reinforces the negative framing through multiple visual semiotic resources (Figure 1), as analyzed in the Table 1.



Figure 1. Afghan schoolgirls walking up the stairs in a school (Al Jazeera, 2024).

Table 1. Visual Framing Strategies in Al Jazeera’s Report on Afghan Girls’ Education

Visual Feature	Analysis & Interpretation
Social Actors	The image depicts Afghan schoolgirls wearing headscarves and backpacks, seemingly engaged in learning activities. The Taliban, however, are absent from the image, symbolizing their suppression without directly showing them.
Point of View	The shot is taken from a slightly elevated angle, looking down on the girls. This perspective can create a sense of vulnerability, reinforcing the notion that these students are disempowered under Taliban rule.
Gaze & Interaction	None of the girls directly look at the camera, suggesting passivation they are subjects of a policy rather than active agents of change. This supports the textual framing of them as victims.
Vectors & Composition	The staircase serves as a vector, symbolizing movement and progress, yet the presence of barriers (railings, walls) visually suggests obstruction and limitation a metaphor for restricted access to education.
Lighting & Color	The neutral tones and dim lighting contribute to a somber atmosphere, reinforcing the seriousness of the topic. The contrast between bright school uniforms and the dull background highlights the resilience of the girls despite adversity.

Text-Image Relationship

The headline and subheading anchor the image, dictating its interpretation. Without the text, the image might be seen as an ordinary depiction of school life. However, the accompanying text positions the image within a crisis narrative that directs the audience to perceive these students as victims of an oppressive system. This exemplifies anchorage, where textual elements guide visual meaning. The presence of barriers in the image, such as stair railings, further aligns with the headline's emphasis on deprivation and restriction. The visual elements complement the textual framing by reinforcing the notion of constraint, making it clear that these girls' education is under threat.

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of AP News Report

Linguistic Framing Strategies

The headline, "Afghanistan's school year starts without more than 1 million girls barred from education by Taliban," employs quantification and exclusion framing to emphasize the scale of the crisis. The phrase "more than 1 million girls" foregrounds the magnitude of those affected, presenting the ban as an extensive, systematic policy rather than an isolated restriction. The use of "barred" conveys a sense of force and control, implying that girls are actively prevented from accessing education rather than merely left out. By explicitly attributing the ban to the Taliban, the headline assigns direct responsibility, framing the group as the primary agent behind the deprivation.

Table 2. Visual Framing Strategies in AP News' Report on Afghan Girls' Education

Visual Feature	Analysis & Interpretation
Social Actors	The central figure is a young Afghan girl, depicted alone in a nearly empty classroom. Her solitary presence visually symbolizes exclusion and isolation under the Taliban's education ban.
Point of View	The shot is taken at eye level, fostering empathy and identification with the girl. The audience is invited to see the world from her perspective, reinforcing personal connection and emotional engagement.
Gaze & Interaction	The girl's downward gaze suggests concentration and perseverance, yet it also conveys resignation and helplessness. This aligns with the textual framing of girls as determined yet powerless in the face of Taliban policies.
Vectors & Composition	The composition places the girl slightly off-center, emphasizing the desolate environment around her. The abandoned desks and damaged walls act as metaphors for neglect and systemic destruction of education.
Lighting & Color	The muted color palette and dim lighting create a somber, melancholic atmosphere, reinforcing the sense of loss and deprivation. The contrast between the girl's bright white headscarf and the dull, deteriorating surroundings highlights the struggle for education amid adversity.

The caption accompanying the image supports this narrative through specifying that the ban has persisted for “the third year”, indicating continuity and entrenchment of the restriction. The phrase “schools open Wednesday for the new educational year, while thousands of schoolgirls remain barred” highlights an explicit contrast between access and exclusion, further reinforcing the victimization frame. The reference to “school beyond sixth grade” contextualizes the extent of the ban, subtly evoking international norms where secondary education is a fundamental right.

The article likely employs overlexicalization, repeating terms such as ban, restriction, and exclusion to emphasize the deliberate nature of the Taliban’s policy. The use of structural oppositions such as educated vs. uneducated, inclusion vs. exclusion, freedom vs. oppression simplifies the narrative, presenting it as a stark dichotomy between progress and regression.

Visual Framing Analysis

The image in the report plays a crucial role in reinforcing the textual narrative by visually representing isolation, restriction, and loss. Table 2 provides an in-depth analysis of key visual elements.

Text-Image Relationship

The relationship between text and image follows the anchorage function, where the headline directs the interpretation of the visual elements. Without the textual context, the image might depict a girl simply studying in an under-resourced school. However, the headline explicitly links the image to the ban on girls’ education, transforming it into a powerful symbol of exclusion and restricted opportunities. The empty classroom amplifies the sense of systemic injustice, mirroring the statistic of over 1 million girls barred from education. This interplay between text and image ensures that the audience perceives the situation as an ongoing crisis rather than an isolated instance of hardship



Figure 2. An Afghan girl studies alone in a classroom amid restrictions on girls’ education in Afghanistan (Associated Press, 2023).

