

**American Exceptionalism, American Masculinity and Orientalist  
Constructions of "the Other": A Post-Structuralist Analysis of Continuity  
and Discontinuity in US Foreign Policy Representations of Myanmar.**

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**Abstract:**

The discursive representation of Myanmar in US foreign policy will be analysed in this dissertation, and it will be argued that there is change as well as continuity in the representation of the country. Political changes have taken place recently in Myanmar, and it is the Bush- and Obama-administrations' representation of the country in the context of these changes that will be examined. Even though the representations of the regime and Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for democracy (NLD) have to some degree been altered, the highly orientalist and gendered representations of these actors and of Myanmar in itself remain intact. Further, American exceptionalism is analysed here as the hegemonised discursive centre of US foreign policy discourse, and throughout the changes the exceptionalism of the US, as well as American masculinity, remains unchallenged. Indeed, the removal of sanctions and the economic reforms that have ensued in Myanmar are represented in a manner that highlights the dominance of the US. Thus, the dominance of the United States is reproduced, while the orientalist construction of Myanmar as feminine and helpless persists.

## **Introduction**

It has been argued that: “[...] one of the most consequential elements present in all of the encounters between the North and the South has been the practice(s) of representation by the North of the South” (Doty, 1996: 2). In this study one such representation will be examined: the representation of Myanmar by the US. Recent representations of Myanmar have taken place in the context of change: During the Bush-administration the sanctions that have been implemented in the country steadily increased in line with atrocities committed by the Myanmar government (Brooten, 2005: 138; Steinberg, 2010: 182). With the inauguration of Obama this changed, as his administration sought to alter its policy (Steinberg, 2014: 117). A new government was inaugurated in Myanmar in 2011, and since then conditions in Myanmar have changed (Steinberg, 2014: 117) and most of the sanctions have been lifted (Steinberg, 2015: 439). Hence, the changes that have taken place makes Myanmar an interesting case study where continuity and discontinuity can be examined from a post-structural point of view.

Hence, the focus of this dissertation is what Doty (1996) calls *how*-questions: such questions examine the production of meaning, how this meaning is attached to actors and entities, and further how this construction of the social world enables certain lines of action whilst precluding others (Doty, 1996: 4). It is upon this approach this analysis will be based. The relationship between Myanmar and the US is one of unequal access to representational agency and power, and thus in foreign policy it is the US that produces meanings and identities upon which it can act. This study will be conducted by examining the meanings that are produced and attached to the implementation of sanctions, the removal of sanctions, and the subsequent economic reforms and investment in Myanmar. Moreover, the identity of the US as an exceptional and masculine state will be examined, and it will also be analysed how other actors were constructed in an oriental and gendered way in relation to US exceptionalism and masculinity. However, the discursive representations and the political situation in Myanmar have both changed recently. The representations of Suu Kyi and the regime in Myanmar are altered, but the identity of the US as an exceptional and masculine state remains fixed. It will be argued that US exceptionalism is the discursive centre in this discourse, around which other subjects and meanings are represented<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the

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<sup>1</sup> It should be emphasised here that even though it is argued that American exceptionalism is the discursive centre, it is not argued that the words ‘American exceptionalism’ are spoken out loud often in US foreign policy. Rather, it means that ‘American exceptionalism’ is a hegemonic *idea* around which articulations are created.

dominance of the West in general, and the US in particular, is reproduced through the orientalist and gendered representation of Myanmar.

It is relevant to explore the theory that will be used in this study, as well as the theoretical tools that will be utilised in order to analyse the discourse of American foreign policy in Myanmar, and this will be done in the next section. After that a short section follows where some key historical events and issues in the history of Myanmar, and the relationship between Myanmar and the US, will be examined. Then the discourse analysis will be conducted, first by examining the discourse of the Bush-administration and then the discourse of the Obama-administration. In the conclusion some relevant topics will be highlighted, in particular the upcoming election in Myanmar that is set to take place November this year. Indeed, it is the political changes, but also the prevailing continuities, that makes the representation of Myanmar an interesting topic in a post-structural analysis.

### **Theoretical framework**

The analytical framework I use will largely be based on tools we find in discourse theory, a theory that is situated within post-structuralism and anti-foundationalism (Jørgensen; Philips, 2002: 16-17). In this theoretical approach there is no objective reality and we can only access reality through discourse (Jørgensen; Philips, 2002: 5). Here we can analyse knowledge in a Foucauldian manner – that is, knowledge is imbedded in power and it is a



product of power (Jørgensen; Philips, 2002: 14). The close connection between knowledge and power means that power is closely connected to discourse as well (Jørgensen; Philips, 2002: 14). Discourses, in turn, create meanings (Jørgensen; Philips, 2002: 13) that produce objects, events, identities and subject-positions (Weldes, 1996: 284-285). Thus, knowledge, meanings and identities that are created in representations are a product of power. Doty defines discourse as “[...] a structured, relational totality” (Doty, 1996: 6). Discourses are, furthermore, partially fixed: what articulations are possible is limited within any given discourse, but due to the fact that discourses can only partially be fixed (Jørgensen; Philips, 2002: 38), there is always room for change. Hence, there is continuity and discontinuity in the meanings that are created, and meanings can therefore change in different contexts. Imperial representations will not be the same today as they were many years ago, as has been explored in depth by Doty (1996), but we are likely to see some continuity. It is the continuities and discontinuities in representations of identities that are at the core of this study of US representation of Myanmar.

Orientalism is important to the analysis of US foreign policy in Myanmar because it highlights representational dominance by the West over “the other”. In his seminal work *Orientalism*, Said argues that orientalism is a “Western style of dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient” (Said, 2003 [1978]: 3). Orientalism is further based on the idea that there is a fundamental ontological and epistemological distinction between the West and

the Orient (Said, 2003 [1978]: 2). The relationship between the West and the “other” is also a relationship of complex hegemony (Said, 2003 [1978]: 5), a term that will be examined later. Orientalism thus highlights how hegemonies in the West have power to construct the South.

