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Orientalism and Media Studies: Western Media Framing of the War in Gaza

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Abstract:

This article analyzes the integration of Edward Said's Orientalism theory with media studies in evaluating Western representations of the Gaza conflict. Utilizing these two analytical frameworks concurrently allows us to dismantle the manner in which Western media perpetuates a unilateral narrative of the conflict.This study employs postcolonial theory, particularly Said's concept of Orientalism, to analyze the persistent othering of Palestinians through orientalist caricatures depicting them as irrationally violent and possessing a barbarous culture that conflicts with Western standards.The findings indicate that Western media develops knowledge of the conflict using Orientalist strategies that favor Western perspectives while marginalizing the voices of Palestinians living under occupation.

Keywords: Orientalism, media framing , Gaza War, Edward Said , strereotypes.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The connection between media representation and geopolitical conflict has historically been a primary focus of media studies, but few instances highlight the persistent influence of Orientalist paradigms as clearly as Western reporting on the Gaza war. Since October 2023, the conflict has been broadcast live on worldwide platforms in unprecedented manners, marking it as the first to be livestreamed in the contemporary era. (Chemamat, S., Sujiwa, K., & Prihatika, Y. D, 2025). This exposure has paradoxically shown both the persistence and strengthening of enduring systemic prejudices in Western media reporting. The portrayal of Gaza, as this essay contends, cannot be comprehended without considering the legacy of Edward Said's critique of Orientalism—the Western practice of characterizing Eastern civilizations as illogical, violent, and inferior to rationalize colonial supremacy. Contemporary media study reveals a recurring pattern of representation that continues to depict Palestinians in the manner highlighted by Said decades ago: In newsreels or news-photos, the Arab is always portrayed in enormous numbers. No uniqueness, no personal qualities or experiences . (Matar, D. 2025).

The dissemination of Orientalist and racist narratives in the coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by Western legacy media, notably the BBC, CNN, the New York Times, and Fox News, has been well documented by media studies experts. Ahistoricity and decontextualization that obscure the settler-colonial context of the conflict; linguistic choices that frame Israeli military actions as "retaliatory strikes" while portraying Palestinian resistance as "terror"; and visual and discursive strategies that portray Palestinians as either passive victims or violent aggressors—a dual framing that obscures the political and historical complexities of the genocide, reducing Palestinians to dehumanized subjects within a broader narrative that privileges Western power and viewpoints.. (Said, E. W, 1978). The concept of epistemic violence, articulated by Gayatri Spivak as the systematic process through which colonized peoples are denied the ability to formulate their own epistemologies, provides a crucial analytical lens for understanding how media practices serve to normalise Israel's

epistemic violence against the Palestinians while also depriving them of agency as knowable subjects/agents .(Ali, S. A, 2025).

The theoretical framework of Orientalism, when applied to media analysis, reveals that these representational strategies are not merely instances of bias but are constitutive of a broader civilizational discourse that positions Arab and Muslim societies as the constitutive "other" of Western modernity . This approach has been developed through the idea of "digital Orientalism" to account for how developing media technologies repeat colonial motifs under the appearance of innovation or neutrality . The present media landscape, marked by the growth of social media platforms and AI-generated content, complicates but does not deconstruct these Orientalist systems. According to studies, Western legacy media continue to have a considerable effect on how the world interprets the war through what scholars describe to as "habitual media"—repeated behaviors that have helped define, express, conceive, and interfere implicitly and overtly in the conflict, its securitization, visualization, mediation, narrative, and representation—even as digital media allow Palestinian voices to escape traditional gatekeepers.(Al Haj Abed, S, 2025).

Through the perspectives of Orientalism and media studies, this paper investigates how Western media has presented the crisis in Gaza, investigating how prominent outlets such as CNN and Fox News have utilized discursive tactics that reinforce colonial hierarchies and diminish Palestinian agency. It investigates the linguistic choices, narrative structures, and visual representations that have defined coverage of the war by drawing on framing analysis, critical discourse analysis, and postcolonial theory.. The research indicates how language acts as a "mechanism of power, where micro-linguistic choices construct moral meaning and perpetuate asymmetrical conflict perceptions" . Particular focus is made to how media framing helps to "unchild" Palestinians—stripping Palestinian children of the innocence and safeguards generally granted to childhood by casting them as extensions of an allegedly violent and pre-modern culture . This dehumanization, the paper contends, is not accidental to media coverage but rather structurally ingrained in Orientalist forms of representation that have been consistently replicated throughout decades of reporting on the Middle East. By bringing



together the theoretical resources of Orientalism and the analytical tools of media studies, this study adds to the pressing scholarly challenge of understanding how media representation creates, and is influenced by, the material violence of modern war. For the purposde at hand , the research questions are :

• How does the framing of the Gaza conflict in mainstream Western media (e.g., CNN, Fox News) differ from the framing in more critical, alternative, or Global South media outlets (e.g., Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya..)?

