A Life Revealed/ A Life Revised:

From Afghan Girl to Commodified Subject

Sachi Sekimoto and Elizabeth Simas

California State University, Northridge

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We live in a world where images, and the way we view them, dominate our lives and perception of reality. While taking a picture is an act of framing and fragmenting reality, the images transform and re-essentialize reality. In the 1985 National Geographic article on the civil war in Afghanistan, the impact of the article came not from the text itself, but rather from the picture that appeared on the cover. The young Afghan woman shown on the front of the magazine came to represent the women of the third world as well as the political, economic, and cultural situation in Afghanistan. She was “framed,” “captured,” and “represented” as a commodified object through the subjectivity of the West; by doing so the identity of the West itself, and our understanding of war-torn Afghanistan, was framed, reinforced, and essentialized. In this image-dominated society, it is important for us to analyze these iconic representations through the lenses of postcolonial feminism and postmodernism in order to deconstruct how they affect our perception of reality and the negotiation of power and identity. The politics of representation must be unpacked through the critical questioning of the location of power and dominance in visual images. This paper will address the issues of representation and commodification in the image of Sharbat Gula from a postcolonial feminist and postmodern perspective. We will first look at a postcolonial feminist critique of the pleasure of the Other, focusing specifically on voyeuristic pleasure, pleasure of identification, and pleasure of authenticity, and then discuss a postmodern critique of reality and knowledge.

Pleasure of the Other: A Postcolonial Feminist Perspective

What I resent most…is not his inheritance of a power he so often disclaims, disengaging himself from a system he carries with him, but his ear, eye, and pen, which record in his language while pretending to speak through mine, on my behalf (Minh-ha, 1989, p. 48).
In the discussion of “the commodity image-system” of the current capitalist economy, Jhally (1995) argues that we live in a world where “substance” or actual lived lives of people are “colonized” by a world of “style,” image, and emotion (p. 85). Our understanding of socially constructed reality is heavily dependent on visual images, making images “the dominant language of the modern world” (p. 85). In this system of image-based understanding of the world, what is often overlooked is the pleasure that images provide for us: “This is not simply trickery or manipulation” argues Jhally, “pleasure is substantive” (p. 85). hooks (1992) argues that the longing for the sexualized, racialized “Other” is “rooted in the longing for pleasure” and “the secret (not so secret) deep structure of white supremacy” (p. 22). Differences and specialness of the Other are commodified and valued, because there is pleasure in contacting them. The problematic of commodification of race, gender, and ethnicity lies in the social constructs that are used as “an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other” (p. 23). The pleasure provided through the commodification of the Other conceals and perpetuates the dominant, colonizing, and otherizing force of mass culture (p. 22).

In the case of the image of Sharbat Gula, what do Western readers read in her image, and what is the substantive “pleasure” we receive from it? What is the pleasure that is embedded and evoked through our reading of the image, which made the image of Sharbat Gula sensationaly famous and problematic? In this section, I argue that the process of the Western signifying practice and commodification of the subject photographed in 1985 was based on the voyeuristic pleasure of “capturing” and being “captured” by the eyes of the image of Sharbat Gula. This pleasure masked our very signifying practice that framed, represented, and commodified the woman according to the Western system of representation of the “Third World Women.” This
voyeuristic pleasure is also rooted in the desire to redefine and reinforce the Western identity through the encounter with the eyes of the Other. As hooks (1992) argues, there is a “contemporary revival of interest in the ‘primitive’” where the longing for and the pleasure of contacting with the Other is caused by the West’s crises in identity (p. 22). Additionally, embedded in the voyeuristic pleasure is “imperialist nostalgia” and the longing for authenticity where people mourn things they destroyed or transformed (p. 25). The nostalgia is provoked as we look into the image of Sharbat Gula who came to represent “the Third World Women” who need to be rescued and are on the verge of extinction (hooks, 1992, p.29; Minh-ha, 1989, p. 94).

Voyeuristic Pleasure: Watching/Being Watched

When we see the first image photographed in 1985, what captures our gaze are the woman’s “sea green” eyes (Newman, 2002). They are described in various articles as “unforgettable green eyes,” (Afghan girl, 2002) “haunting, green-eyed gaze” (Braun, 2003) and “the fierce green eyes” (Stuteville, 2002). These descriptions are often the primary signifiers to depict “the Afghan girl.” “The green eyes” remind most people of the picture of the Afghan woman. That is, viewers were obsessed with her green eyes which became almost synonymous with who she is.