A variety of theoretical tools will be utilised in order to make sense of the US representation of Myanmar, and several of these tools will be based on the theories of Laclau and Mouffe as understood by Howarth and Stavrakakis as well as Jørgensen and Philips. The first of these that will be examined is discursive centres, also called nodal points and dominant signifiers. A discursive centre partially fixes a discourse (Doty, 1996: 6-7), it creates some stability, and it serves as a reference point that binds together discursive meanings into ‘chains of connotations’ (Howarth; Stavrakakis, 2000: 8). Other signs within the discourse acquire their meaning from their relationship with the discursive centre (Jørgensen; Philips, 2002: 26). Further, chains of connotations are words or signs that in a particular discourse often are associated with each other (Weldes, 1996: 284). They often include language and ideas that are common within a particular culture (Weldes, 1996: 284). Weldes uses the example of totalitarianism after the Second World War and how it became articulated in the US in a chain of connotation with words such as expansion and aggression (Weldes, 1996: 284). Such chains of signifiers can often be contrasted to other chains, and oppositions between chains help define identities and subjects (Jørgensen; Philips, 2002: 43). Theoretically, discursive centres fits well with an analysis of American exceptionalism, as

the idea of the superiority of the US is an idea around which other meanings are created. Moreover, it will be explored how certain words are articulated in chains of connotation and the fixity of the meanings that have been produced in times of continuity and discontinuity in American political discourse. In particular the identities of the US, Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, and the authorities in Myanmar will be examined. These identities are connoted to various terms as well as to the discursive centre, and this will be explored further on.

In my analysis I will argue that American exceptionalism is a hegemonic idea. Hegemonic projects try to create and stabilise the discursive centre by articulating elements that are unstable, and through hegemonic practices various identities and subjectivities are articulated into a common project (Howarth; Stavrakakis, 2000: 14-15). Complete hegemony is impossible though; there will always be the agency of various actors and antagonisms that can challenge the discursive hegemony (Howarth; Stavrakakis, 2000: 15). Hegemonic discursive centres will be a useful analytical tool for my analysis as I examine the meaning of American exceptionalism. It is here argued that the common project in American foreign policy representations of Myanmar is the stability and continuation of American exceptionalism. Hegemonic American exceptionalism is reproduced not only by representing Myanmar: it is also reproduced by socially constructing sanctions and the removal of sanctions, as well as constructing the role of the US as pivotal in upholding the sanctions and then initiating political change. Therefore the construction and

representation of sanctions and political change will be analysed in order to examine the reproduction of American exceptionalism as a hegemonic idea.

In examining North-South relations and representations it also seems relevant to examine how meanings and identities are naturalised and articulated into a system of hierarchical classifications. Naturalisation takes place through creation of knowledge and the creation of binary oppositions (Doty, 1996: 10). These may, in turn, be associated with other pairs of binary oppositions, such as nature/culture, Oriental/European, and may then transform into yet another overarching binary opposition between, say, civilised Europe and the instinctual Oriental (Doty, 1996: 10). These binary oppositions may come to be naturalised, they can be perceived as “truth” (Doty, 1996: 10). Individuals and actors can act on the meanings that are produced through the process of articulation, and if these articulations are repeated often enough these meanings may eventually come to be seen as natural (Weldes, 1996, p: 285). The discourse may also reveal classifications of the different social actors into groups that are constructed as “natural”, and it may also reveal hierarchies between these groups of actors (Doty, 1996: 10). When meanings such as civilised and uncivilised are naturalised, and those meanings and identities are associated with different subjects and geographies, a clear hierarchy can be detected between the North and the South. In this analysis binary oppositions and naturalisation will be examined in the US foreign policy in Myanmar. It is unlikely that the US will use the word uncivilised in reference to Myanmar.

Indeed, the language has changed from earlier imperial encounters, but the orientalist language is nevertheless still present.

My starting point, then, is that the US represents Myanmar within an orientalist language that creates meanings and identities with which the US and Myanmar can be identified. The US, and in particular American exceptionalism, is the hegemonic centre, whilst the identity of Myanmar is articulated in order to stabilise the hegemonic discursive centre. However, there are different identities within these representations, especially gendered ones, and these I will explore further in my analysis. Masculine and feminine representations present us with yet another layer we can analyse and which is classified and hierarchised within the discourse in American foreign policy. Post-colonial feminism has highlighted that the racialised hierarchy of the global North and the global South often has been complemented by a gender hierarchy where the South is constructed as feminine in contrast to the masculine West (Chowdhry; Nair, 2004: 19). The men in the South can also be constructed as masculine, but their masculinity is represented as dangerous to the women in the South, and the West can thus be constructed as the saviour of the female victims (Chowdhry; Nair, 2004: 20). Women from the West also have agency in this context though, and they also want to liberate the female "others" (Chowdhry; Nair, 2004: 20). This theoretical viewpoint will be utilised in order to analyse the representations that occur in the crossing between race and gender in US representations of Myanmar. However, the meaning of race and gender changes according to context, and thus the

meanings of the two terms are not fixed once and for all (Chowdhry; Nair, 2004: 17). Hence, we need to analyse not just the hierarchy of gendered identities, but also how the representation and identity of these gendered subjects can change. In this study this will be analysed by examining the different representations in the Bush- and Obama-administrations.

These components will provide the theoretical framework and tools that are necessary in order to make sense of the representation of Myanmar in US foreign policy. Documents from the US government will be analysed, and these documents have been chosen based on their relevance to the topics that are being examined in this dissertation. This analysis will take into account the dominance of American exceptionalism, orientalism and gendered orientalism. Before a discourse analysis can be conducted, though, it is important to look at some of the key events in Myanmar's recent history, as well as the general context of the relationship between Myanmar and the US.

