

Making and Unmaking a Hero: Aung San Suu Kyi in the News Media

Astrid Juckenack, astrid.juckenack@uni-marburg.de

MA thesis defended at the Department of Theology, Uppsala University, spring 2019

Background

- Ethnic cleansing potentially constituting genocide against the Rohingya minority has been in progress in Myanmar since 2017, though violence and discrimination have been ongoing for years prior. Criticism has been leveled against a multitude of military and political officials in Myanmar. Among them is Aung San Suu Kyi, current State-Councilor of the country after decades of resistance against its military dictatorship, efforts for which she spent a total of 15 years under house arrest whilst receiving a plethora of international human rights honors (Pletcher 2018).
- As a person previously lauded as a 'hero' and human rights champion, her seemingly benevolent attitude towards violent ethnic cleansing has come, to many, as a shock and surprise alike. The subject of attempts to make sense of her drastic change of roles, just which roles she is cast in in news articles and discussions, and which roles, positions, or behaviors are assigned to her, is at the focus of this project.

Conceptual Framework

- The theoretical backdrop to this project consists of media framing, drawing somewhat from the gendered mediation thesis, as well as of critical perspectives on the roles and critical reception of victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and 'hero figures,' including on women assigned any of these roles (see f.ex. Vetlesen 2000; Staub 2010; Sjoberg & Gentry 2007; Donà 2018; Jayawickreme & Di Stefano 2012; Howard & Privera 2008) during genocide and mass atrocity.
- It is thus assumed that news articles do not merely contain facts pertaining to the events on which they report, but offer structures for interpreting these events and the actors involved as well, which suggest causation, moral judgment, and suitable remedies for the issues at hand (see f.ex. Ross 2009; Tuchman 1978; Entman 1993; Gidengil & Everitt 2000). In the context of genocide and mass atrocity, media framing may therefore encourage active or passive bystandership, influence public willingness to provide humanitarian aid or intervene, or whether such measures are understood as being plausible or necessary (see f.ex. Anderson & Brakstad 2016).

Results

- Articles employing any of the four main frames call into question notions of Aung San Suu Kyi's 'heroism.' Nevertheless, this is often done through a retrospective critique of her family history, previous political position, and person demeanor, rather than through a critique of the limits and drawbacks of the construction of 'hero figures.' The suggested remedies, consequently, are largely focused on Aung San Suu Kyi as an individual who has disappointed, betrayed, and perhaps somewhat embarrassed, the international community(ies). Thus, a frequent demand revolves around the revocation of her Nobel Peace Prize and other human rights honors and awards, as well as around personal moral reformation rather than broader, structural action in the Myanmar political field (e.g. cooperation with ICC investigations, or supporting international aid efforts to the Rohingya).
- The portrayal of Aung San Suu Kyi prior to her 'fall' appears gendered in some cases, as allusions to femininity, grace, and fragility are used to elevate her to the status of an extraordinary hero, or a 'secular saint' of sorts. Dismantling Aung San Suu Kyi's 'hero' status without critiquing that she was elevated to this status without a lot of critical consideration over the course of decades, then, underscores the severity of her fall but to an extent, also depicts the persecution of ethnic minorities in Myanmar from an angle which excludes the international community and exempts its from responsibility. The revocation of human rights credentials increases the distance between Aung San Suu Kyi and those international actors who have previously recognized her – yet it does not evoke additional obligations to aid the Rohingya refugees or intervene in their persecution.
- On the other hand, this perspective exempts the international community from some of its own responsibility from relying, to a considerable extent, on an idealized individual to bear the brunt of the country's transition from military dictatorship to democracy, rather than offering long-term support more suited to the complexities on the ground.

Research Questions

How is Aung San Suu Kyi portrayed in the media between 2015 and 2018?