Her eyes in the image create a dual voyeuristic effect where the Western viewers watch her as she watches them back. On the one hand, viewers watch her “haunted and haunting” eyes. Looking into her eyes evokes a sense of guilt, shock, and fear in the Western viewers as if they saw something they were not supposed to see, because viewers “can read the tragedy of a land drained by war” in her eyes (Newman, 2002). Paradoxically, the voyeuristic view on her eyes and her experiences provides pleasure of seeing something horrible, painful, and mysterious. Watching the pain and suffering of the Other provides the viewers with the pleasure of being
non-victims as well as sympathetic outsiders. Pleasure is also provided through the contact with
the Other through “a form of legal voyeurism” that allows “a personal identification with the
natives observed” (Minh-ha, 1989, p. 69).

On the other hand, her strong, piercing, and “wild” gaze captures and haunts the eyes of
viewers. They are “watched” by her eyes, which produces the exotic, romantic, and nostalgic
pleasure of being watched or even objectified by the nameless third world woman. The lure of
encounter with the Other is “the combination of pleasure and danger (hooks, 1992, p. 26). It was
what the Western viewers were not used to: being “captured” by the eyes of the Other woman. It
is this sense of being watched, captured, and caught by the “third world eyes” that masks and
conceals the dominant and colonizing force of subjective voyeurism that otherizes, essentializes,
exoticizes, and commodifies this third world subject (p. 22).

* Negotiating Identity/ Negotiating Pleasure

The dual voyeurism of capturing and being captured by the eyes of the Other is
pleasurable because it allows the Western viewers to redefine and reinforce the West’s identity
as masculine and its role as a protector of the third world women. The gaze of Sharbat Gula and
the difference she represented is “productively used” for the West to view itself through the eyes
of her image (hooks, 1992, p.24). The image, especially her eyes, presents itself to the Western
viewers as what hooks calls an “unexplored terrain” or “symbolic frontier” (p. 24) which serves
pleasure by allowing the West to redefine, maintain, and transform its identity as masculine
protector of the third world. hooks says:

[White males] claim the body of the colored Other instrumentally, as unexplored terrain,
a symbolic frontier that will be fertile ground for their recognition of the masculine norm,
for asserting themselves as transgressive desiring subjects (p. 24).
hooks argues that in mass culture, the sexual encounter with the “exotic” Other is considered more exciting because it is thought to bear a transformative force (p. 24). The Other is commodified and made available for the Western viewers because it “will counter the terrorizing force of the status quo that makes identity fixed, static, a condition of containment and death” (p. 22). Constant encounter with the Other is crucial, because identity is constructed and maintained only through repetitions (Butler, p. 9, 1993). The “attempt at defamiliarization” through the contact with the “primitive,” “different,” and “unfamiliar,” argues hooks, “distance[s] us from whiteness, so that we will return to it more intently” (p. 29). The image of Sharbat Gula is sensational and provocative because it arouses and feeds the West’s self-image of being a sympathetic, masculine protector by contacting the Other third world woman.

The “unexplored terrain” found in Sharbat Gula’s eyes was used to strengthen the position of the West within the protector-protected paradigm (Young, 2002). Being watched by the Other is pleasurable, because through the gaze of this woman the West redefines and reinforces the masculine identity. Her eyes were “colonized” and commodified within the paradigm of “masculinist protection” where those protected take subordinate role “in return for male protection.” The redefinition of the Western, masculine self required National Geographic to find the woman to further frame her to maintain the self.