### **The United States and Myanmar**

After decades of military rule (Steinberg, 2015: 428-429), revolts erupted in Myanmar in 1988 (Fiori; Passeri, 2015: 10). A group of generals then took control under the name of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which would in 1997 be renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) (Hadar, 2001: 414). However, in the 1990 elections, the National League for Democracy (NLD), with its leader Aung San Suu Kyi

defeated SLORC (Steinberg, 2015: 431-432). The purpose of the election has, however, been contentious: Western governments thought it was supposed to assemble a new government, but there is also evidence that the election actually was intended for a constitutional convention where a new constitution could be written (Steinberg, 2015: 432). The military junta oppressed the NLD when they demanded that the election result should be recognised and respected (Steinberg, 2015: 432): Members were imprisoned, Aung San Suu Kyi was put under house arrest, there was complete censorship, and a general neglect of human rights (Steinberg, 2015: 432).

The result of this has been many years of sanctions from the West in general, and from the U.S. in particular. Before 1988, however, the main idea of American foreign policy in Myanmar was to keep communism at bay: there were powerful leftist groups within Myanmar, and the country was also of concern to the US because of the advance of communism from the People's Republic of China (Steinberg, 2010: 177). In the 1990's it became increasingly common for the US Congress to apply sanctions against regimes (Hadar, 2001: 411). There was a landslide of policies that froze out Myanmar during this time: the US suspended the provision of aid, they declined from sending an ambassador to the Capital of Myanmar, they withdrew Myanmar's permission for trade and investment programs, and they prevented assistance from international institutions (Hadar, 2001: 414). The use of sanctions would increase steadily throughout the Bush-regime. This time-period will be examined in the next section.

Until recently, Myanmar has arguably been a ‘boutique issue’ in US foreign policy circles, as it requires few resources (Yawngghwe, 2010: 429). It is also a small issue, in comparison to American foreign policy issues around the world; it is fashionable and popular amongst human rights activists and expatriates; and it is a specialised issue, as it is mostly noticed by a narrow audience and pressure groups in the U.S. (Fiori; Passeri, 2015: 14-15). Lastly, it has been easy and in everybody’s interest to criticise the ‘bad guys’ – the generals – whenever the opportunity has arisen (Yawngghwe, 2010: 429).

Myanmar has traditionally followed a line of non-alignment in their foreign relations, although Haacke (2012) has argued that China at all times has had a key position in Myanmar foreign policy (Haacke, 2012: 58). The administration in Myanmar found it difficult to build a better relationship with the US whilst the Bush-administration was still in power, and at the same time adjust its relationship with China – however, when the Obama-administration came into power and changed their Myanmar-policy somewhat, the military elite saw an opportunity for a new relationship with the US (Haacke, 2012: 59). Nevertheless, Myanmar will probably stick to its policy of non-alignment (Haacke, 2012: 59).



## **Representations of Myanmar during the Bush-administration**

The representation of Myanmar fits into a long tradition of oriental representations of “the other” by the West, where the US and Europe have been constructed as actors who understood human rights and democracy, and who were already civilised (Doty, 1996: 139). It is within this context it seems relevant to study Myanmar: American hegemony is to this day pertinent, and the sanctions that have been invoked against the regime in Myanmar, as well as the unrelenting support for the National League for Democracy (NLD) and its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi (Steinberg, 2015: 433), can highlight some interesting representations of “the other”. During the Bush-administration the sanctions increased steadily: In 2003 a group backed by the military attacked Aung San Suu Kyi and her motorcade, and Suu Kyi was placed under “protective custody” (Brooten, 2005: 138). New condemnations ensued from a host of countries, and stronger sanctions from the government of George W. Bush were implemented (Brooten, 2005: 138). The already strained relationship between Myanmar and the US became exacerbated during the so-called “saffron-revolution” in 2007, when the government cracked down hard on monks who protested against the regime (Steinberg, 2010: 182). Yet more sanctions were implemented by the US as a result of this. (Steinberg, 2010: 182) In 2008 Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar, and yet again the authorities were harshly criticised; this time it was for the lack of adequate response to the disaster (Steinberg, 2015: 435)

Bush's foreign policy in Myanmar was very much a policy of sanctions: sanctions are a powerful tool "somewhere between active engagement and military action" (Savey, 2013-2014: 375). The invocation of sanctions is thus a mechanism that can serve to represent actors in a particularly forceful way: since 1997 the US has maintained a declaration of a national emergency due to the cold relationship between the US and Myanmar and the policies of the government of Myanmar (Bush, G., 2007a). The situation and the policies of the authorities are described as: "[...] an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States [...]" (Bush, G., 2007a).

Steinberg has argued that rather than invoking an actual state of emergency, this declaration is practical insofar as it warrants a number of sanctions that has been implemented, sanctions that would otherwise not have been legally justified (Steinberg, 2010: 175-176). Sanctions have helped produce various meanings, and in particular the production of American exceptionalism has been powerful. In a testimony in 2002, Matthew Daley, Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, stressed that US leadership had been pivotal in assembling the efforts of the international community in order to put pressure on the regime. (Daley, 2002). After the attack on Suu Kyi's motorcade, Daley said the following: "In response to the events of May 30, a great many countries have joined in denouncing the SPDC and calling for democracy in Burma. However, none have yet adopted an investment ban, import ban, or financial services ban as has the United States." (Daley, 2003).

This clearly shows American exceptionalism at work: Nayak and Malone (2009) argue that American exceptionalism is a particular type of orientalism that produces “America” (Nayak; Malone, 2009: 254). The narrative of America as an exceptional state is underpinned by some of the main tenets of this idea: the “God-given” destiny of the US to teach and lead the world according to the worldview of mainstream America, that the US has a unique place in history, and that it is in its essence different from all other nations (Nayak; Malone, 2009: 254). They further argue that we need to better understand the “othering” not just of the Orient, but also the “othering” of Europe in relation to the U.S. (Nayak; Malone, 2009: 254). The American approach was the most uncompromising in its criticism and condemnation of the regime in Myanmar (Pedersen, 2008: 23). The uncompromising stance of the US represented America as superior to both the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the EU, thus reinforcing American exceptionalism by representing their identity as superior to their Western “others” – the Europeans. Indeed, the sanctions had a discursive *function*, they reinforced the identity of the U.S. as an exceptional and unique state.