• How are Palestinian civilians, particularly women and children, framed? Do depictions correspond with Orientalist clichés of passivity, helplessness, and irrationality, or are their resilience, political will, and humanity centered?

• In what ways is Palestinian violence portrayed as fundamentally "savage" or "terroristic," whereas Israeli violence is framed as "rational," "regrettable," or a "necessary response"?

2.Media Framing of the Gaza Conflict

The media framing of the Gaza crisis constitutes one of the most crucial and controversial features of contemporary war reporting, illustrating how narrative building impacts global comprehension and political response. Framing theory, as established by researchers such as Robert Entman and William Gamson, contends that media do not merely report events but actively generate meaning through selection, emphasis, and exclusion—processes that decide which parts of a dispute become evident and which stay concealed. Framing analysis is about how information is presented and how this impacts the audience's interpretations of an event. This technique involves choosing, highlighting, and organizing diverse news elements to form the audience's impressions. Robert Entman thinks that frames characterize the situation at hand. They identify its causes, declare a judging attitude, and recommend a remedy (Entman 1993: 52). In the case of Gaza, framing functions not only as a journalistic technique but as a site of epistemological conflict, where the very grounds of argument are formed through linguistic choices, source selection, and visual depiction. Based on the available search results, below is a comparison of how CNN and Fox News have characterized the fighting in Gaza, pulling from multiple analyses:

Research reveals CNN's coverage, like that of other Western channels, has demonstrated a considerable bias in favor of the Israeli narrative, but typically packaged within a more "objective" journalistic style.. CNN has been shown to depend significantly more on Israeli and

pro-Israel sources than Palestinian ones. For instance, a quantitative research revealed CNN utilized almost four times more Israeli sources than Palestinian sources and nearly 11 times more pro-Israel sources than pro-Palestinian ones in their reporting. (S. Al-Ghazzi,2023) An review of metaphors in CNN's coverage indicated that the media tended toward Israeli viewpoints, employing metaphorical language that may be perceived as damaging Israel's worldwide image (e.g., relating a UN court case) rather than portraying the conflict from a Palestinian perspective.

On 13 October 2023, CNN coverage highlighted evacuation orders in Gaza, saying that Hamas had recommended inhabitants to remain in place. President Biden’s attempts to obtain the release of hostages were emphasized, coupled with an in-depth interview with a family member of an Israeli hostage. The documentary also focused on Israeli military attacks in Gaza and speculated about probable future measures by Israel, including the likelihood of a ground invasion. Overall, CNN referred to Israeli aggression a dozen times, with three of those cases portrayed as actions connected to self-defence. In contrast, Palestinian violence was referenced eight times, with the bulk of these events characterized as acts of hostility. Palestinian violence was repeatedly depicted as being fuelled by hate.

The CNN program of 24 November 2023 concentrated on the freeing of captives, notably the American prisoners. Emphasis was also given to numerous personal Israeli stories of the 7 October 2023 Hamas onslaught. Additionally, Anderson Cooper offered a brief documentary on the hostages abducted, concentrating on the stories of survivors and their families. Cooper also reported as the correspondent from a kibbutz near Tel Aviv.

In this report, CNN framed Israel’s activities through the Innocence Frame, depicting its military operations as a legitimate act of self-defence against aggression. This narrative positioned Israel as a victim, responding to threats, while the violence committed by Palestinians underlined their role as aggressors. Once the Israeli bombardment on Gaza began, terminology such as



“infiltrators” and “rockets launched” were used to indicate Palestinian operations. Thus, Palestinians, in general, were positioned as the instigators of violence.

Fox News is generally described as having the most pronounced bias, particularly in conjunction with a right-wing, pro-Israel political agenda.. One comparative examination of major networks showed Fox News to have the highest level of bias, with the Israeli narrative dominating 95% of their coverage..Data reveals Fox News nearly exclusively avoids the phrase "Palestine." The outlet's reporting reveals the word "Palestine" appearing relatively occasionally, while "Israel" occurs thousands of times more frequently. (A. Yousef and H. Mansour,,2024) While the word "Palestinian" does emerge with some regularity in Fox's coverage, it is frequently in a negative context—associated with protests and destruction. In contrast, the word "Israeli" is often related to positive or neutral circumstances like the army, hospitals, and hostages. Fox also prominently promotes "Hamas," which featured three times more often than "Gaza" in headlines, typically in a military context, strengthening the link of Palestinians with terrorism.