*Imperialist Nostalgia: Pleasure of Authenticity*

The issues of authenticity and imperialist nostalgia must be addressed in order to account for the pleasure of watching, being watched, as well as rediscovering Sharbat Gula. The search for the “Afghan girl” revealed the desire and longing for the “original” and the “authentic” by the photographer, National Geographic, and the viewers. Although the image of Sharbat Gula became a sign that represents the West’s generalized imagery of the ‘Third World women’ as a
category, it was still important for the viewers to find her, not anyone else. The obsession with the authentic was pursued and achieved by the power of science:

To make sure Sharbat Gula was the girl who had been photographed 17 years earlier, the EXPLORER team obtained verification through iris-scanning technology and face-recognition techniques used by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (Bwaun, 2003). Authenticity of Sharbat Gula is valued because it assures the concrete origin of the pleasure of watching and being watched by the eyes of the Other. The authenticity of the “Afghan girl” was commodified and became “a product that one can buy, arrange to one’s liking, and/or preserve (Mihn-ha, 1989, p. 88). The desire for authenticity is problematic when third world women’s “inauthenticity is condemned as a loss of origins and a whitening (or faking) of non-Western values” (p. 89), thereby confining women in “traditional” and “authentic” ways of living and suffering.

Also rooted in the desire for an authentic third world woman is the sense of “imperialist nostalgia,” where people mourn what they have destroyed and/or transformed (hooks, 1996, p. 25). The rhetoric of the third world women as “endangered species” allows for the self-gratification of the West as the savior, which at the same time demands the women to maintain their authentic images, because their “past and cultural heritage are doomed to eventual extinction” (Minh-ha, 1989, p. 89). Imperialist nostalgia and the longing for authenticity are problematic because those who are marked as the ‘third world women’ are only permitted to speak up for change within the limited scope of their “specialness” and for the purpose of protecting their “authenticity” and “difference” (pp. 88-89). Commodified authenticity is “a product of hegemony and remarkable counterpart of universal standardization,” which “constitutes an efficacious means of silencing the cry of racial oppression” (p. 89). Their voices
are heard, valued, and commodified only when they ask for help to maintain their “authentic” images of the third world women who needs the West’s protection (p. 88).

The politics of authenticity marks those women forever different, and only within that difference they are given the savior’s attention and protection. The pleasure of Other is assured and perpetuated, where the viewers never feel “cheated” by the third world women. When we look into the green eyes of the image of Sharbat Gula, the substantive, concrete pleasure is provided through dual voyeurism, reinforced masculine identity of the West, and the desire for authenticity. The pleasure of Other is substantive and exciting, because we can “listen to that voice of difference likely to bring us what we can’t have and to divert us from the monotony of sameness,” which simultaneously assures and masks the West’s power over the third world Other (Minh-ha, 1989, p. 88).

The Postmodern Perspective

The first photograph that Steve McCurry took of Sharbat Gula was not posed; he simply was struck by the anger and experience behind the eyes of a woman who looked no more than a girl (Newman, 2002). This picture landed on the cover of National Geographic and challenged all who viewed it. It won a Pulitzer for McCurry. It brought attention to National Geographic. It commodified and otherized Sharbat. We are now in a postmodern time where images have become reality, and because of this the way images are treated has become increasing important to look at: “The postmodern terrain is defined almost exclusively in visual terms, including the display, the icon, the representations of the real seen though the camera’s eye” (Denzin, 1991, p. viii). Sharbat Gula was presented to the world as a picture, and that is all she was allowed to be. This image became the reality that society gains their knowledge of other cultures from, creating problems not only with the simulated concept of reality, but also with the knowledge provided to
us and the way policy decisions are rationalized. This section will first discuss some critical concepts in postmodernism relating specifically to pictures and visual images, then analyze National Geographic’s treatment of Sharbat in her photo and the accompanying text.

**A Picture of Reality**

According to Baudrillard (1983) we are in the time of the simulacrum, or the final stage of simulation. Baudrillard theorizes that signs go through four stages of simulation: “[first] it is the reflection of a profound reality; [second] it masks and denatures a profound reality; [third] it makes the absence of a profound reality; [finally] it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum” (1994, p. 6). Essentially, the sign has been severed from any object or idea behind it. It is fairly easy to see how these ideas can relate to images. First, if images are claiming to be representations, as those in National Geographic do, they are not being entirely truthful. No image is a representation because it is simply a simulation of an image. Second, it proves the commodification of Sharbat. She is no longer seen as someone who can be useful, instead her image becomes all about the exchange-value: she can be recognized and have that recognition lead to her “purchase.” People want to buy or sell Sharbat because she is the plight of the Afghan woman, and if they can purchase her, they can feel like they are saving her. Also, Baudrillard (1981) writes about how symbolic-value has eclipsed both exchange- and use-value; Sharbat is an excellent example of this concept. Her value now comes not from who she is, but from what she represents or symbolizes.