From a post-structural perspective, the invocation of a national emergency, as was mentioned above, also has the function of representing the authorities in Myanmar as villains. Secretary of State Colin Powell described the regime as thugs after Aung San Suu Kyi’s motorcade was attacked in 2003 (Powell, 2003), and Powell’s successor Condoleezza Rice called Myanmar an outpost

of tyranny in her hearing before congress (Rice, 2005: 15), clearly continuing the representation of the regime in Myanmar as rogue and incompetent. Through this representation of the military junta, the US was discursively placed in a binary opposition, as morally superior to the leaders of Myanmar.

The reaction against the conduct of the regime has been fierce, clearly reinforcing the representation of the authorities in Myanmar as inept thugs, while positioning the US as an exceptionally moral state with the power to discipline the leaders of Myanmar. This representation is reinforced through various statements by US officials: “[...] a series of generals have [...] implemented irrational and repressive policies that have caused the needless suffering of Burma’s [...] people.” (John, 2006), and, in the context of the perception that Myanmar was once a prosperous country, but that it now has a shattered economy: “[...] Burma’s leaders should hang their heads in shame” (Kelly, 2002). In 2003, Lorne W. Craner, Assistant-Secretary for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, said the following in relation to possible investigations of human rights abuses and widespread rape by the Burmese military, and whether or not the regime in Myanmar would accept implementation of such an investigation: “We hope that the regime will break from tradition and finally make an intelligent choice.” (Craner, 2003). Irrationality, a lack of intelligence, and actions that should make the generals ashamed create a chain of connotations with which the Burmese authorities become associated.

This chain of connotation, which reinforces the perception of the Myanmar regime as uncivilised, simultaneously creates a binary opposition where the US becomes represented as the civilised actor in this relationship. In the statements above it is the US that points the finger, controls and disciplines the regime in Myanmar, whilst representing itself as an exceptional country that uses tough measures like sanctions in order to discipline the rogue regime in Myanmar. The activities of the US, however, are seldom scrutinised in the same way as the activities of the military junta in Myanmar. The morality of the United States means that the US does not have to answer to anyone; the social construction of the US as an inherently ethical actor has come to be perceived as simply true, as has been argued by Doty (1996: 142).

The relationship between the US and the military regime is thus one of power and discipline, where the US can continuously underline the irrationality and incompetence of the regime. The relationship between the US and the National League for Democracy in general, and its leader Aung San Suu Kyi in particular, differs starkly from the relationship the US has with the military junta. In American media, Suu Kyi is “larger than life” (Brooten, 2005: 135), and this is arguably also true in American politics: Bush has stated that Aung San Suu Kyi is at the centre of American foreign policy (Bush, G., 2008a), whilst Paula J. Dobriansky, Under-Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs during the Bush-administration, has stated the following in relation to Suu Kyi: “She continues to be a beacon of hope for those who yearn for freedom in Burma. Her message of non-violence and her courageous support

for the establishment of democracy in the face of the junta's repression inspire people [...] around the world.” (Dobriansky, 2005a).

Even though descriptions in the media, as Brooten has argued, emphasise how determined and brave Suu Kyi is, it is also stated in the media that she and the people of Myanmar in general are largely incapable of bringing about change (Brooten, 2005: 146). After Aung San Suu Kyi's motorcade had been attacked, Secretary of State Colin Powell stated that Suu Kyi and the UN special envoy Razali had failed to restore democracy in Myanmar “despite their good will and sincere efforts” (Powell, 2003), largely confirming the representation of Aung San Suu Kyi as brave, but nevertheless incapable of producing real change, thus reinforcing an orientalist representation.

The representation of her bravery is coupled with a gendered representation; her feeble femininity, family-bonds and helplessness in confrontations with the military junta ensures a highly gendered tone in the discourse on Suu Kyi (Brooten, 2005). Due to how closely connoted the democracy-movement and Suu Kyi are in American representations, democracy in Myanmar in effect also become gendered and feminised (Brooten, 2005: 151). Dobriansky has stated that: “Those in power in Rangoon should understand that we hold them solely responsible for the well-being and safety of Aung San Suu Kyi and all other political prisoners“ (Dobriansky, 2005b). This statement, while highlighting the status of Suu Kyi and other political prisoners as victims in

need of protection, also recreates an American identity: the US has the moral authority to demand the safety of these individuals.

In this representation there is a construction of “us” against “them”: it is America against the cruel regime in Myanmar. However, the US identifies with the democracy-movement and Suu Kyi due to the shared value of democracy, even though Suu Kyi and the NLD represent feminine democracy, whilst the US is constructed as a masculine democracy. Through the representation of democracy in Myanmar as feminine, democracy in itself becomes gendered, and difference between democratic systems reproduces hierarchical relations on the global arena (Brooten, 2005: 135). In the media, the representation of Myanmar and Suu Kyi invoked a “protection scenario”, where evildoers threaten the victim, who is then subsequently rescued by the protector (Brooten, 2005: 135). In the protection scenario, if there are to be good protective men, there also has to be bad men who are aggressors (Young, 2003: 4). In the context of the Bush-administration the protection-scenario is interesting: In 2001 the US bombed Afghanistan, and they justified the bombing by stating that it was a humanitarian war, and that they wanted to protect the women, thus placing the US in the position as protector (Young, 2003: 17). Laura Bush, the First Lady, justified the war on terror by representing it as necessary in order to save Afghan Women (Young, 2003: 17). Feminists constructed these women as exotic victims that needed a Western female saviour (Young, 2003: 18-19).

While the representation of Aung San Suu Kyi already gives the representation of Myanmar a highly gendered aspect, the way the First Lady talks about Myanmar adds another layer to this gendered representation. Shepherd (2006) argues that in relation to the war in Afghanistan, Laura Bush took on a traditional maternal and caring role (Shepherd, 2006: 24): indeed, in the discourse on the war, American women are represented as passive and in need of protection (Shepherd, 2006: 25). Women abroad, however, are represented in not only highly gendered terms, but also in racial terms: her life is based on her gender and her identity as a victim from the Global South (Shepherd, 2006: 25).