Fox's coverage is regarded as profit- and popularity-driven, aimed to engage its audience with a certain ideological position. It is defined as a network that prioritizes its brand and political agenda over balanced journalism, a tactic that has been noticed across its coverage, even on matters like the COVID-19 vaccine regulations.

3 Linguistic Framing and Asymmetrical Language

Central to the framing of the Gaza conflict is the asymmetrical application of language, wherein Western media systematically deploy terminological distinctions that construct moral hierarchies between combatants. This linguistic asymmetry manifests most prominently in the verbs used to describe military actions. Research on coverage of the 2023–2025 Gaza conflict has documented how Israeli military operations are co

nsistently framed as "retaliatory strikes," "defensive measures," or "counter-terrorism operations," while Palestinian resistance is characterized as "terrorism," "aggression," or "indiscriminate attacks." This linguistic framing accomplishes what critical discourse analysts identify as the naturalization of violence—rendering Israeli military action as legitimate and reactive while

coding Palestinian violence as inherently illegitimate and proactive. (https://www.dawn.com/news).

The implications of this linguistic asymmetry extend beyond semantics to constitute what scholars term "epistemic violence"—the systematic denial of Palestinian capacity to formulate their own political narratives. When major outlets such as the BBC, CNN, and the New York Times adopt language that frames Israeli actions through the lexicon of self-defense while denying Palestinians equivalent terminology, they participate in what Gayatri Spivak identified as

the erasure of the subaltern subject. This linguistic framing serves to position Palestinians not as political actors with legitimate grievances but as objects of security discourse—populations to be managed, contained, or eliminated rather than peoples with sovereign claims.(Spivak,1988).

Furthermore, the linguistic framing of casualty reporting reveals profound asymmetries in how human life is valued. Studies have documented how Western media consistently employ passive constructions when reporting Palestinian deaths ("were killed," "died in strikes") while utilizing active, agentive language for Israeli casualties ("were murdered," "were targeted"). This grammatical framing accomplishes the subtle but significant work of constructing Palestinian deaths as natural or inevitable consequences of conflict while representing Israeli deaths as intentional acts of violence requiring moral condemnation. As one analysis notes, "micro-linguistic choices construct moral meaning and perpetuate asymmetrical conflict perceptions," establishing through grammatical structure what cannot be stated explicitly. (https://doi.org/10.1386/ajms)

4 Decontextualization and Historical Erasure

The deliberate decontextualization of the Gaza conflict—the propensity to portray violence as erupting from a historical void rather than from decades of occupation, embargo, and dispossession—is a second important aspect of media framing. Every violent outburst is usually framed by Western media as a distinct "cycle of conflict," a rhetorical strategy that conceals the underlying power disparity between Israel and Palestine while implying symmetry between the sides. Scholars refer to this framing as "ahistoricity" since it presents events without taking into

account the larger context of military occupation, settler colonialism, and the systematic denial of Palestinian rights.

This decontextualization has significant ramifications. Media framing deprives viewers of the analytical tools required to understand the conflict by eliminating its historical background.

This decontextualization has significant ramifications. By erasing the historical context of the conflict, media framing deprives audiences of the analytical tools necessary to understand Palestinian resistance as a response to structural violence rather than as expressions of irrational hatred or religious extremism. This framing, according to one researcher, "obscures the political and historical intricacies of the genocide, reducing Palestinians to dehumanized people within a broader narrative that promotes Western power and perspectives."The result is a coverage that positions Israeli military action as regrettable but necessary responses to Palestinian provocation, while rendering invisible the daily violence of occupation—the land confiscation, home demolitions, checkpoints, and systematic restriction of movement that constitute the material conditions of Palestinian life. As the table below shows, the choice of words is never neutral and often reveals an Orientalist bias :

Table 1. Media bias

When Describing Israel	When Describing Palestinians
"Retaliation," "Response," "Self-defense"	"Terror," "Savage attacks," "Slaughter"
"The Israeli government or military"	"Hamas," "Militants," "Terrorists" (often used interchangeably with "Palestinians")
"Targeted strikes," "Precise operations"	Random rocket fire," "Barrage of rockets"
"Casualties" or "Collateral	"Martyrs" (using the group's own