If we look to Baudrillard’s procession of simulation it is clear that the photo of Sharbat is only reflecting itself, and the re-shoot of the first photo seems to advance this theory even further. The second picture that was taken of Sharbat seventeen years after the first was set up to mirror the first photo. She was positioned to resemble exactly the photo from years before, even
though she is most definitely not the same person she was then. While the first picture was taken candidly, the second set out to mirror the reality shown in the first. She was not allowed to be herself; rather, she was made to be the person the photographer saw previously. In the most literal sense, the reality was supposed to mirror itself even though it was not itself. One could argue that the first picture was a legitimate picture of reality, although this argument seems to be false because of the way the picture was adopted by society. The world saw this picture and took it for lived experience even though it was only a simulation. Sharbat was seen as “that girl with the amazing eyes who has such a hard life.” The photo of her was not her, but was taken as her. In fact, who she was did not matter. The idea of simulation is further problematized by the fact that the journalists doing the reporting and collecting the images simply drop in and leave the areas and cultures they are exposing. When the context of the culture is not fully understood it is easier for the representational image to fall into the category of simulation because people cannot even understand the reality that is supposed to be behind it. As Louw (2001) writes: “When journalists . . . cover foreign contexts, they engage in their task with already existing pictures and discourses in their minds. These images determine . . . the images they seek” (p. 193). If the images in the journalists’ minds are preset based on societal constructions, it furthers the idea that there is no reality behind them. The image is created from what society tells the journalist is real, not from actual lived experiences. Further, if the images in the mind are a construct and a simulation, then the image that is being reproduced for the rest of the world to see is also a construct and simulation, simply because there is no frame of reference grounded in lived experience. With no lived experience to contextualize the image it becomes more and more like a fantasy shown to us to give us some sort of pleasure rather than showing us an aspect of truth. This idea crystallized by the fact that she was not even referenced in the original article (Denker,
1985). Not only was she not referenced, but the photographer did not get her name or any information about her. She was simply a figurehead for her culture, a simulation of a reality that does not exist. What makes it even worse is that *National Geographic* went back to try and find her to recapture the spark that her original photo created. The photographer won critical acclaim for a photo of a woman whose name was not known, whose location was not known, whose only distinguishing feature, according to society and the authors of the *National Geographic* articles, is her “haunted and haunting” eyes (Newman, 2002). Because initial commodification did not exploit Sharbat to the fullest extent possible, the photographers went back to try to get her story and exploit her further. Now it is important to find out her information, but initially she was only needed to establish a simulated reality of third-world women.

*The Production of Knowledge*

Lyotard (2001) also contributes to the postmodern analysis of images by influencing Baudrillard. Lyotard theorizes that we use the narratives as the primary way to gather knowledge:

> There is one point on which all of the investigations agree, regardless of which scenario they propose to dramatize and understand the distance separating the customary state of knowledge from its state in the scientific age: the preeminence of the narrative form in the formulation of traditional knowledge … Narration is the quintessential form of customary knowledge. (p. 19)

This again directly applies to the generation and proliferation of images because images can be considered a large part of narrative discourse. Images tell us stories about our world by making us believe they are lived experiences (Denzin, 1991). This falls increasingly into the simulation because the reality that we are believing, the knowledge that we are gaining, is simply not true, it
is just a representation. It is important to look at Lyotard’s theories of narration in order to better understand how and why we believe the image and the narrative behind it, and how the narrative is used to justify our compliance in policy issues.

Lyotard argues that those who have the ability to possess and distribute knowledge are the ones in power. If this is true then the images that are used to create knowledge are supporting the power structure and the knowledge gained from narratives is very specific. This concept supports the idea of the image of Sharbat sustaining and advancing the war text. *National Geographic* went back to her, the “innocent” that this country fetishized, seventeen years later when we were bombing Afghanistan and needed the public’s support. She is portrayed in a very specific way to ensure that people read into it exactly what those in power want. She is posed to remind us of the innocence that she once had. She is photographed in the same light to remind us of the “darkness” that surrounds people in the third world. This is the narrative that is constructed and fed to us, it is the knowledge that we are supposed to carry around and impute to most other things in life. According to the people who hold and disburse the knowledge, it should inform us on everything we do. But, as stated above, this knowledge is not true. We are supposed to take the simulation as the knowledge, further entrenching us in the simulacra. Even if one makes the argument that meaning is co-created between those in power and those seeing the image, ultimately the views have inherent biases that were initially created by those in power. Essentially, if one follows the logic of Lyotard and agrees that the ones who create and hold the knowledge are the ones in power, then the ones that are able to put out the image are the ones who chose which images to put out. This means that there is a reason behind an image and when it is distributed, which is definitely the case with Sharbat.
Images in a Postmodern Society