The reason why the gendered representation of Afghanistan is mentioned here is because it is partly within the same discursive context Myanmar is represented. In the already much-cited article that examines media-representations of Myanmar, through an analysis that takes into account both orientalism and gender in representational practices, Brooten argues that it becomes clear that the US is represented as a protector of a less developed democracy - Myanmar (Brooten, 2005: 136). She further argues that Myanmar is represented as a feminine democracy, and that the US is represented as the mature, masculine democracy, run by decent and capable leaders that advocate freedom and democracy globally (Brooten, 2005: 136). This analysis of the media very much reflects the representation in American foreign policy.



The gendered representation of Myanmar can be analysed further by focusing on the discourse of key actors in American politics, and the role of the protection scenario in this context. Laura Bush and the Senate Women's Caucus on Burma were feminine protectors of the feebler orientalised Myanmar. In the Bush-administration it was Laura Bush, the First Lady of the United States, who seemed to be the most committed to Myanmar in the White House, although other politicians in the senate and congress also were vocal about the issue. Afghanistan and Myanmar were *the* foreign policy issues of particular interest for the former First Lady. Mrs. Bush represents Aung San Suu Kyi in gendered terms simply by stating that she is, indeed, a woman: "She's a Nobel Prize-winning woman. And I am interested in women's issues." (Bush, L., 2008a).

On several occasions Myanmar has also been discursively linked to Afghanistan in talks and interviews given by the First Lady, thus placing Myanmar in a context of masculinist protection: "I'm more educated about the situation in Burma and the situation in Afghanistan, just after having lived here in the White House for seven years. I've just learned more about it and know more about it, and Burma certainly." (Bush, L., 2008b). She has also compared the situation in Myanmar to the Taliban: "[...] the country has been decimated, just like Afghanistan was under the Taliban" (Bush, L., 2008b). She emphasises the plight of women in Afghanistan, thus connoting the situations in the two countries through her rhetoric:

“[...] what really started it all was right after September 11th, when we looked into Afghanistan and saw the plight of women there. I was struck by, like many American women were, the idea of women being forbidden to be educated, not to even be able to leave the house unless they have a male escort, not being able to work. All of the things that we saw in Afghanistan made me then move on to look at other countries around the world, and particularly at the way women are treated in some of these countries. [...]

And then slowly, I became interested in Aung San Suu Kyi after that, and then in the plight of the Burmese people.” (Bush, L., 2007).

Thus Afghanistan and Myanmar become connected in a chain of connotation where they are represented as rogue and uncivilised states. The First Lady further emphasises how people in the US want to help the people in Myanmar: “we also now look at Burma and we want to see what we can do” (Bush, L., 2008c), and further she says:

“[...] especially after the cyclone we all looked at Burma and it's just so difficult and so sad and so really, I think, very, very difficult for people in the United States to know that we had all the help we had right off the coast of Burma and that the government would never allow us in.” (Bush, L., 2008b).

Myanmar was thus represented as in need of help, and when Laura Bush emphasized that she wanted to help them, she reproduced a feminine, maternal and humanitarian protection scenario. Aung San Suu Kyi's family-bonds are also mentioned, along with her personal sacrifices and how she has sacrificed herself for the country:

“[...] I [...] learned about her story and her courage and her sacrifice, not even being able to say good-bye to her husband as he was dying from cancer because he was not allowed into Burma and she was afraid to leave because she knew she'd never be allowed back.

All this long time, off and on, of the last 18 years, being under house arrest, being in some sort of detention -- all of that really shows the sacrifice that she's making for the people of Burma [...].” (Bush, L., 2007).

This focus on family-bonds, as emphasised earlier by Brooten, reproduces Suu Kyi's identity as a mother - a mother who sacrificed a life with her family for the sake of the people of Burma, thus representing her motherhood in relation to the nation (Brooten, 2005: 147). Aung San Suu Kyi's family-situation and other topics were mentioned in 2007 when Laura Bush and members of the Senate announced the Senate Women's Caucus on Burma (The White House, 2007) and this in itself reproduces the representation of Myanmar as gendered. During the announcement of the caucus several members of senate as well as

Laura Bush talked about Myanmar, and Senator Hutchison underlined how the First Lady has stood up for women in Afghanistan, and how she now does the same in the case of Burma (The White House, 2007). Laura Bush further said at the meeting: “[...] these are Republican and Democratic senators, that this is a bipartisan issue, and that all the women who signed this -- every single woman senator -- stand with all of our friends in Burma, including Aung San Suu Kyi.” (The White House, 2007). She also expressed the following:

“I really would like Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to know that the women of the United States Senate, as well as the women of the United States stand with her, and that we watch her and we think about her a lot. And her story is really an example to us, to all of us -- her courage and also her very sincere desire to have reconciliation, to have a non-violent reconciliation in Burma for the best of all the Burmese people. And we want her to know that we know that and that we stand with her.” (The White House, 2007).

Further, Senator Stabenow stated that:

“[...] we come together to support a woman who represents women's leadership in the world, women's leadership in her country. We stand here as women elected representing our states, our First Lady, representing the entire country, to say that we stand with one voice, speaking out on behalf of a woman who is a leader

in her country and represents critical leadership in the world, who has been denied access to her family, to those in her country for way too long. This is a situation that we hope and call on Burma to change, and allow her to step out and assume her leadership role.” (The White House, 2007).

Senator Klobuchar also mentions Suu Kyi’s family-situation with the death of Suu Kyi’s husband when she was not able to visit him, and she further argues that we need to “convict the guilty and protect the innocent”, thus reinforcing the protection-scenario (The White House, 2007). Senator McCaskill stated that:

“Throughout history women who are determined have accomplished great things. I'm honored to join the women leaders behind me in our determination to help this brave woman of Burma and the people she represents to take her rightful place as an elected leader for freedom and democracy in Burma.” (The White House, 2007).