Damage"	terminology, which frames their death in a specific religious light)

https://www.dawn.com/news/1862989

This narrative positions Hamas as inherently barbaric (willing to sacrifice its own people) and frames massive Palestinian civilian casualties as ultimately Hamas's responsibility . Coverage that frames the conflict through what academics refer to as "crisis discourse"—presenting violence as extraordinary and unexpected rather than as the inevitable result of persistent structural

conditions—is especially blatant examples of this historical erasure. The media's portrayal of each escalation as a "sudden outbreak" of violence obscures the fact that, for Palestinians, occupation is an ongoing condition that does not stop between military operations by subtly implying that times of relative calm constitute normalcy. By implying that violence only occurs when Palestinians disturb an otherwise calm order, this framing serves to legitimize the status quo rather than acknowledging that the occupation itself.

4 Visual Framing and the Construction of Palestinian Identity

When it comes to how the Gaza crisis is covered, the visual aspect of media framing has been very important in influencing how viewers view the compassion and suffering of the Palestinian people. Decades ago, Edward Said noted that "the Arab is invariably presented in enormous numbers in newsreels or news-photos." No uniqueness, no unique traits or life experiences. The continuance of this visual Orientalism is confirmed by contemporary study, as Palestinians are often portrayed in Western media in ways that deny them personal identity and agency.

Several recurrent themes are seen in recent research on the visual framing of Gaza coverage. First, the disproportionate use of wide-angle and aerial pictures that represent destruction from a distance, rendering individual suffering abstract and faceless. By portraying Gaza as a landscape of ruins rather than a location of individual lives and experiences, this visual framing achieves the dehumanization that academics identify as crucial to media coverage.

Second, the methodical portrayal of Palestinian children as either potential threats or helpless victims in need of rescue—a process known to academics as "unchilding" that deprives Palestinian youngsters of the protections and innocence that come with childhood. Instead of portraying Palestinian children as unique individuals worthy of the universal rights of childhood, this visual framing presents them as extensions of a violent culture.

Third, the selection of images that reinforce Orientalist stereotypes—depictions of Palestinians praying, mourning, or demonstrating that emphasize religious and cultural difference while obscuring political agency. As one analysis notes, "visual and discursive strategies render Palestinians either as passive victims or violent aggressors," a dual framing that denies the possibility of Palestinian political subjectivity. This visual regime operates in conjunction with linguistic framing to construct Palestinians as objects of Western humanitarian concern rather than as subjects of their own history. (Al Haj Abed, S., 2025)

The persistence of this visual framing is particularly striking given the unprecedented access to Palestinian perspectives enabled by social media. During the current conflict, Palestinian journalists and ordinary citizens have used platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and X to document their experiences in ways that bypass traditional media gatekeepers. Yet research indicates that Western legacy media continue to exercise significant power in shaping global perceptions, often incorporating user-generated content only when it reinforces existing narratives of Palestinian victimhood without challenging the underlying Orientalist framework. The result is a complex media ecology in which counter-narratives circulate alongside dominant frames, yet the institutional power of legacy media ensures that Orientalist framing continues to shape mainstream understanding of the conflict.

5 Conclusion

Media coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict highlights how different news outlets have framed the situation, with significant implications for global perceptions of the conflict. Through the lens of framing theory, CNN’s and Fox News portrayal of the conflict largely aligns with the Innocence Frame; Israel’s military actions are depicted as defensive and justifiable. Meanwhile, the Israeli Victimhood Frame positions Palestinians as the aggressors. This approach limits

empathy for Palestinians by framing their actions as a direct threat to Israel's security, while the historical context of the occupation is obscured.

Linguistic asymmetry, historical decontextualization, and visual depiction are some of the interrelated strategies used by the media to frame the Gaza conflict. These mechanisms work together to create Palestinians as objects rather than subjects of their own history. These framing techniques are fundamentally ingrained in Orientalist forms of representation that have been methodically replicated throughout decades of Middle East reporting; they are not incidental to media coverage. This article adds to the urgent scholarly endeavor of comprehending how media representation both shapes and is shaped by the material violence of contemporary conflict—and

how alternative framing practices might contribute to more accurate and just coverage—by analyzing how these framing mechanisms function.

Analyzing the Western media's framing of the war in Gaza through an Orientalist lens has revealed that the coverage is not merely a reflection of events. It is an active construction of reality that is deeply embedded in historical power relations. Understanding this is crucial for developing media literacy. It encourages consumers to ask critical questions: Who is being quoted? What language is being used? What historical context is provided? And ultimately, whose interests are served by this particular framing of the war?

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