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of The Afghan Times Report

Linguistic Framing Strategies

The headline, "Open Skies, Closed Doors: The Education Crisis in Afghanistan," utilizes a metaphorical contrast to frame the crisis. "Open Skies" suggests limitless opportunities, freedom, and possibility, while "Closed Doors" symbolizes restriction, denial, and barriers. This juxtaposition highlights the paradoxical nature of the Afghan education system while education should be universally accessible, societal and political structures have effectively shut the doors to learning. The phrase "Education Crisis" signals an urgent and systemic issue, aligning the report with a humanitarian and policy-driven discourse rather than treating the situation as an isolated event.

The article's subheading and supporting text employ quantification and authoritative references to legitimize the crisis. Terms such as "thousands of children" or "a generation at risk" contribute to a scale-framing effect, making the issue appear vast and widespread. Additionally, the mention of aid organizations like USAID in the background of the image indicates a discourse that involves international intervention, advocating the idea that the crisis is of global concern. The selection of sources within the article whether teachers, students, or policymakers would further shape the reader's perception by either emphasizing victimhood, resilience, or policy failures.

Table 3. Visual Framing Strategies in The Afghan Times' Report

Visual Feature	Analysis & Interpretation
Social Actors	The image presents a diverse group of Afghan children, both boys and girls, seated on the ground under a temporary tent, suggesting improvised learning conditions. Their presence together implies an aspiration for inclusive education, yet the precarious setup underscores the uncertainty and instability surrounding their access to schooling.
Point of View	The shot is taken from a slightly elevated angle, allowing a full view of the students and their surroundings. This creates a documentary-style realism, reinforcing the idea that the audience is witnessing a raw, unfiltered reality.
Gaze & Interaction	The students appear attentive and engaged, focusing on something outside the frame. Their collective gaze suggests determination and perseverance, countering a purely victimizing narrative and instead portraying them as active learners despite adversity.
Vectors & Composition	The tent serves as a symbol of both refuge and limitation while it provides shelter for education, it also signifies the lack of proper school infrastructure. The framing of the image includes the USAID logo, subtly referencing international aid dependency.
Lighting & Color	The warm, natural lighting casts a hopeful tone, contrasting with previous media portrayals of dark, abandoned classrooms. However, the earthy tones and sparse setting reinforce the fragility of the education system.

Visual Framing Analysis

The image accompanying the article is a powerful representation of the educational crisis, depicting Afghan boys and girls studying under a makeshift tent. Table 3 outlines key visual elements and their semiotic meanings.

Text-Image Relationship

The headline and image work in tandem to construct a paradoxical framing. The text's reference to "Closed Doors" is visually realized through the tent, which acts as an improvised substitute for an actual classroom. The "Open Skies" metaphor aligns with the literal open-air setting, reinforcing the precarious nature of education under current circumstances. The inclusion of both boys and girls in the image contrasts with other reports that focus solely on the exclusion of female students, indicating that the crisis extends beyond gender restrictions to broader systemic failures.



Figure 3. Afghan students attending school under a tent due to educational infrastructure challenges (The Afghan Times, 2024).

CONCLUSION

The multimodal analysis of the three media reports reveals a consistent yet varied framing of the ban on Afghan girls' education, shaped through linguistic and visual strategies. Across the texts, the linguistic framing employs quantification, authoritative references, and emotive language to emphasize the scale and severity of the crisis, positioning the ban as a systemic violation of rights rather than an isolated policy decision. The headlines, such as "deliberately deprived" and "barred from education", construct a narrative of intentional oppression, reinforcing the portrayal of the Taliban

as the primary agents of exclusion. Meanwhile, the visual elements further amplify this framing, with images of empty classrooms, struggling students, and makeshift learning environments symbolizing the broader collapse of educational infrastructure and the resilience of Afghan girls despite adversity.

Although all three reports highlight the exclusion and victimization of Afghan girls, the analysis also reveals subtle differences in narrative emphasis. While Al Jazeera and AP construct a political and humanitarian crisis, focusing on policy failures and lost futures, The Afghan Times incorporates a more localized and community-driven perspective, showing students' determination to continue learning despite inadequate conditions. The interplay of text and image across all three reports ensures that the audience perceives the crisis as not merely a national issue but a global concern, calling for international intervention and policy responses.

Ultimately, the findings carry significant implications for both media practitioners and policymakers. For media organizations, the study underscores the importance of critically reflecting on how linguistic choices and visual compositions can either challenge or inadvertently reinforce narratives of victimization, agency, and political legitimacy. Ethical multimodal reporting requires conscious attention to representation, especially when covering vulnerable populations.

Data Availability Statement

The data used in this study consist of publicly available mass media articles. Due to copyright restrictions, the full texts cannot be shared directly. However, readers can access the articles by searching for their titles, as provided in the analysis section of this manuscript. For further inquiries, please contact the corresponding author.

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