In this discourse we can detect a whole range of oriental and gendered representations: The connotation to Afghanistan is repeated. Also, Suu Kyi’s family relations and the need for the women’s caucus to protect the innocent are only some of the issues that are mentioned in this Western women’s saviour narrative. By further stating that the people around the world wonder what they can do to help Suu Kyi and other political prisoners, a hierarchy is

created between their own gendered position and that of Suu Kyi: while Laura Bush is in a privileged maternal and caring position, Suu Kyi - however brave she may be - needs help and protection. Laura Bush's position in the US as a passive American woman in need of masculine protection in turn reinforces the representation of the US state and the government as a masculine protector, thus reinforcing the idea of American manhood, an important component of the idea of American exceptionalism.

Laura Bush's statements are all the more interesting due to the way in which the Myanmar-issue was represented in American politics at the time. As has already been mentioned, Myanmar has been described as a 'boutique-issue' – specialized, important to only a few, and not really a key issue in American foreign policy. Laura Bush's engagement in Myanmar must thus be seen in light of her position as passive and maternal; as a traditional domestic motherly figure. Her representation of Myanmar and Aung San Suu Kyi reinforces the perception of Myanmar as a feminine issue: the First Lady's care for the Burmese does not really have an impact on 'high-politics' because of the First Lady's own need for protection, and thus Laura Bush's engagement in the country only helps to reinforce the perceived helplessness and unimportance of Myanmar and Aung San Suu Kyi.

Hence, during the Bush-administration, the implementation of sanctions made possible a particular kind of representation of American exceptionalism: the moral high ground of the US was reinforced as the US implemented the

highest amount of sanctions among all nations whilst they represented the military in Myanmar as particularly inept. The feminised representation of Aung San Suu Kyi and the democracy-movement in Myanmar was embedded in a language of maternal care that also invoked a protection-scenario that simultaneously represented the US as the masculine protector, and the military junta as the male aggressor. As the Bush-administration came to an end, however, a new approach to Myanmar would appear gradually. In the next section the continuities and discontinuities that ensued in terms of hegemonic American representation of Myanmar will be explored.

### **Representations of Myanmar during the Obama-administration**

“When I took office as President, I sent a message to those governments who ruled by fear. I said, in my inauguration address, “We will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.” And over the last year and a half, a dramatic transition has begun, as a dictatorship of five decades has loosened its grip. Under President Thein Sein, the desire for change has been met by an agenda for reform. A civilian now leads the government, and a parliament is asserting itself. The once-outlawed National League for Democracy stood in an election, and Aung San Suu Kyi is a Member of Parliament. [...]

So today, I’ve come to keep my promise and extend the hand of

friendship. America now has an Ambassador in Rangoon, sanctions have been eased, and we will help rebuild an economy that can offer opportunity for its people, and serve as an engine of growth for the world. But this remarkable journey has just begun, and has much further to go.” (Obama, 2012).

In 2009 George W. Bush’s presidential term was over, and only a few years later the situation in Myanmar was being represented differently. The discursive shift that took place at this time will be explored here. The analysis will still focus a great deal on sanctions (or, rather, during the Obama-administration: the removal of sanctions), and gendered identities, as well as the overarching topic of American exceptionalism and the North’s dominance over the South.

The government in Myanmar signalled that it was interested in change in 2009 (Steinberg, 2014: 117). After Obama’s inauguration in 2009 the new administration conducted a review of its Myanmar-policy, indicating that it wanted a better balance between economic sanctions and what they called ‘pragmatic engagement’ (Clapp, 2010: 411, 418) The seven-month review of US policy in Myanmar in 2009 was the first of its kind in decades, and it gave the administration the opportunity to re-evaluate its interests in the context of the changes that had taken place during the last decades (Clapp, 2001: 410-411). The events that followed would make this difficult though: the American John Yattew swam to the house of Suu Kyi, who was under house



arrest at the time (Clapp, 2010: 412). He stayed there a few days because he claimed ill health, and she was put on trial for failing to inform the authorities about this (Clapp, 2012: 412). The result was eighteen months of house arrest (Clapp, 2010: 413). Because of these events the US policy review was altered from what the administration had initially planned (Clapp, 2010: 413). According to Clapp the “pragmatic involvement”-policy of the US was “[...] more a *prospective* than an *actual* policy shift” (2010: 418).

In 2011 reform was surprisingly initiated in Myanmar, a development that astounded people both inside and outside of the country (Steinberg, 2014: 117). By-elections were held, and Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD were allowed to run – and won (Steinberg, 2015: 440). Political prisoners were released and censorship-rules were to a large extent removed (Steinberg, 2015: 439). The US and other countries gradually removed sanctions that had been imposed, and investment from the West ensued (Steinberg, 2015: 439-440).

Even though Assistant-Secretary at the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Kurt Campbell, has emphasised that the authorities in Myanmar has showed increased interest in political, economic, and social development, as well as national reconciliation (Campbell, 2012), he nevertheless has also emphasised that the policy-shift was a victory for the US. The shift in policy is largely credited to the efforts in American foreign policy. In a statement before the Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs Senate Foreign Relations Committee he stated that: “[...] for the first time in recent memory, the

Burmese leadership has shown an active interest in engaging with the United States. But, let me be clear: we have decided to engage with Burma because we believe it is in our interest to do so.” (Campbell, 2009). Thus, Campbell stresses the fact that although the Burmese initiated contact with the US in order to change their relationship, it is still the US that has the upper hand, insofar as it is the US who has decided that they want to have an engagement with the regime. This was further stated in 2012, when Campbell testified yet again. Campbell stressed that because of:

“President Obama’s and Secretary Clinton’s far-sighted leadership and the hard work of our first Special Representative and Policy Coordinator for Burma, Ambassador Derek Mitchell, the Burmese government has engaged with the United States in candid and constructive exchanges, leading towards concrete progress on our core concerns over the past nine months.” (Campbell, 2012).

Hence the US reproduces its own superiority and control, and by emphasising their leading role in the policy-shift, American exceptionalism is also reproduced in this discourse. Steinberg (2015) has, however, argued that it is still unclear whether the role of the US was decisive, or whether the change was the result of a variety of different complex components (Steinberg, 2015: 428). This, however, is fairly irrelevant to the representation of the issue: the dominance of the US ensures that the agency of Myanmar is largely curbed, and thus even if Myanmar had played a decisive role in the policy-shift, it might not be represented as such by the US.