Gaining knowledge through a narrative that is a simulation is problematic but not uncommon in the postmodern society. Denzin (1991) writes about how images function in the postmodern society: “Representations of the real have become stand-ins for the actual, lived experiences” (p. x). This corresponds to both Lyotard and Baudrillard. The representations of the real have taken the place of the real, and worse, society has adjusted to this shift by taking the representations to equal the actual experience. Denzin sets out three specific criteria of the postmodern society:

First, reality is a staged, social production. Secondly, the real is now judged against its staged, cinematic-video counterpart. Third, the metaphor of the dramaturgical society, or ‘life as theatre’ has now become interactional reality. The theatrical aspects of the dramaturgical metaphor have not ‘only creeped into everyday life,’ they have taken it over. Art not only mirrors life, it structures and reproduces it. (p. x).

Along with proving the simulation, the treatment of Sharbat’s photo supports Denzin’s theory about the postmodern society. The second claim that he makes is that the real is measured against the staged version of reality that has been media-ized. This must be taken with his first claim that reality is actually staged social production, but the integral concept is that there is a sense of societal measuring and determination happening. Sharbat’s “realness” is based on how closely society sees the mediated image relating to the social production that it has constructed. In this sense the image is further commodified. In fact, Sharbat no longer matters; she is simply a representation of her entire community. While we are in a time of looking increasingly at the local rather than the global, *National Geographic* positions Sharbat as the global figure exemplifying “her people.” The problem is that there are no “her people.” Her characteristics are
unique to her alone, and people who are in her community have other, unique, characteristics that she cannot represent. Taking the image for reality greatly perpetuates this conflation of characteristics because now the individual reality does not matter. The “reality” is Sharbat. There are several reasons that the decline of the individual is a problem, the least of which is that it leads to overgeneralizations. Society can rationalize much more when the distinctions surrounding a group of people are vague. To think that this was not the plan of the government is incredibly naïve. If the individual is gone then all the individuals who are being hurt do not matter, the reality is “Sharbat.” As long as she is safe, then what we are doing is not bad. The thousands of people being hurt do not matter because Sharbat is not being hurt. Because of this, if she is ever hurt by the United States Government they will not let it out. As soon as Sharbat is hurt the situation becomes an attack on the narrative and an attack on the one person who we believed represented the whole.

In the End . . .

*National Geographic*’s treatment of Sharbat Gula on their cover in 1985 made her a commodified object, something that people living in the West could purchase and feel good about purchasing. Their revisiting in 2002 did not change that fact. When the photographer went in search of the “Afghan girl” he kept her in a subjugated role, that of the Other. He instructed her to pose in the same way to recreate the feeling that was produced when people saw her for the first time. It was a feeling of pleasure, pleasure provided through a dual voyeurism, being able to identify her thereby identifying ourselves, pleasure that reinforced the masculine Western identity, and pleasure from finding an “authentic” Other. Along with these feelings of pleasure, the revisited Sharbat Gula was an image that reflected an absence of reality: she was no longer the young woman in the original picture, but she needed to be portrayed that way. By continuing
the simulated image a cultural narrative of third world women is extended and the Western
cultural knowledge reified. It is through this knowledge that the Western war text can be
rationalized and the killing by the United States can be made into an acceptable policy action, the
reality is Sharbat. In unpacking the image of Sharbat Gula from both a postcolonial feminist and
a postmodern perspective we are able to become aware of how power and identity are negotiated
in society. If we do not want to be a pawn in someone else’s game, it is imperative that we begin
to analyze where we get our knowledge from and how it is being constructed to manipulate us. It
is only through the coming together of actual lived experiences and simulated cultural
knowledge that we can begin to exercise our agency in making society a better place.
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