Sub-questions:

- To what extent is the media portrayal of Aung San Suu Kyi gendered, and how?
- How are the categories of victim, perpetrator, bystander, and 'hero' figure applied to Aung San Suu Kyi, and how is she situated within the respective categories?
- How does the media reconcile Aung San Suu Kyi's achievements as a human rights champion with the current developments in Myanmar?

Method and Material

- In a single case study, a qualitative framing analysis (see e.g. Entman 1993) was conducted, in which notions of victimhood, bystandership, perpetration, and heroism served as analytical frames.
- Articles from internationally read, generally politically centrist media outlets, including both daily news outlets as well as those more focused on opinion pieces, were analyzed, specifically from *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times* (incl. *International NYT*), *The Atlantic*, *Al Jazeera English*, and *The Guardian*. Using the *Factiva* database (NYT, WP, TG) and search functions of the websites (TA, AJ), articles published between 01 January 2015 to 31 December 2018 were searched using the term 'Aung San Suu Kyi.' Initially, this garnered 1.555 results on Factiva.
- Upon identifying only those articles in which Aung San Suu Kyi was, indeed, discussed in more depth, a total of 149 articles across all five outlets remained, which provided the data for the qualitative analysis.

Conclusion

- All four frames are employed across articles and news outlets, though Aung San Suu Kyi is most prominently conceived of as a passive bystander (see f.ex. Vetlesen 2000; Staub 2010) holding considerable, albeit limited, political power as well as moral authority in Myanmar. Hence her inaction is understood as a deliberate act, as *omission* rather than general *inaction*, indicating moral complicity to the persecution of the Rohingya.
- This notwithstanding, some articles do consider Aung San Suu Kyi as a politician, not as a saint who has fallen to that role, but one whose taking on of this role was a pragmatic and legitimate step (though her current inaction is not). These discussions, which take place *through* Aung San Suu Kyi but ultimately are about a greater variety of topics alongside her, also extend to critical perspectives on processes of democratization and 'Western' perspectives on South East Asia. Thus, when the notion and construction of 'heroism' serve as a framework with which to criticize these narratives of both Myanmar's and Aung San Suu Kyi's political decline, discussions appear to open up, broaden, and become more critical overall.

References

Anderson, Kjell Follingstad; and Ingjerd Veiden Brakstad. "The Impossibility to Protect? Media Narratives and the Responsibility to Protect." *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 3:9 (2016): 96-115.; Donà, Giorgia. "'Situating Bystandership' During and After the Rwandan Genocide." *Journal of Genocide Research* 20:1 (2018): 1-19.; Entman, Robert. "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm." *Journal of Communication* 43:4 (1993): 51-58.; Gidengil, Elisabeth; and Joanna Everitt. "Filtering the Female." *Women & Politics* 21:4 (2000): 105-131.; Howard, John W. III; and Laura C. Privera. "The Fallen Woman Archetype: Media Representations of Lynndie England, Gender, and the (Ab)uses of U.S. Female Soldiers." *Women's Studies in Communication* 31:3 (2008): 287-311.; Jayawickreme, Eranda; and Paul Di Stefano. "How Can We Study Heroism? Integrating Persons, Situations and Communities." *Political Psychology* 33:1 (2012): 165-178.; Kipgen, Nehginpao. *Myanmar: A Political History*. (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2016).; Pletcher, Kenneth. "Aung San Suu Kyi." *Britannica Academica* (2018), retrieved: 4 May 2019.; Ross, Karen. *Gendered Media: Women, Men, and Identity Politics*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009).; Sjoberg, Laura; and Caron E. Gentry. *Mothers, Monsters, Whores. Women's Violence in Global Politics*. (London and New York: Zed Books, 2007).; Staub, Ervin. *Overcoming Evil: Genocide, Violent Conflict, and Terrorism*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).; Tuchman, Gayle. *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality*. (New York: Free Press, 1978).; Vetlesen, Arne Johan. "Genocide: A Case for the Responsibility of the Bystander." *Journal of Peace Research* 37:4 (2000): 519-532.