The emergence of a changed discourse correlate with the change from sanctions to investment and economic development: Obama has emphasised that the US should “lead by example”, and that American companies thus should meet high standards (Obama, 2012). Under-Secretary for Economic growth, Energy, and the Environment, Robert Hormats, has in the same vein emphasised that the best American companies are highly responsible investors, and that due to the skills of American companies they can contribute to the reform process in Myanmar (Hormats, 2012). He has also stated that: “[...] we have – what I call, sort of, the American brand, which essentially is American companies bring very high quality products, but also very high-quality business practices where they invest.” (Hormats, 2012).

In this rhetoric it becomes apparent that as American representations of Myanmar change from sanctions to economic engagement, the lines of action that are deemed possible also change. Thus the form of control and dominance change: whilst scathing criticism was aimed at the military junta, the Bush-administration nevertheless had a fairly passive form of control through the implementation of sanctions. Whilst the sanctions were removed, discursive change also took place. The discursive change has made possible controlling and disciplining lines of action. The controlling and disciplining discourse reproduced the identity of the US as a powerful hegemony and exceptional state, and thus the discursive centre remains fixed while the representation of Myanmar changes.

The implementation of various forms of aid, partnerships between the US and Myanmar and good governance reinforces this representation and the dominance of the US. Obama has stated the following:

“America will support you every step of the way -- by using our assistance to empower civil society; by engaging your military to promote professionalism and human rights; and by partnering with you as you connect your progress towards democracy with economic development.” (Obama, 2012).

Obama has also talked about the work that has been done by USAID in supplying the skills and resources that are needed in Myanmar in order to promote democracy (Obama, 2014a), as well as a project launched by the president called the Young Southeast Asian Leader Initiative, an initiative where leaders in the region learn values from the US, for example entrepreneurship (Obama, 2014b). Doty has stated that “foreign aid is but one of the numerous domains for the deployment of disciplinary techniques” (Doty, 1996: 129), and thus by invoking several mechanisms of aid and development the US is disciplining Myanmar. American companies are represented as ethical actors simply by effort of being American, and thus such representations not only underline a new form of discipline and control that is emerging in the discourse, but it also underlines the continued representation of the US as an exceptional state.

Taking this American exceptionalism yet another step further, assistant secretary at the Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs, Charles Rivkin, stated the following at a forum for investment in Myanmar:

“[...] we all know that when people watch a Hollywood movie – the world over – they become immersed in the freedoms and values that its heroes fight for.

The same needs to be true of our corporate culture and the products and services we provide. When people buy American, they buy into our values and beliefs as well as our culture of practicality and trust in the open market.

We really do answer to a higher authority. It is about who we are and what we stand for. We must remain unwavering in our task because – as Benjamin Franklin said – “It takes 20 years to build a reputation but only five minutes to ruin it.”” (Rivkin, 2014)

This is a clear example of American exceptionalism and how it plays out in a new economic environment, where control is more direct. Moreover, by quoting Benjamin Franklin, Rivkin invokes the myth of the US as the greatest nation on earth, with its timeless and universal values (Nayak; Malone, 2009: 264).

In terms of identities, the continuation of US exceptionalism has been widely analysed here. The construction of the leaders of Myanmar, however, changes

drastically. Hilary Clinton has stated that “President Thein Sein and his government have taken courageous steps”, but she also emphasises that a lot of work still remains (Clinton, 2012a). Ambassador-Designate Mitchell takes it further and praises the cooperation between Aung San Suu Kyi and President Thein Sein, while also stating that: “We should never forget to recognize his extraordinary vision and leadership [...]” (Mitchell, 2012).

The difference between the representations before and after the reforms is clear, and the government is no longer represented as villains and thugs. However, by stating that the US was a leading actor in bringing about changes in policy in Myanmar, and further by implementing a large amount of aid and emphasising the positive impact American companies will have in Myanmar, the US ultimately reproduces its own superiority over the country and over the Myanmar government. Indeed, this represents Myanmar as in need of help to foster good business practice, which further reproduces the identity of the US as an exceptional as well as masculine state that can help Myanmar in order to foster such business practices or other reformers.

The representation of Aung San Suu Kyi also changes: she is still represented as an icon; a woman who the US can look to for “inspiration as well as resolve” (Obama, 2014c). However, in the rhetoric of Hilary Clinton another element is added to the representation:

“Now, just a few days ago, we joined the world in celebrating her election. I did tell her in one of our recent telephone conversations she was moving from an icon to a politician. [...] Having made sort of the same journey to some extent, I know that that’s not easy because now you go to a parliament and you start compromising, which is what democracy is all about. It is not a dirty word. You cannot expect to have one person or one party – one leader – be the repository of everything that is true. And so you have to work with other people, some of whom you disagree with deeply. [...] But it is part of the commitment you make to a democratic process, even one as fragile as that being embraced by the leadership and the people of Burma.” (Clinton, 2012a).

She similarly stated on a different occasion that she and Suu Kyi had: “[...] talked about [...] the challenge of moving from protest to politics, from symbol to stateswoman.” She further stated that: “It [...] requires the kind of pragmatic compromise and coalition building that is the lifeblood of politics but may disappoint the purists who have held faith with you while you were on the outside.” (Clinton, 2012b).

This representation to a large extent clears Suu Kyi of responsibility for her political actions, rather than holding her to account. The continued representation of Suu Kyi as a moral actor is useful for the continued exceptionalism of the US and the unchallenged fixity of this discursive centre.

Suu Kyi is connoted to democracy, whilst democracy is connoted to the US. Thus, the possibility of Suu Kyi being an immoral actor could create instability at the discursive centre, and the possibility of this instability was partially eliminated through the language of Hilary Clinton. Political decisions that could be seen as unethical in the case of Suu Kyi could thus simply be constructed as pragmatism.

Brooten has emphasised that Suu Kyi constantly is depoliticised in US media (Brooten, 2005: 149), and this is apparent in US foreign policy as well: indeed, an interesting aspect of Clinton's language is that it represents Suu Kyi as an icon that has not had a political standpoint until now, now that she is represented formally in politics. Suu Kyi's support for democracy and her strong stance against violence (Brooten, 2005: 148) are thus not represented as political in this discourse. Brooten has argued that Suu Kyi, due to her anti-violent stance, might have denounced the use of force utilised by the United States in its wars abroad, if she could speak freely without having to worry about losing support from the US (Brooten, 2005: 148). However, this is not discussed in US policy. As has been mentioned earlier, the US is represented as an inherently moral actor, and questioning the actions of the US thus became unthinkable in US politics. Hence the orientalist gendered representation of Suu Kyi continues, although it is slightly altered, as she has become a formally elected politician. However, she is still denied agency as she is mostly not being held to account for her political actions, all the while her identity as a politician before she was elected largely goes unnoticed.



With the inauguration of Obama there was also a new First Lady. However, Michelle Obama did not have the same focus on Myanmar as Laura Bush had. Myanmar was one of the most important causes for Mrs. Bush during her husband's tenure in office. An important discursive change has thus happened simply by removing one vocal actor. The gendered representation of Myanmar and the US has changed in correlation with Laura Bush' departure, and it can be argued that during the Bush-administration Myanmar was a 'boutique-issue' in US foreign policy, as has been mentioned earlier. During the Obama administration, however, it gained some relevance due to *realpolitik* issues: indeed, Haacke (2012) has argued that the Obama administrations new policy must be seen in context with the fact that the government is wary of the Chinese influence in the Myanmar (Haacke, 2012: 55). Further, Secretary of State Clinton reinforced the representation of this part of Asia as an increasingly important region when she stated in 2011 that: "The 21<sup>st</sup> century will be America's Pacific century, a period of unprecedented outreach and partnership in this dynamic, complex, and consequential region." (Clinton, 2011). During the Bush-administration Myanmar was represented as a humanitarian, feminine issue, whilst during the Obama-administration it gained relevance, and thus as an *issue*, it became more "high politics" and masculine.

The representation of Suu Kyi, Myanmar and democracy in Myanmar remains feminine during the discursive changes. The presence of Condoleezza Rice

and Hillary Clinton as Secretaries of State, as well as the representation of Myanmar by other women in the administration has not changed this: Enloe has argued that women who gain access to the political elite often take on a masculine identity (Enloe, 1990: 6-7). Starting from this understanding it can be argued that this masculine identity of power and of those who are in power, is reproduced when people like Rice and Clinton continue to represent the masculine dominance of the West over the South. That the US is producing change and working to enhance change is widely recognised in the discourse, but through this discourse the government in Myanmar is represented as in need of help to change society. Thus the American dominance and, by extension, American masculinity is reproduced, whilst Myanmar is represented in an orientalist language where the country is helpless, feminine and underdeveloped. And thus, whilst certain components of the discourse change, American exceptionalism and the dominance of the North over the South is reproduced and reinforced.

## **Conclusion**

The representation of Myanmar in American foreign Policy has changed, but there is also a prevalent continuity at the very core of the discourse: American exceptionalism and American masculinity. The representation of the use of sanctions created different subject-positions: not only for the US and Myanmar, but also for the rest of the world. In this representation, the US was the ultimate moral actor. Furthermore, during the Bush era both the regime in

Myanmar and Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD were represented in a gendered and orientalist language. In the narrative of the Western female saviours, Myanmar and Suu Kyi were further represented as victims who needed to be saved. The language of Laura Bush was key in this representation.

During the Obama-administration the representation of Myanmar changed, and so did the politics of Myanmar. In this representation the US had a crucial role in the changes that were happening in Myanmar, thus reproducing American exceptionalism. Economic investment, aid and good governance have ensued after the political changes. This has opened up for a representation of Myanmar as a country in need of help to manage its internal affairs on its way to prosperity, whilst it also represents US companies as particularly moral actors that can contribute to this prosperity. Thus the dominance of the United States continues.

The representation of the government and Suu Kyi also changes: while the former is being praised for the changes that have taken place, the latter is being represented as an ethical icon that now has to compromise. Both representations are rooted in orientalism: the government is represented as in need of help from the outside in order to manage the changes that are happening, while Suu Kyi is denied agency in that she is represented as an actor that has not had a political stance before being elected. The disappearance of Laura Bush's discourse has also had great impact on the representation of Suu Kyi and Myanmar: Laura Bush's maternal language had

much impact during the Bush-administration, but when George Bush left office this discursive space was not filled. At the same time, Myanmar was being increasingly represented as slightly more ‘high-politics’ than it had been before. Thus, as the feminine and humanitarian representation of Myanmar disappeared, Myanmar became – as a foreign policy *issue*, at least - represented as more ‘high-politics’ and consequently also more masculine.

In the introduction the upcoming election in Myanmar was briefly mentioned, and the representation of this election will be interesting to follow. Recently, Suu Kyi’s political pragmatism has been surfacing with her lack of support for the Muslim Rohingya (Lee, 2014: 330), and it should prove intriguing to observe how this progresses and how the US will represent the pragmatism of Suu Kyi. So far the representation of Suu Kyi as a moral actor has been prevalent, and the praise she has received in American policy for her fight for democracy has ensured her discursive connotation to the United States. However, with the situation of the Rohingya and the upcoming election, this could change. Whether or not any upcoming change will be able to shake the discursive centre, and subsequently create any instability in terms of the identity of the US as an exceptional masculine actor, is yet to be seen. So far, American exceptionalism has proven to be a stable hegemonic idea in times of change.

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**Explanatory note:** In this dissertation US government documents will be referenced in the “Harvard Style”, the way I reference other articles and books in this dissertation: (name of author or the person being quoted, followed by year of publication). I will thus not include the name of the government body in the text; rather, this will be included in the bibliography. This seems to be the best way for me to organise this text. However, the document on the Senate Women’s Caucus on Burma will be referenced slightly differently: here I will refer to The White House as the author, while I emphasise in the text which senators are being referenced and quoted.

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